

# Applied creativity

## —and how to lead it

June 2026

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# Every company starts with an idea

**They end when  
they run out of ideas.**

**Or, more likely, can't execute  
the ones they have.**

This research is about the discipline of reliably turning ideas into useful and interesting things for customers. It starts with the intuitive principle that creativity is needed to innovate and grow and ends with the elusive practice of delivering it. To do so, we define the pillars of creative infrastructure, prove the positive business impact when all are in place, and point to the need for visible creative leadership.

With the rapid and widespread adoption of AI, there is general agreement that human creativity will be a differentiator. However, in contrast to the focus and expertise spent on technology infrastructure, very little has been spent on this creative infrastructure. Surprisingly few enterprises recognize, let alone know how to address, their creativity debt.

Maybe it's because, like the word "technology," "creativity" is a broad categorical term used to describe many things. Unlike technology, it's considered vague and ineffable.

To make it workable, we have also defined the types of human creativity, with a focus on those that contribute to company growth— inventive and expressive. Inventive creativity is the systematic discipline of making things work. Expressive creativity is the empathetic discipline of making people care.

No creativity can be separated from technology. Creativity makes technology more human, and technology makes humans more creative. And, for the first time in history, downstream from the systems we invent and the content we express, is another type of creativity that can be harnessed— generative AI.

How enterprises use human ingenuity to be distinctive, and AI to amplify and operationalize creativity, cannot be left up to good intentions. It needs to be led with the right commitment, structure and expertise.

**We call this applied creativity.**

**—Nick Law**

## **Applied creativity —and how to lead it**

**Ask top business leaders, and we did, if their organizations can generate creative ideas. Eighty-one percent will say they can. A resounding endorsement of creative potential.**

**Now ask if they *very frequently* turn those ideas into initiatives that drive growth and you'll see a very different number: only 16%.**

Why do so many fail to repeatedly turn that potential into meaningful practice? And what do the ones that do, do better?

Our research shows that creative ideas often show up unevenly across the business, and the leadership that sets and supports the conditions for them to take shape, gain traction and deliver impact is often absent. When that leadership foundation is in place, it supports three pillars—commitment, structure and expertise—providing the

infrastructure for creativity to do real work across the organization, and be valued for it.

Creativity does have value. In fact, the financial impact is significant.

These 16% of organizations that say they *very frequently* turn creative ideas into growth initiatives **perform better, grow faster and connect deeper.**

The bottom line: creativity, when applied, performs.

### Where applied creativity pays off

The 16% of companies that actively convert ideas into execution see gains in revenue, engagement and customer loyalty.

### Better business

**69%**  
more likely than peers to outperform on time to market

**54%**  
more likely to outperform on employee engagement

**53%**  
more likely to significantly outperform on revenue growth, with average growth rates **1.6 percentage points above industry average**

**26%**  
more likely to outperform on operating margin

### Better brand

**58%**  
more likely to outperform on brand equity

**48%**  
more likely to outperform on Net Promoter Score

**45%**  
more likely to outperform on customer retention



## From something created to something delivered

If creativity is how imagination turns into ideas, then applied creativity is the disciplined way that organizations turn those ideas into useful and meaningful things for customers—across functions, through execution and over time. This extends beyond marketing, where creativity has typically been centered, to other disciplines across the organization.

From how interfaces for internal applications are developed, to industrial design for desirable new products, to the ways customers are supported before and after purchase.

It's important to approach applied creativity as an infrastructure for turning something *created* into something *delivered*. Strategy decides what matters and sets the direction. Creativity imagines and expands what's possible. Applied creativity delivers it and turns them into something meaningful that people can see, use or feel.

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**“Creativity isn’t a campaign.  
It’s the only way the business works.  
Creativity shows up in how  
fast you can learn what actually  
creates value.”**

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Creative Leader  
Toy manufacturer



## More than innovation: the modes of creativity

Creativity can mean many things to many people. We use creativity singularly throughout, but it's important to acknowledge the different modes under that umbrella term and recognize their roles across the business. For us, applied creativity can be defined as four distinct capabilities that work in concert.

Organizations, which require organizing, tend to see and support systemizers by putting them in roles where that strength is valued. Expressive and empathetic intelligence is the one most often not seen as equally real, rigorous and worthy of leadership.

Choreography across all four is required to bring ideas to life—though the goal is not to view everyone as being creative. It is to have the *receptive* culture and *supportive* infrastructure in place so that creative ideas can turn into impact.

### Inventive

Systematic creativity.  
Making things work.



### Engineering

Executing inventions.  
Using hardware and software.

### Expressive

Empathetic creativity.  
Making people care.



### Production

Executing stories and interfaces.  
Using content and media.

## The creative leadership mandate

Leadership is critical to helping set and model the culture that applied creativity requires to gain momentum and meaning across an organization. And by extension, so is acknowledgment of the people and practices that are part of that leader's organization.

This happens already. The Chief Technology Officer and Chief Information Officer and their teams set the technology and guidelines

that all use to help the business operate and grow. The office of the Chief Financial Officer establishes procedures for purchasing and expenses that all use to support the fiscal health of the business. Creative leadership in the C-suite and across the business should command the same respect and display the same rigor toward growth through innovation and brand building.

For something imagined to become something real, and for ideas to turn into the impact that successful organizations see, creativity in all forms must endure.

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### About our research

This report draws on qualitative and quantitative methods conducted over the fourth quarter of 2025 and the first quarter of 2026. The qualitative phase involved 60-minute interviews with 15 senior-level experts, including creativity academics, thought leaders and senior executives from leading global organizations. In the quantitative phase, we surveyed 1,725 executives across 14 countries and markets spanning North and Latin America, Europe, the Asia Pacific,

the Middle East and Africa, representing 20 industries and organizations with revenues exceeding US\$1 billion in most markets. Neuroscience-based tools were incorporated alongside traditional survey methods to reduce response bias and sharpen the findings. Together, they examined how creative leadership drives performance, how AI is reshaping creative work and which organizational conditions allow creativity to thrive.

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# Why applied creativity matters now

## When the promise becomes a penalty

Creativity has become a leadership issue—and the rise of AI is adding to the urgency.

Increasingly, executives recognize creativity as central to future success—for them and their business. Eighty-three percent believe creativity will be one of the most important leadership capabilities in the years ahead. And 84% say it's essential for relevance, differentiation and future leadership.

At the same time, leaders report a far different reality inside their organizations, and have witnessed an actual penalty for those with more creative ideas. Sixty-three percent know colleagues who have been held back for their creative approaches. Fifty-seven percent say they personally have been held back. And 59% say challenging the status quo makes you “difficult.”

This may be because the ideas and approaches are bad. More likely, it’s because the organization lacks the commitment, structure and expertise to support and sustain creativity—or advance creative leaders.

We analyzed 163 board members across the five largest companies in hospitality, consumer electronics, and apparel and fashion, and found that only 9% had creative backgrounds with careers centered on shaping, elevating or expressing the meaning customers see and feel.

The meteoric speed of AI adoption puts additional pressure on leaders. As AI accelerates execution and makes software and media easier to generate, the distance between the value of operations and creativity changes. Seventy-three percent of leaders fear their brand will be lost in a “sea of sameness.”

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**“The C-suite often says it wants to be more creative but in practice, its risk appetite is far more conservative than it admits.”**

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Vice President  
Technology and creative  
software company



Much of the conversation and expectation around gen AI is about what organizations stand to gain. Productivity. Speed. Savings. But if AI adoption travels across the business in a way that ideas do not, you could miss out on even more transformative gains.

AI shifts the value in an organization from parsing and ordering complex logical systems to having judgment, taste and customer intuition. When input and options are abundant, value shifts upstream—to framing and choice.

To truly differentiate, more parts of an organization will need to be “by design” and centered on creating unique products and experiences for both customers and employees, led by people who can imagine things that people will want that do not yet exist. True innovation requires leaders and teams with the aptitude to make them all stand out in what could be an increasingly flattened marketplace. And leaders are increasingly called on not just to approve these ideas, but to shape the conditions under which ideas can emerge, be tested and be defended.

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**“Creativity has moved upstream. It’s no longer about execution, it’s about how leaders frame problems and make decisions.”**

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Senior Director Strategy & Product  
Leading global sportswear brand



Most companies were not intentionally built to miss creativity. They were built to reward something else. Efficiency. Predictability. The comfort of a familiar answer. Creative people and creative ideas are rarely the problem. The problem is an organization that was designed, often unintentionally, to set them aside.

What organizations need is a set of shared principles and actions that do not add up to a system for controlling, but rather an infrastructure for growing and sustaining support for creative ideas and approaches.

## We've seen similar survival adaptations before: the rise of strategy

In the early 2000s, globalization, rising volatility and growing organizational complexity fundamentally changed what it took to compete. Strategy could no longer be episodic or intuitive—it had to become a disciplined, enterprise-wide capability. Many companies struggled to adapt, lacking the

operating systems, governance, and shared ownership required to translate insight into sustained action. The result was a familiar pattern: critical decisions made inconsistently, revisited endlessly, or diluted in execution. This moment marked a broader lesson for leadership—when the context of business changes, capabilities that were once informal or implicit must be deliberately designed into the organization if they are to scale and endure.

**By 2013, more than 50% of S&P 500 firms had appointed a Chief Strategy Officer.\***

\* Menz, Markus (2013). "Chief strategy officers: Contingency analysis of their presence in top management teams." *Strategic Management Journal*. 35 (3): 461–471.

# The infrastructure for applied creativity

## Commitment, structure and expertise

We see that successful infrastructures for applied creativity are built on three pillars, supported from the top.

**Commitment** establishes a culture that encourages creativity and incentives that reward it. It makes imaginative work possible, without fear of penalty.

**Structure** sets a model and process that leads to reliable creative outcomes. It makes creativity workable, not risky.

And **expertise**, with the right experience and sensibility in leadership positions, gives everyone trust in the creative practitioners and the ability to hold their nerve. This leadership fosters a shared ambition that never forgets the most important people to an organization—the customer.

We also see that this infrastructure must be consistent and complete. When one of these pillars is missing, companies falter predictably.

Quality signals without decisions that last. The sum is equal to all parts adding together across the business.

Exploration without direction. Polished expression built on shallow framing.

Together, all three work to center and then unleash creative expertise across the organization.

<b>How it appears</b>	→	<b>Failure mode</b>	→	<b>Missing link</b>
Decisions are made but not held		<b>Endless revisiting</b>		Commitment without structure
Decisions are logically sound but experientially wrong		<b>Abstract correctness</b>		Commitment without expertise
Significant effort applied in the wrong direction		<b>Misguided momentum</b>		Structure without commitment
The wrong quality standard is defended and reinforced		<b>Stubborn mediocrity</b>		Structure without expertise
Quality signals exist, but no directional choice		<b>Aesthetic drift</b>		Expertise without commitment
Quality recognized but not defended		<b>Beautiful ideas that don't ship</b>		Expertise without structure



## Commitment

Commitment creates permission for creative leaders and experts to explore, question and take creative risks without fear of penalty. It legitimizes unfinished thinking as serious work and makes room for the uniquely human contribution: choice.

The barriers are explicit. Fifty-four percent say leaders avoid creative ideas because they are perceived as risky. Sixty percent say time spent exploring ideas is viewed as a distraction from real work. Where permission is absent, creative ideas stop surfacing. Teams default to safe,

familiar options. The organization loses creative input not because people lack ideas, but because they learn it is not acceptable, or not safe, to share them.

Commitment requires both culture and incentives. The culture that supports them is built on a singular vision and collaborative practices. A vision that people understand, are inspired by, but importantly know how to work together to achieve. And a process that is loose with ideas but tight with execution. Ideas that are open, curious and follow intuition as much as data.

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**60% of leaders say  
time spent exploring ideas  
is viewed as a distraction  
from real work.**

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Followed by execution with the discipline that comes with a commitment to excellence and craft. The incentives that sustain it reward quality over quantity and teams over individuals. Together, they signal what the organization actually values: breadth of expertise in service of imagination, intuition and customer needs.

Commitment also requires leaders to acknowledge distinct creative modes and to deliberately design moments where uncertainty is allowed, so sensemaking can happen before solutions harden.

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**Creative leaders  
are more likely  
than peers to:**

- Create a culture of structured forums with expert practitioners like idea markets or pitch sessions where ideas compete on merit
- Invite and integrate outside perspectives

**Creative organizations  
are more likely  
than peers to:**

- Balance investment in proven and new ideas
- Fund pilots or experiments before large commitments
- Reward quality of output above completed task

# Commitment in action

## Making creativity a leadership mandate

**The LEGO® Group** treats creative commitment not as a personal trait, but as a leadership responsibility embedded in formal systems. Leaders are evaluated on how effectively they enable creative culture, with incentives tied to measures of employee empowerment.

By hardwiring creativity into performance expectations, the organization removes ambiguity about whether exploration is valued. Commitment is no longer implicit or personality dependent; it is institutionalized, making creative risk-taking legitimate, expected and repeatable across leadership levels.

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## Signaling commitment from the front lines

At **Rivian**, creative commitment is established through visible, direct engagement by senior leaders with frontline teams. Informal forums such as fireside conversations and on the ground immersion reduce hierarchical distance and signal psychological safety. By listening rather than directing, leaders

invite ideas to surface earlier and with less fear of penalty. The result is not only greater engagement, but clearer, faster feedback loops between insight and action—demonstrating how commitment accelerates performance when leaders model it in practice.

## Structure

Commitment without structure produces volatility. Structure supplies the processes, decision rights, time horizons and incentives that make creativity workable, and the contributions of creative experts rewarding, not risky. At its core, structure is what moves teams from asking questions to making decisions.

The constraints are widespread. Seventy-seven percent say approvals and processes at least moderately affect creativity. Twenty-two percent say approvals affect it significantly. Sixty-one percent say short-term pressures crowd out creativity.

Structure starts at the top. Creative ambition must be reflected in leadership—who is in the room, what they are accountable for and how they model the behavior they expect. From there, the model itself matters. The most effective organizations operate with horizontal strategy, drawing on diverse intersections of thinking, and vertical execution, with experts leading experts. Invention and expression are not siloed. They inform each other.

Collaboration cannot be left to good intentions. It has two distinct requirements: efficiency with information and intentionality with conversation. The process must go deep before it simplifies. Inventive thinking front-loads, finds connections and sees across the problem. Expressive thinking back-loads, building narrative simplicity through subtraction until only what matters remains. Together, they move the work from exploration to clarity, and from clarity to decisions that hold.

The structural requirements are concrete: protected time for exploration, defined decision ownership and clear separation between early exploration and late-stage evaluation. Incentives must not punish uncertainty or judge early ideas by short-term financial metrics.

When structure works against creativity, a familiar pattern follows. Ideas get judged too early. Decision-making becomes politicized or unclear. Predictability wins by default. When structure supports creativity, constraints become enabling—time-bound experiments, gated funding, sandbox environments, standardized baselines for pilots and clear KPIs for the right stages of the creative value chain.

This choreography between roles and among creative disciplines is what carries a good idea from its earliest form through to impact, ensuring it encounters the right modes of creativity at the right time. Leadership must be visible in guiding these ideas across the business.

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**Creative leaders  
are more likely  
than peers to:**

- Ensure cross-functional collaboration and orchestration with team design and intentional collaboration
- Create processes that make adaptability and change leadership inevitable

**Creative organizations  
are more likely  
than peers to:**

- Have clear ownership and accountability for creative decisions
- Protect time and space for exploration

## Structure in action

### Structuring creativity in regulated environments

In highly regulated organizations, creative work often stalls under compliance pressure and risk aversion. **HSBC** addressed this by formalizing creativity through time-bound experimentation, sandboxed environments and gated funding models. Leaders deliberately separated learning evaluation from outcome evaluation, measuring

progress by insights generated and problems reframed rather than by immediate financial return. By using constraints as a design feature rather than a limitation, the organization made experimentation safer, faster and more repeatable—allowing creativity to operate within regulatory realities rather than in spite of them.

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### Using simulation to de-risk creative decisions

**IKEA** structures creativity by replacing intuition-only decision-making with decision grade evidence. Its innovation teams use AI-driven simulations to test dozens of ideas end to end in minutes, compressing months of validation into structured experimentation cycles.

This approach gives senior leaders greater confidence in creative bets, shifting discussion from personal preference to comparative insight. By turning experimentation into a systematic capability, **IKEA** accelerates learning while reducing the organizational bottlenecks that often slow bold ideas at scale.

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**“I’ll say to the team: ‘This is too complicated. Go away and strip it away, simplify it and come back when it’s single-minded.’ Some of the best creativity and the best design is the most simple... but it requires that unflinching resolve.”**

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Global Creative Director  
Consumer technology  
and home appliances brand

## Expertise

Experts who have the right experience and sensibility should lead a shared ambition that never forgets the customer. They bring the customer into the boardroom, protect the core insight against short-term pressure, and yield clarity and purpose across functions. The constraint is visible: 1 in 3 executives say insufficient customer insight limits creativity in their organization.

Creative expertise keeps the organization oriented toward what matters most: how what you make gets to customers, and how they respond when it does. It lives in two places: in the creative principles an organization shares—differentiated beliefs that actively steer behavior—and in the creative practices that apply those principles to the ever-changing needs of the people they serve. Principles without practices drift into abstraction. Practices without principles drift into tactics.



Expertise shows up as a disciplined sensibility around simplification and standards that do not collapse when pressure and urgency rise. Organizations often mistake accumulation for value. As features, options, messages, proof points and processes accumulate, they are easily defended because addition is easily seen and quantified. But to the actual people on the other side—not just customers, but employees, vendors and shareholders—those additions often turn into noise.

Expressive creatives are experts in the act of subtraction, protecting the core insight so that the human story is clear and the true value shines through. Sensibility is grounded in the courage to know that meaning and value often result from what is removed.

Where inventive and expressive sensibility is weak, creativity loses to efficiency. Exploration gets deprioritized, and organizations optimize what already exists instead of imagining what comes next.

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**Creative leaders  
are more likely  
than peers to:**

- Translate ideas into innovations
- Translate innovations into intuitive experiences and compelling narratives
- Simplify ideas into clear, essential messages

**Creative organizations  
are more likely  
than peers to:**

- Have a customer theory of mind that shapes all product and marketing development
- Actively mine a diverse array of sources for creative inspiration—from customers, to frontline employees, to online communities, academia, and trends reports

## Expertise in action

### Making the customer tangible at the top

**The LEGO Group** furthers creative expertise by ensuring customer insight is not merely presented to executives but experienced by them. Research is translated into immersive, physical “play invitations” that allow senior leaders to directly engage with children’s realities before making decisions. This approach grounds creative judgment in lived

understanding rather than abstract data, anchoring leadership choices in long-term relevance and brand purpose. By bringing the customer into the boardroom in a visceral way, The LEGO Group creates shared conviction—and reduces the risk of short-term, trend-driven decision-making.

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### Translating bold ideas into organizational alignment

At a leading **global sportswear brand**, creative leadership is as much about influence as ideation. Senior leaders take ownership of distilling complex product and portfolio bets into clear, single direction narratives that functions can align around—from product and merchandising to finance and

regional teams. Rather than pursuing broad consensus, leaders anchor decisions in brand purpose and protect the core idea from dilution. Expertise here is expressed through clarity: simplifying complexity so the organization can move decisively without losing strategic intent.

# When the pillars stand and applied creativity is supported

Taken together, commitment, structure and expertise demonstrate how creativity becomes operational rather than aspirational.

They explain not just what creative leaders value, but how organizations convert imagination into decisions that hold—under pressure, at scale and across functions. When these conditions are designed into the system, creativity stops being episodic or confined to certain teams and

begins to shape everyday judgment, talent decisions and strategic trade-offs.

The result is not more ideas, but more coherent action. Organizations that embed creativity as a leadership discipline are better positioned to then embrace creativity across functions, navigate technological disruption and sustain differentiation in increasingly automated environments.

# Creative organizations are more creative (almost) everywhere

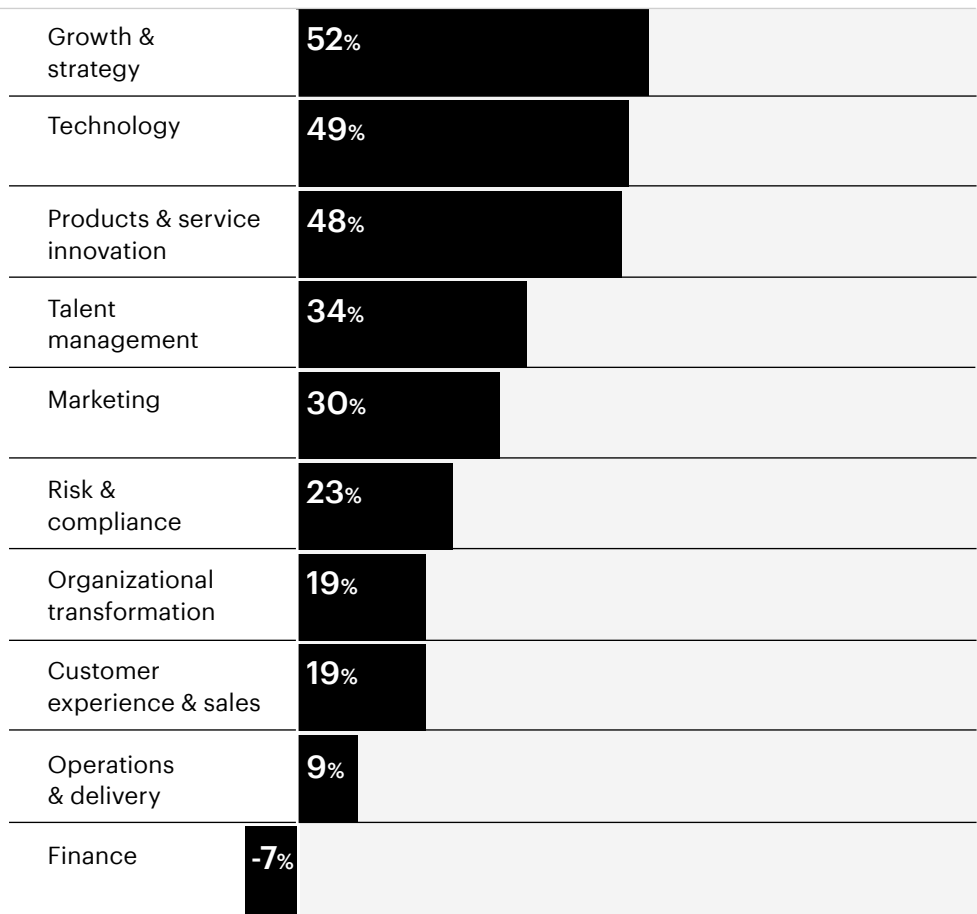
It no longer resides solely in marketing or design. It appears across functions traditionally considered non-creative: strategy, technology, product development, talent, transformation and operations.

When creative systems are fully in place, creativity moves upstream—and outward.

This shift is critical. Creativity, properly embedded, becomes a way the organization thinks—not just how it communicates. It informs how problems are framed, how trade-offs are made and how bets are chosen.

## Where creative organizations are more creative

How much more or less functions in creative organizations are "very accepting" of creative approaches, relative to those at their peers.



Source: Accenture Applied Creativity Research 2026, n=1,725.



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**“As AI homogenizes content, creativity becomes more critical for differentiation.”**

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Vice President  
Technology and creative  
software company

## **Creative organizations are better equipped for the agentic AI era**

As AI advances, execution becomes faster, cheaper and more consistent. Judgment, however, does not scale as easily.

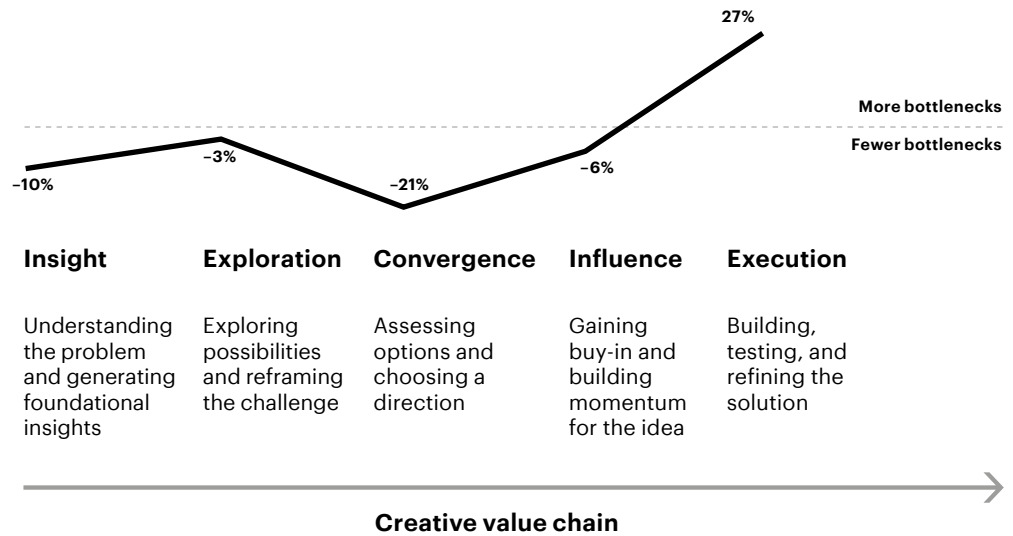
Organizations with stronger creative infrastructure show clearer readiness for an AI-enabled world. They are 37% more likely to strongly agree that investing in creative leadership will outperform in an AI-enabled world, 27% more likely to strongly agree that leaders who can guide teams through uncertainty and rapid change will stand out, and 25% more likely to strongly agree they are building a culture where human creativity and AI complement each other.



## Creative organizations are built for the agentic moment

How much more or less likely creative organizations are to report bottlenecks at each stage versus non-creative peers.

Creative organizations experience fewer bottlenecks precisely where judgment matters most—insight, exploration, convergence. Agentic technology is purpose-built to handle exactly what slows creative organizations down. The advantage they already have is one agents can't replicate.



Source: Accenture Applied Creativity Research 2026, n=1,725.

Organizations with embedded creative leadership and infrastructure are better positioned for this transition because they exhibit greater clarity where human discernment matters most—and greater discipline where automation can accelerate execution. Leaders in these environments are more likely to see creativity not as a cultural

nice-to-have, but as a performance differentiator in conditions of uncertainty, rapid change and technological acceleration. In this sense, creative leadership becomes a critical interface between human insight and machine capability, enabling organizations to move faster without defaulting to sameness and ubiquity.



## Creative organizations have visible creative leadership

The most creative organizations make one final choice: they make creative leadership visible.

They are 49% more likely to actively hire and develop leaders with creative potential, and 39% more likely to say their boards value creative leadership when making executive appointments. Someone at the top owns the system. Creative tension is allowed inside the executive team. Premature convergence is resisted.

Simply put, leaders must model the culture and set the standards for how applied creativity and ideas survive and thrive as they encounter different parts of an organization.

### Creative leadership by design

When David Droga became CEO of Accenture Song in 2021, revenue was US\$12.5 billion. By 2024 it had reached US\$19 billion.

That growth did not happen by accident. Droga—the most awarded creative in the history of the Cannes International Festival of Creativity and founder of Droga5, named Agency of the Decade by both Adweek and Ad Age in 2020—brought a specific and deliberate belief to the role:

That creativity, when led with discipline and clarity, is not a cultural asset—it is a business one.

He unified a collection of acquired agencies spanning technology, data and experience under a single coherent identity. That clarity reduced disconnection, accelerated execution and gave teams a shared sense of purpose. Design and agile delivery aligned around measurable outcomes. Creativity stopped serving the business and started driving it.



# How it all comes together

For boards and executive teams, the question is no longer whether creativity matters, but how it is deliberately built, governed and defended under pressure. Embedding creative leadership requires clear ownership, constructive tension at the top and structural choices that legitimize imagination alongside performance.

The principles that follow translate this mandate into action—clarifying how leaders can hardwire creativity into decision-making—simplify and align around what matters most, and protect standards when short term urgency threatens long term advantage. Together, they define what it takes to move from episodic creative moments to truly applied creativity, including sustained creative leadership, infrastructure and culture.



## What applied creativity means for boards and executive teams

### **Making applied creativity visible, viable and valuable**

#### **Creativity is part of strategy.**

In the most effective organizations, creativity is not confined to innovation, brand expression or execution. It shapes how growth opportunities are defined, how markets are framed and how strategic bets are chosen. Imagination applied early influences the quality of downstream decisions, not just how those decisions are communicated.

#### **Creative infrastructure requires clear expertise at the top.**

When creativity is treated as “everyone’s job,” it becomes no one’s mandate. Executive teams need a clearly accountable steward—whether a formal role or an equivalent leadership function—responsible for standards, coherence and cross-functional creative integration across the business.

#### **Creative breadth must be modeled by the executive team.**

Creativity is not a choice between making things work or making people care, it is both. And creative leadership should integrate the strengths of each. It can be challenging, because inventive creatives think and operate very differently from expressive creatives. But when companies can balance and empower both, they win.

#### **Structural choices determine whether creativity is applied—or denied.**

Incentives, funding models, governance gates and performance metrics either legitimize imagination or quietly suppress it. Executive teams hard code what the organization values through these mechanisms, shaping whether creative judgment is rewarded or penalized under pressure.

#### **Sustained creativity becomes the leadership objective.**

Creative leadership is not about approving bold ideas in isolated moments. It is about designing conditions in which bold ideas can repeatedly survive scrutiny, scale responsibly and inform long-term direction—turning applied creativity into a durable organizational capability rather than a periodic act.

## What needs to happen across the organization

### **Growing a creative culture of commitment, structure and expertise**

#### **Encourage the conversation.**

If people only bring polished, low-risk ideas, creativity is already constrained. Leaders must consistently signal that reframing, dissent and unfinished thinking are welcome—especially when ideas challenge prevailing assumptions.

**Don't confuse more ideas with better ideas.** The goal is not volume, but direction. Leaders should invite broader perspectives while anchoring exploration to a clear, consequential problem—continually sharpening focus rather than accumulating options.

#### **Treat alignment as part of the creative act.**

Ideas that cannot withstand stakeholder scrutiny are not ready to scale. Creative leaders must build coalitions early, recognizing influence and alignment as core components of execution, not downstream tasks.

#### **Simplify before you scale.**

If an idea cannot be explained clearly, the organization cannot carry it. Leaders must distill complexity to its essence before mobilizing the system—clarity is what enables speed and coherence at scale.

#### **Protect standards under pressure.**

Short-term urgency is when creativity is most easily diluted. Leaders must hold the line on quality and long-term intent precisely when it feels uncomfortable, signaling what truly matters through their decisions.

# Not a function. Not a moment.

# Applied creativity is a capability that compounds over time.

Closing the gap between creative potential and creative performance is, at its core, a leadership opportunity—and one well within reach.

The leaders and organizations that do applied creativity well have built the conditions for it. They design and build an infrastructure with shared principles and actions, one that grows and sustains support for creative ideas and approaches—and does not simply control them. Commitment for creative experts to explore without fear. Structure that carries good ideas through pressure and scrutiny. Expertise that centers what actually matters to the people they serve. Together, these make creativity visible, viable and valuable—not as an ideal, but as a daily practice.

When applied with discipline, creativity stops being episodic because the infrastructure and culture to support and sustain it are deeply and firmly embedded. It becomes the way the organization thinks, decides and grows. Not a function. Not a moment. Instead, applied creativity is a capability that compounds over time. And AI serves that capability without dominating it, freeing leaders and the organization to deeply focus on and take ownership over how the business differentiates, competes and grows.

The infrastructure is buildable. The leadership is available. And the organizations that invest in both are better positioned to grow, to adapt and to make something that lasts.



# About the research

The research conducted for this report combined quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a global perspective on creativity in modern business. The study explored how leaders define creativity, how creative leadership drives performance, how AI is reshaping creative work and which organizational conditions enable creativity to thrive.

The qualitative phase consisted of 60-minute interviews with 15 senior-level experts held during the fourth quarter of 2025. Participants included creativity academics and thought leaders, alongside senior creative and business executives from leading global organizations across industries.

The interviews explored evolving definitions of creativity, the integration of creativity into leadership and business strategy, the impact of AI and automation on creative work and identity, and the organizational strategies and cultural conditions that enable creativity and foster “creative zones” within professional environments.

Unless otherwise stated, the use cases, executive perspectives and direct quotes featured throughout the report are drawn from the qualitative research findings.

The quantitative phase, in field during the first quarter of 2026, combined a traditional survey approach with neuroscience-based tools to validate insights on creative leadership, business outcomes, career progression, organizational enablement and the gap between creative ambition and execution. The neuroscience-based tools were incorporated to help ensure greater accuracy and reduce potential response bias in the findings.

The study surveyed 1,725 global executives across 14 countries and markets, spanning North and Latin America, Europe, the Asia Pacific, the Middle East and Africa. Respondents included C-suite executives and direct reports from organizations with revenues exceeding \$1 billion in most markets and representing 20 industries including banking, healthcare, communications and media, retail, software and platforms, automotive, travel, utilities and more.

We use generative AI in our research production process. Our research experts review and validate generative AI outputs using traditional research methods where possible and they apply Accenture’s Responsible AI standards.

# Acknowledgments

The authors thank the following individuals for their contributions to this report.

## **Research and Editorial**

Juliana Azuero  
Konstanty Chyb  
Gerry Farkova  
Tomas Giri  
Corbin Lazier  
Regina Maruca  
Kathleen Trickey

## **The authors extend special thanks to**

Julia Albu

## **Marketing + Communications**

George Bragdon  
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# About Accenture

Accenture helps the world's leading enterprises reinvent by building their digital core and unleashing the power of AI to create value at speed for organizations across industries. Our strategy is to be the reinvention partner of choice for our clients and lead in the safe, widespread adoption of AI, and to be the most client-focused, AI-enabled, great place to work in the world. We bring together the talent of our approximately 799,000 people with proprietary assets and platforms, deep process and industry expertise, and leading ecosystem relationships to deliver end-to-end solutions and measurable outcomes at scale. Through our Reinvention Services, we offer broad expertise across Cybersecurity, Digital Core, Finance, Industry and Enterprise, Song, Supply Chain and Engineering, and Talent, with advanced capabilities in AI and Data, Industry and Process, and Technology. We serve approximately 9,000 clients and generated approximately \$70 billion in FY25 revenue.

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## Accenture Research

Accenture Research creates thought leadership about the most pressing business issues organizations face. Combining innovative research techniques, such as data-science-led analysis, with a deep understanding of industry and technology, our team of 300 researchers in 20 countries publish hundreds of reports, articles and points of view every year. Our thought-provoking research developed with world-leading organizations helps our clients embrace change, create value and deliver on the power of technology and human ingenuity.

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