FORRESTER®

The Improvement Paradox

Why "Continuous Improvement" Isn't Continuous When It's Not Integrated Into The Daily Work Of Frontline Teams

A FORRESTER CONSULTING THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PAPER COMMISSIONED BY MITTI (FORMERLY SAFETYCULTURE), JANUARY 2026

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ABOUT FORRESTER CONSULTING

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Executive Summary

Leaders often cite growing improvement maturity and heavy investment into continuous improvement, but frontline supervisors report a different reality, facing increased workload, unclear authority, and inconsistent reinforcement. The result is an improvement system that signals intent but fails at execution.

When improvement remains episodic or compliance-led, organizations incur the cost of activity without corresponding productivity gains. The disconnect between leadership perception and frontline experience reveals a systemic execution problem. Few organizations regionally report that improvement is fully embedded into daily work, underscoring the difficulty in moving from intent to integration at scale.

In October 2025, Mitti commissioned Forrester Consulting to assess how improvement operates across organizational layers. Forrester surveyed 427 frontline supervisors and 213 decision-makers across manufacturing, transport and logistics, retail, and hospitality sectors in North America, the UK, and Australia, spanning roles from C-suite leaders to site-level operators responsible for productivity, safety, capability building, digital tools, supply chain optimization, and analytics.

The findings point to a consistent pattern: Misaligned priorities, fragmented ownership, and centralized governance slow the translation of insight into action. Tools, routines, and cultural enablers are often in place, but operate in isolation.

Closing this gap requires a shift from initiative-led improvement to system design. Improvement must function as a connected work system that accelerates rather than constrains action. Only then can improvement become a part of how work gets done — not an activity layered on top of it.

Key Findings

Belief in daily improvement is high, but execution is fragmented. While 73% of frontline supervisors and 82% of leaders believe improvement should be embedded in daily work, only 39% of frontline supervisors say it actually is, compared to 76% of leaders. This perception gap creates a structural disconnect between intent and day-to-day execution.

System-level misalignment is the primary barrier to improvement. Frontline supervisors cite capacity constraints and workload pressure as the main reasons why improvement stalls, while leaders point to behavioral issues like unclear ownership or inconsistent goals. This mismatch drives interventions that target symptoms rather than root causes, reinforcing the perception that improvement is “extra work” rather than part of daily operations.

Tools, governance, and routines exist but do not reinforce each other. Adoption is high, yet only 29% of frontline supervisors find tools very effective. Feedback loops are the weakest link: 81% of frontline supervisors say reviews occur, but only 63% hear what happens to their suggestions.

Improvement maturity rises when autonomy, clarity, and follow-through converge. Teams with both empowerment and timely feedback are far more likely to say that improvement efforts succeed. At higher maturity levels, having integrated systems, clear decision rights, and consistent leadership rhythms turn improvement from an initiative into the operating system.

The Reality: Improvement Still Sits Outside Work

Improvement efforts often default to enterprise standardization: tighter controls, uniform processes, and centrally-mandated tools. These approaches are intended to increase consistency and reduce risk, but they often do not align with frontline reality. Forrester's research on manufacturing standardization shows that local variation is not noise — it reflects the situational awareness, adaptation, and judgment required to keep work moving.[1] When systems overprivilege central control, they strip away the conditions that enable effective frontline problem-solving.

The same dynamic appears in improvement. Organizations assume stronger governance, tighter routines, and enterprise-wide systems will close the gap between intent and execution. Instead, operating procedures often constrain autonomy, slow feedback, and distance decision-making from the point of work. Frontline teams are asked to surface issues but lack the authority or visibility to act — pushing improvement outside the flow of work and turning it into an additional task rather than part of the job.

ALIGNMENT AT THE TOP, FRICTION ON THE FRONTLINE

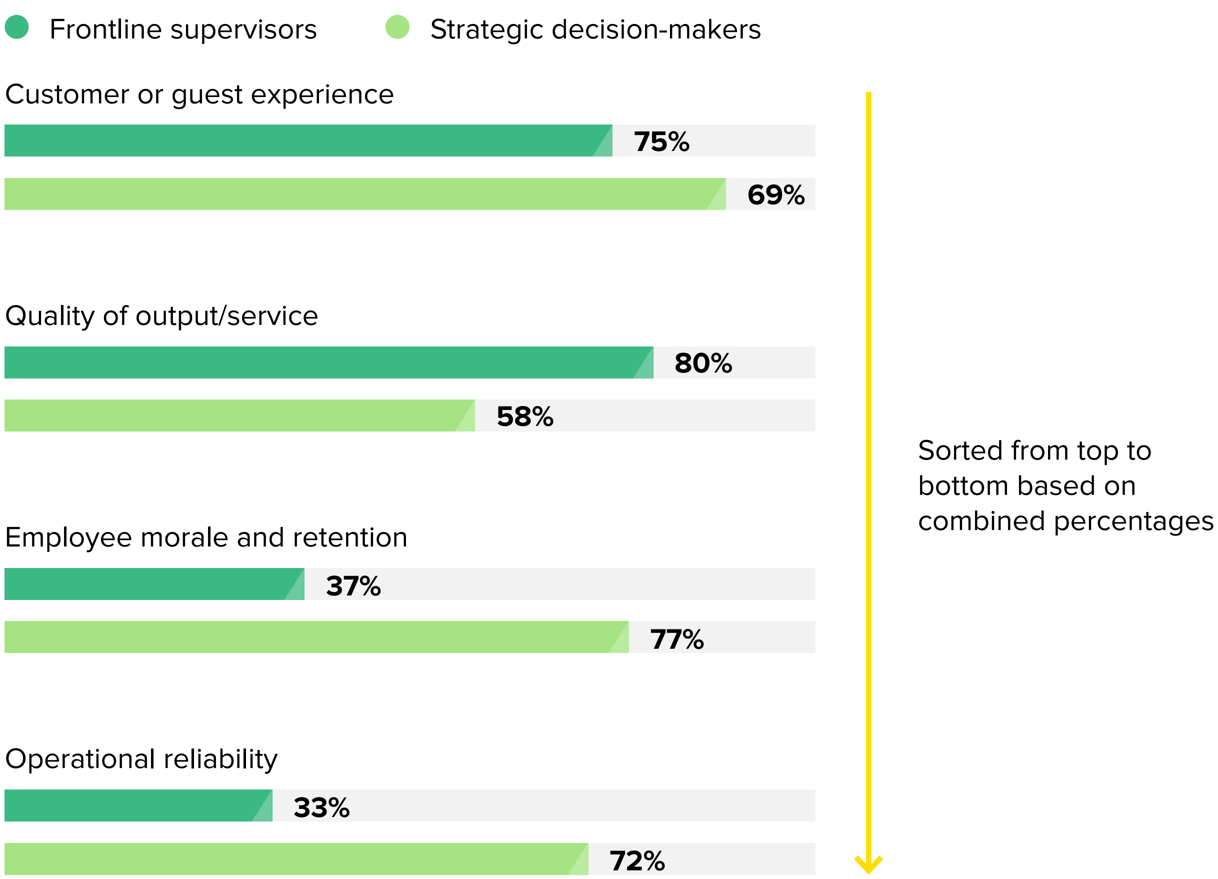
- **Decision-makers broadly recognize the value of worker-centric improvement.** Both frontline supervisors and leaders strongly endorse embedding improvement into day-to-day work (73% and 82%). The strategic north star is shared — but belief alone does not create practice.

- **The gap is experiential, not ideological.** While 76% of leaders believe improvement is mostly or completely part of how work gets done, only 39% of frontline supervisors agree. This gap reflects the different vantage points each group occupies. Leaders report seeing positive outcomes they associate with improvement, citing gains in morale (77%), reliability (72%), and customer experience (CX) (69%). Frontline supervisors, however, report a very different reality in daily operations: They observe far lower progress in morale (37%) and reliability (33%), even as they acknowledge significant improvement in output quality (80%) (see Figure 1).

Improvement appears to be delivering results, but not relief. What registers as progress at the top is experienced by the frontline as continued operational strain, reinforcing confidence among leaders while weakening belief among supervisors that improvement is practical or sustainable.

FIGURE 1

Top Organizational Improvements Over The Past 12 Months



Note: Showing only responses for ”Slightly improved” and “Significantly improved”
Base: 427 operational managers and site leads and 213 strategic decision-makers
Source: Forrester’s Q4 2025 Frontline Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637] and Forrester’s Q4 2025 Decision-Maker Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637]

IMPROVEMENT FEELS LIKE EXTRA WORK

- **Improvement still feels bolted-on to work, not embedded within it.** In early-stage organizations, fewer than half of frontline supervisors say improvement is part of daily work. Even for organizations at the mid-maturity stage, a third of them still experience improvement as a separate program. When improvement is rarely integrated into everyday workflows — and is constrained by misaligned governance and limited time — teams perceive it as an additional effort rather than part of how work gets done.

- **This is reinforced by a gap between leadership intent and frontline experience.** While more than two-thirds of leaders describe their approach as empowering, frontline teams often conversely experience improvement as inconsistent or reactive.

- **When improvement adds to operational load instead of reducing it, teams disengage.** While participation may increase, the work itself does not get easier. Over time, improvement is learned as a program to comply with, rather than a practice that helps teams do their jobs better.

THE HUMAN COST OF WEAK IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS

The outcomes mirror this reality. Fewer than 20% of frontline supervisors and leaders say most improvement initiatives deployed had fully succeeded in the past year. Activity is happening, but benefits are not adhering. Improvement feels episodic; a series of isolated efforts rather than something embedded in the way work gets done.

- **Weak improvement success also carries cultural consequences.** Frontline teams feel the strain more acutely when improvement efforts fail: Nearly half point to wasted time, resources, or budget, and increased rework, while 38% highlight declining trust and engagement. Similarly, leaders report negative customer and growth implications on top of what frontline supervisors reported (see Figure 2). Together, these impacts show that improvement effectiveness is not just an operational measure — it is a proxy for workforce optimism and resilience. When improvement does not work, the cultural foundation weakens.

FIGURE 2

Top Five Business Impacts When Continuous Improvement Fails To Deliver

Frontline supervisors | Strategic decision-makers

Frontline supervisors

48%
Wasted time, resources, or budget

38%
Lower frontline engagement or trust

31%
Missed customer expectations

30%
Increased rework or firefighting (i.e., forced to be reactive)

29%
Damage to culture or reputation

Strategic decision-makers

43%
Wasted time, resources, or budget

38%
Increased rework or firefighting (i.e., forced to be reactive)

36%
Missed customer expectations

34%
Stagnant growth or slower progress compared with peers

32%
Lower frontline engagement or trust

Base: 427 operational managers and site leads and 213 strategic decision-makers
Source: Forrester's Q4 2025 Frontline Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637] and Forrester's Q4 2025 Decision-Maker Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637]

Why Improvement Breaks Down: Misaligned Priorities, Governance, And Ownership

Improvement breaks down not because frontline teams resist change, but because leaders optimize different layers of the system for different outcomes. Frontline supervisors prioritize relief — stability, capacity, and smoother execution — while leaders prioritize acceleration — growth, efficiency, and measurable returns. These goals are rational in isolation, but when pursued through separate priorities, governance models, and accountability structures, they create conflicting signals about what improvement is for and how it should be executed.

The result is a system-level misalignment. Frontline teams are encouraged to surface problems but are measured on operational throughput, while leaders invest in tools and programs but govern them through centralized controls. Improvement is simultaneously expected to reduce friction and increase performance — without resolving who decides, who acts, and what trade-offs matter. Over time, this misalignment shapes how improvement unfolds across the organization.

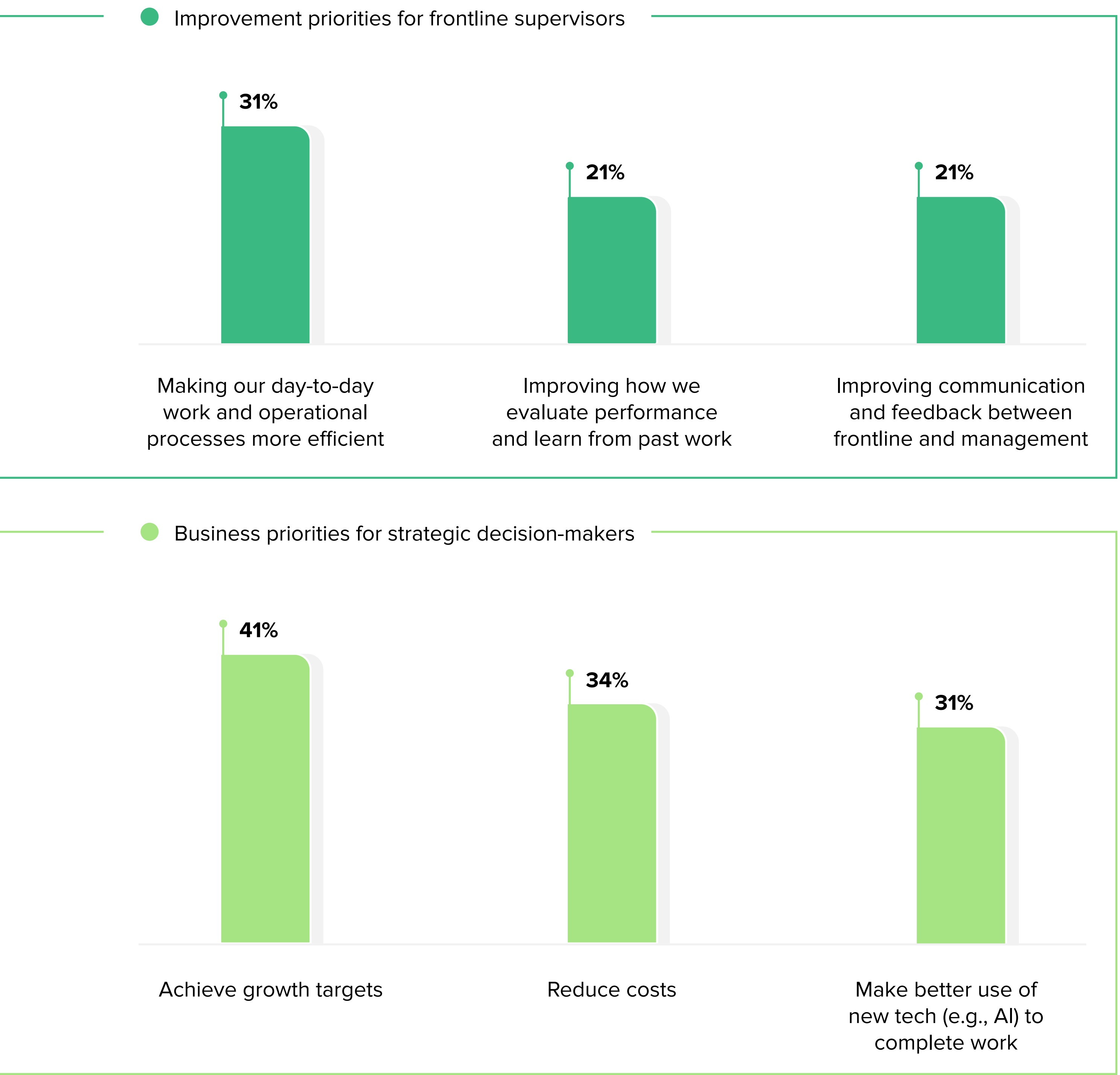
PRIORITIES

- **Priorities pull in opposite directions.** Frontline supervisors prioritize improvements that make work more manageable, focusing on daily operational efficiency, performance learning, and better communication with management. Meanwhile, leaders push for growth, cost reduction, and technology adoption (see Figure 3). These priorities are not mutually exclusive, but they compete in practice. When the frontline seeks stability and leadership seeks growth, improvement is resourced and evaluated through different lenses.

> Improvement is expected to **increase performance and reduce friction**, without resolving who decides, who acts, and what trade-offs matter.

FIGURE 3

Top Critical Business and Improvement Priorities Over The Next 12 Months

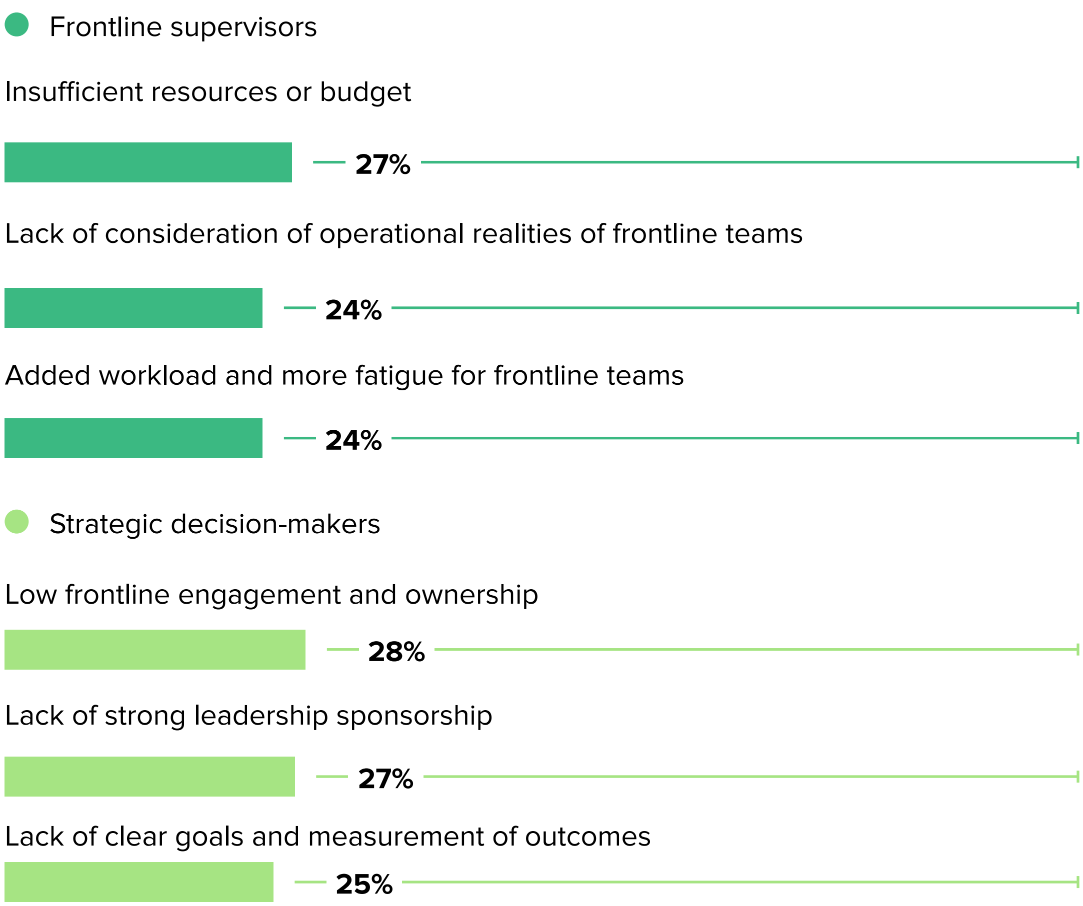


Base: 427 operational managers and site leads and 213 strategic decision-makers
Source: Forrester's Q4 2025 Frontline Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637] and Forrester's Q4 2025 Decision-Maker Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637]

- **Different experiences produce different diagnoses.** The differing priorities of frontline supervisors and leaders shape how failure is interpreted. Frontline supervisors attribute breakdowns to operational constraints, such as limited time, added workload, and insufficient support. Leaders point to behavioral factors such as low ownership, weak sponsorship, or unclear goals (see Figure 4). These are not contradictory but rather reflections of two different experiences of the same system. These influence which problems receive attention and which are dismissed as execution gaps.

FIGURE 4

Top Reasons For Improvement Initiative Failure



Base: 427 operational managers and site leads and 213 strategic decision-makers
Source: Forrester's Q4 2025 Frontline Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637] and Forrester's Q4 2025 Decision-Maker Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637]

GOVERNANCE

- **Centralized governance slows action at the edge.** Although frontline supervisors surface most improvement opportunities (i.e., 40% cite frontline observation), governance remains centralized. Nearly half of decision-makers (49%) describe improvement governance as centrally controlled. Insight originates at the edge, but approval and resourcing sit far from the work. This widens the loop between detection and action, causing promising opportunities to stall or degrade.

OWNERSHIP

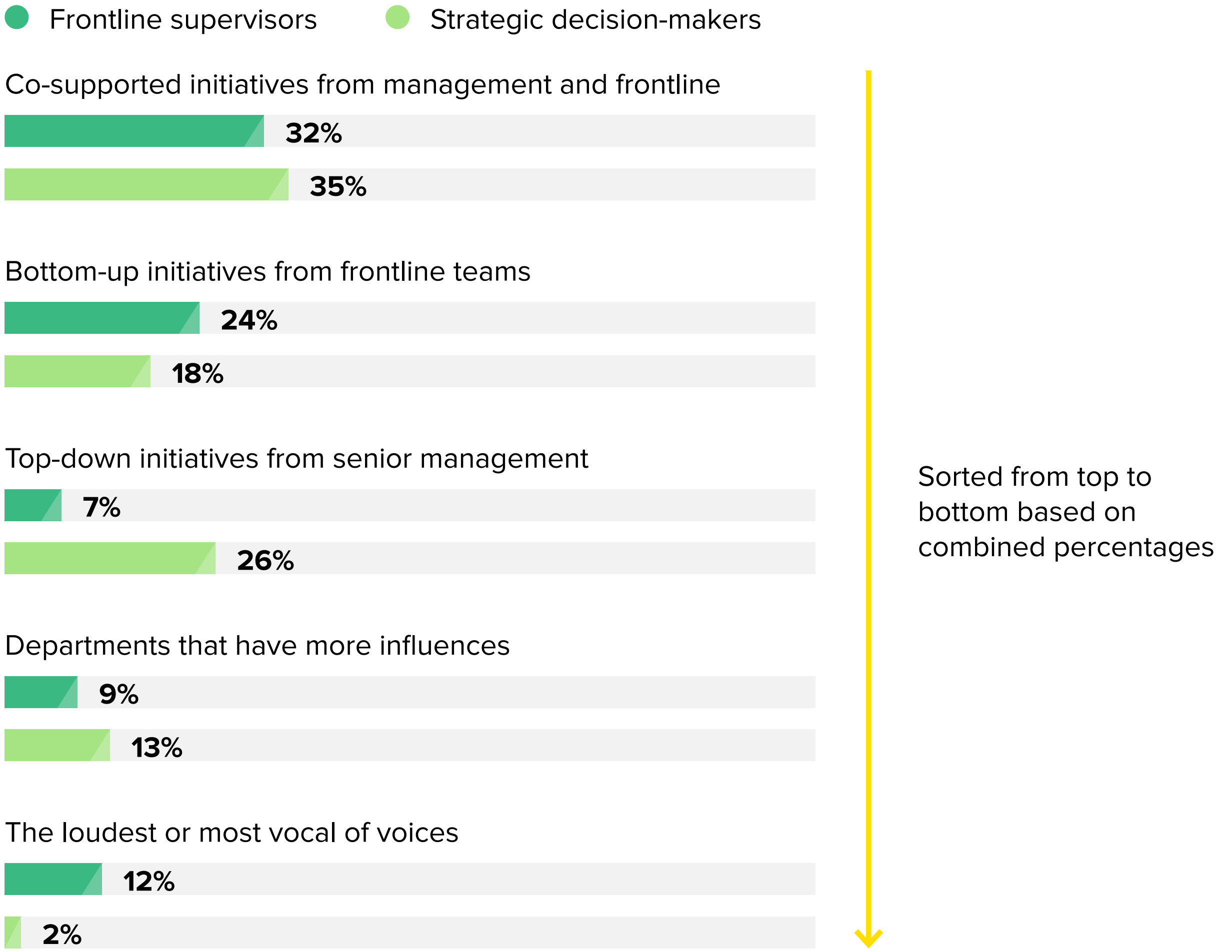
- **Fragmented ownership dilutes follow-through.** Responsibility patterns mirror the broader coordination gap. Both frontline supervisors and leaders view co-supported improvement — where responsibility is shared across roles — as the most effective model. Frontline supervisors also favor bottom-up initiatives, while leaders express notable confidence in top-down approaches (see Figure 5).

  When responsibility is distributed without clear decision rights and escalation paths, follow-through breaks down. Good ideas lose momentum not because they lack value, but because no single role has the mandate, capacity, and visibility to carry them through. Coordination is stronger where accountability is more evenly established across levels: 41% of UK respondents report that responsibility is shared equally across levels at their organization, compared with 32% in North America and 29% in Australia — highlighting how unevenly this condition is realized in practice.

- **Accountability rests at the top while execution rests at the bottom.** Leaders assign responsibility for improvement outcomes to executives (31%) and department leaders (28%), while frontline supervisors believe responsibility should be shared equally across levels (30%). This creates an accountability paradox: Leadership owns the results while frontline teams carry the execution without the ability to control prioritization, sequencing, or resources. Those accountable cannot shape the work, and those doing the work cannot shape the conditions.

FIGURE 5

Origination Of Improvement Initiative Ideas With Successful Outcomes



Note: Showing top five responses
Base: 427 operational managers and site leads and 213 strategic decision-makers
Source: Forrester's Q4 2025 Frontline Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637] and Forrester's Q4 2025 Decision-Maker Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637]

Today’s Ecosystem: Tools And Processes Exist But Don’t Work Together

Most organizations have put the core components of an improvement operating system in place. These include digital tools, routines, measurement processes, and cultural signals that encourage participation. But these components operate alongside each other rather than as a single, reinforcing system. What looks mature from the center often feels fragmented at the frontline because the technology platforms, work processes, and decision routines do not work together in the flow of daily work as one integrated operating system.

- **Tools are widely adopted but rarely drive daily decisions.** Most organizations have digital systems in place, from quality and compliance, to operations and service tools. Yet, effectiveness remains limited, with only about one-third of leaders and frontline supervisors viewing them as highly effective. This gap suggests the issue is not access to tools, but how they are embedded into work. Many tools function primarily as systems that capture and record information, but provide limited support for next-step decisions or in-the-moment action. As a result, technology documents improvement activity rather than actively reducing steps, removing friction, or accelerating resolution.

- **Leaders see technology system integration, frontline teams experience workflow fragmentation.** Leaders feel confident that their technology portfolio is integrated: 70% say digital tools provide visibility and help sustain improvements, and 64% believe those systems are well integrated. However, frontline supervisors report far less alignment: Only 59% see visibility, and just 40% believe their day-to-day workflows work well together.

  This gap reflects differences in how integration is evaluated. Leaders tend to assess integration through portfolio-level connectivity and reporting visibility, while frontline supervisors judge it by whether systems work together in the flow of daily work. As a result, systems may appear to be integrated from an oversight perspective while remaining fragmented at the point of execution. Technical integration exists, but operational integration does not.

> Systems may appear to be integrated from an oversight perspective, while remaining fragmented at the point of execution.

- **Cultural conditions appear supportive, but behaviors don't reinforce them.** On paper, the environment for improvement looks positive. Frontline supervisors report strong psychological safety to speak up about problems or improvement opportunities (75%), perceived time to improve beyond just getting the job done (72%), and autonomy to make small changes (72%). These measures reflect cultural permission to improve.

  In practice, that permission is not consistently converted into operational capacity. While conditions appear supportive, fewer frontline supervisors say improvement is embedded in daily work (68%) or that responsibility is genuinely shared (65%). Competing operational demands and uneven follow-through mean that improvement activity remains deprioritized when operational pressure rises. Without reinforcement thorough routines, visible follow-up, and timely feedback, improvement stays adjacent to work rather than part of how work is completed.

- **Empowerment is signaled through intent but inconsistently reinforced through the operating system.** Most leaders (83%) believe that frontline improvements are recognized, while only 67% of frontline supervisors agree. Similarly, 75% of leaders say decision rights are clear, while only 67% of supervisors agree. Furthermore, when it comes to acting on frontline ideas, 72% of leaders think leadership follows through, but only 57% of supervisors share that view. The gap reflects inconsistency in how empowerment is operationalized daily. Some teams experience strong backing, while others see it applied unevenly depending on the manager or the situation.

Recognition alone is not enough. When expectations of ownership rise without consistent follow-through, accountability outpaces support. Teams are encouraged to take initiative but cannot be sure their efforts will be sustained, resourced, or rewarded. As a result, autonomy feels conditional and teams become cautious about taking ownership — not because they lack motivation, but because the operating system does not reliably reinforce their actions.

- **The weakest link is feedback and it undermines the whole system.** Feedback loops remain the weakest part of the operating system: 81% of frontline supervisors say progress is reviewed, but only 63% are cognizant of what happens to the improvement initiatives they raise. Leaders think feedback is more consistent (75%), which highlights how easily gaps in follow-through can be missed. This weakness is visible across regions: Only 29% of frontline supervisors in Australia and 32% in North America strongly agree they receive feedback on improvements, compared with 41% in the UK — highlighting how uneven reinforcement remains.

- **These gaps carry real consequences.** When teams do not know what became of their ideas, effort feels wasted, momentum fades, and confidence erodes. Improvement without feedback becomes a reporting system, not a learning system. Organizations cannot improve faster than they close loops. Without clear follow-through, each cycle starts from scratch; and without continuity, improvement struggles to take hold.

Maturity Assessment: How Improvement Happens At Different Levels

While most organizations aspire to build a culture of continuous improvement, outcomes depend on the maturity of their underlying capabilities. True integration requires more than activity or intent — it depends on alignment, clear ownership, and systems that embed improvement into the operating rhythm of work rather than layering it on top.

Understanding where organizations sit today, and how behaviors, structures, and outcomes differ by maturity is critical to closing the gap between intent and impact.

Improvement maturity is assessed across four capability domains:

Culture and enablement, leadership and governance, systems and tools, and measurement and feedback (see Figure 6).

These domains represent the core building blocks required to embed improvement into daily workflows and sustain impact at scale. The assessment examines not only their presence, but how effectively they work together.

Organizations are grouped into four maturity stages, namely reactive, compliant, proactive, and integrated — categorized based on observable differences in how leadership, tools, routines, and culture operate in day-to-day work. Reactive organizations rely on ad-hoc efforts; compliant organizations establish basic routines and discipline; proactive organizations embed improvement consistently across operations; and integrated organizations achieve a self-sustaining model where improvement is fully integrated into the operating system.

Low-maturity organizations depend on individual effort to drive improvement, while high-maturity organizations engineer improvement into the operating system itself.

FIGURE 6

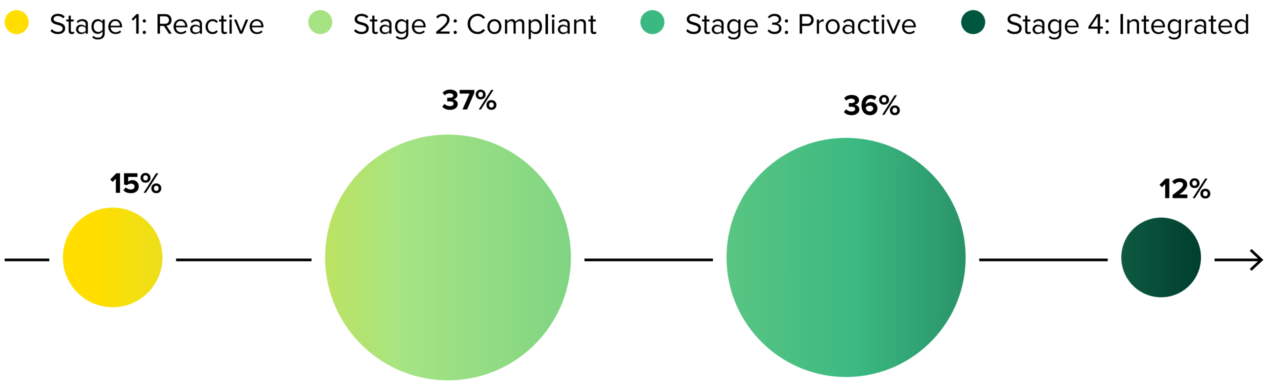
Maturity Assessment Is Built Upon Four Key Capability Domains

Capability domains	Description
Systems and tools	Ensuring digital platforms and improvement systems are interoperable, intuitive, and widely adopted — providing real-time visibility, embedding improvements so they last, and supporting daily improvement through integrated technology.
Culture and enablement	Embedding improvement into daily operations, empowering frontline teams, sharing responsibility across levels, building skills, and fostering psychological safety for raising issues.
Leadership and governance	Leaders articulating a clear purpose, maintaining visibility, acting on workforce input, delegating authority, recognizing frontline-led improvements, and setting decision rights to enable quick, compliant changes.
Measurement and feedback	Using shared dashboards and consistent metrics, linking improvement to business outcomes, reviewing progress systematically, providing feedback loops, capturing learnings, and tracking implementation speed.

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

FIGURE 7

Continuous Improvement Maturity Distribution



Base: 427 operational managers and site leads and 213 strategic decision-makers
Source: Forrester's Q4 2025 Frontline Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637] and Forrester's Q4 2025 Decision-Maker Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637]

Today, most organizations cluster in the middle: 37% are compliant and 36% proactive. A further 15% remain reactive, while only 12% have reached the Integrated stage where improvement is fully embedded (see Figure 7).

At higher maturity levels, improvement is engineered into the system itself. The differences across stages are material: They shape how culture is enabled, the way leadership governs, how systems support work, and how feedback drives action.

STAGE ONE, REACTIVE: FRAGMENTED EFFORT, LOW REINFORCEMENT

At the reactive stage, improvement shows up inconsistently because the operating environment does not support it. With only 45% of leaders reporting shared responsibility for improvement and 49% embedding it into daily work, it signals that improvement is optional and on the individual level rather than structural. Middle-manager reinforcement is rare (30%), meaning even valid concerns often stall without sponsorship.

Weak systems amplify this variability. Interoperability at 29% limits visibility across functions, which causes teams to detect issues late and coordinate even later. Feedback loops reach only 45% of teams, preventing learning from accumulating.

The organization experiences volatility and inefficiency because the system cannot anticipate problems or repeat successes. Improvement is technically present, but strategically inconsequential.

STAGE TWO, COMPLIANT: DISCIPLINE EMERGES, BUT NOT CONSISTENCY

Organizations in the compliant stage experience stability but not scale. With 66% of leaders embedding improvement in daily work and 61% reporting clearer shared ownership, teams begin to follow defined routines rather than relying on initiative. The sharp rise in middle-manager reinforcement from 30% to 60% creates the first reliable backbone for sustaining behaviors, yet the variation across teams remains high.

Systems improve but still constrain coordination. Interoperability remains low at 40%, meaning insights rarely travel beyond the team or site that generated them. Measurement becomes more regular — 76% report systematic reviews — but it remains retrospective rather than actionable, with inconsistent feedback loops still persisting (61%).

Compliant organizations achieve predictable routines but not enterprisewide consistency. The early scaffolding is in place, yet improvement behaves more like a local habit than a system capability.

STAGE THREE, PROACTIVE: OPERATIONALIZED AND PREDICTABLE

Proactive organizations shift from structured routines to coordinated, enterprise-level performance. Ownership rises to 72%, and 80% of frontline workers feel empowered to act without waiting for approval, enabling earlier intervention and faster resolution. Psychological safety reaches 81%, which removes hesitation and supports consistent escalation of risks across teams.

Systems now enable flow rather than recording activity. Interoperability jumps to 57%, linking workflows and enabling cross-functional response to emerging issues. Leaders reinforce these behaviors through clear decision rights (81%) and consistent visibility into operational realities (76%). Measurement evolves from monitoring to prevention: 84% conduct systematic barrier-removal reviews and 77% close feedback loops.

Improvement becomes predictable and repeatable, but not yet fully unified. Strong local systems create momentum, yet variation persists where workflows or functions are not fully integrated.

STAGE FOUR, INTEGRATED: SELF-SUSTAINING IMPROVEMENT

Integrated organizations operate with a fully aligned system where improvement is constant, visible, and self-reinforcing. Ninety-five percent of leaders note that their organizations embed improvement into daily work and 87% report shared ownership, creating uniform expectations across teams. Leadership alignment is high: 90% of leaders maintain real-time visibility and 91% run systematic barrier-removal reviews, ensuring rapid and coordinated decision-making.

Systems function as a single operational layer. Interoperability reaches 73% and real-time issue capture hits 91%, enabling emerging risks to surface and be addressed instantly. Measurement is predictive: 90% of organizations connect improvement to business results and 89% track time-to-implementation, tightening the feedback loop and accelerating learning across the organization.

Improvement becomes an always-on operating model. Issues are anticipated rather than reacted to, decisions propagate quickly, and the system strengthens itself through continuous feedback.

WHEN IMPROVEMENT BECOMES A SYSTEM, PERFORMANCE ACCELERATES

Improvement only endures when teams can act without waiting for approval and the system reliably closes the loop. Less mature organizations (i.e., those in the reactive and compliant stages) depend on individual effort and inconsistent leadership signals. In contrast, more mature organizations (i.e., those in the proactive and integrated stage) build operating systems that remove friction, accelerate decisions, and embed improvement into daily work.

The difference is not in intent, but system reliability. Where governance, routines, and systems reinforce one another, improvement becomes repeatable and self-sustaining. Where they do not, progress remains fragile and episodic.

Fewer than one-third of organizations in any region have fully embedded improvement: 31% of leaders in North America noted their organization possess that, 20% in the UK said the same, and finally 13% in Australia observed the same.

What Makes Improvement Stick: Letting Teams Act And Hear Feedback

Sustained improvement shows up when two things happen consistently: When teams have the room to act, and they hear about what happens after they act. Improvement without feedback is merely reporting — without closure, even empowered teams stall. Organizations with higher success rates show a clear pattern in how these elements work together.

- **Teams agree on what drives success.** Frontline supervisors and leaders point to the same top four factors for success. These include clear ownership, simple goals, active leadership support, and improvement that happens in the rhythm of daily work (see Figure 8). However, the difference lies in emphasis: Frontline teams rank ownership and engagement highest, while leaders prioritize sponsorship. The shared view provides a strong base and signals strong alignment on what matters, but leadership sponsorship that empowers rather than direct is required.

- **Empowerment works when feedback is clear and visible.** Success is highest when autonomy and feedback appear together. Among frontline supervisors, 41% of those who feel empowered and receive feedback report near-universal success, compared with 25% to 27% who feel the same when only either variable is present. Decision-makers show the same pattern: 54% report high success when leadership visibility is paired with delegation, compared to 19% when either exists alone. Autonomy without feedback creates hesitation, while feedback without authority limits action.

Autonomy without feedback creates hesitation, while feedback without authority limits action.

- **Daily integration strengthens autonomy.** Cross-analysis shows higher success among teams that treat improvement as part of daily operations and can make small changes themselves. When improvement fits naturally into the workday, teams act more often. Frequent action reinforces the expectation that improvement is part of the job, not an add-on. Similarly, integration enables autonomy, and autonomy in turn reinforces integration.

FIGURE 8

Alignment Of Perceived Top Success Drivers

● Frontline supervisors ● Strategic decision-makers

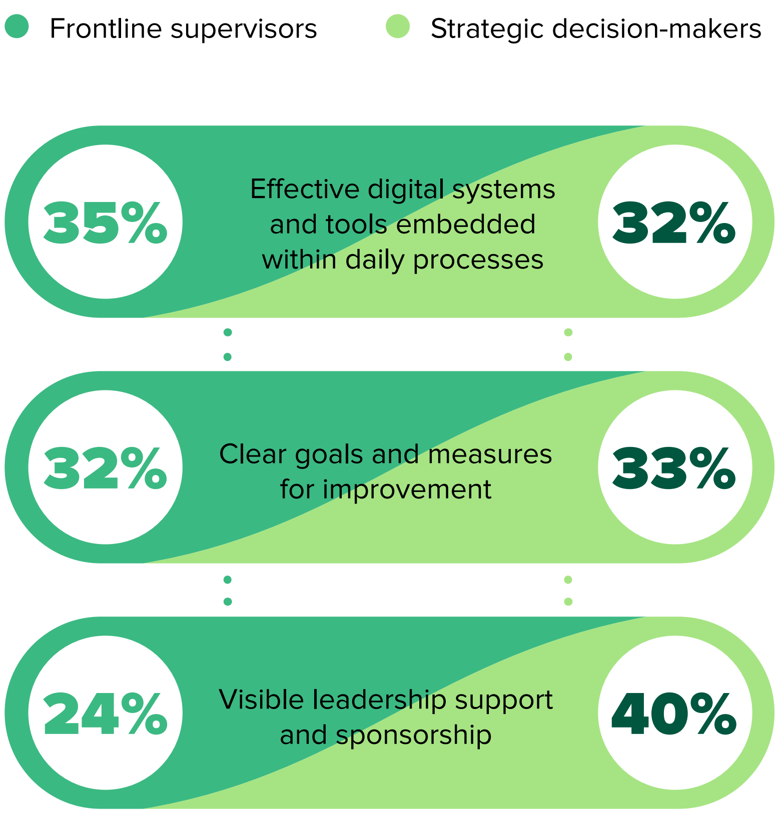
Frontline supervisors		Strategic decision-makers	
43%	Frontline ownership and engagement	42%	Strong leadership sponsorship
36%	Clear goals and outcomes, not just "ticking the box"	40%	Clear goals and outcomes, not just "ticking the box"
31%	Strong leadership sponsorship	36%	Frontline ownership and engagement
30%	Embedded in daily work	36%	Embedded in daily work

Note: Showing top four responses
Base: 427 operational managers and site leads and 213 strategic decision-makers
Source: Forrester's Q4 2025 Frontline Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637] and Forrester's Q4 2025 Decision-Maker Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637]

- **Durability depends on tools, goals, and leadership lining up.** Frontline supervisors and leaders identify the same three enablers of lasting improvement: tools that support daily decisions, goals and measures that are easy to understand, and leadership that follows through on ideas (see Figure 9). When these elements work in concert, they create a predictable environment where improvement progresses smoothly and consistently. When they do not, improvement becomes procedural, thought of as something logged and reviewed but not actively carried through.

FIGURE 9

Top Factors For Building A Stronger Integrated Improvement Culture



Base: 427 operational managers and site leads and 213 strategic decision-makers
Source: Forrester's Q4 2025 Frontline Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637] and Forrester's Q4 2025 Decision-Maker Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637]

Key Recommendations

Organizations do not strengthen improvement culture through tools or processes alone — they do it by aligning authority, behavior, and feedback in the flow of work. The data shows that the fundamentals are likely to already exist, but are inconsistent, fragmented, or operating in isolation. These recommendations outline the core actions organizations should take to turn intent into execution and make improvement a reliable part of daily operations.

Forrester's in-depth survey yielded several important recommendations:

Align goals and measures across all layers. Frontline supervisors optimize for workload relief, while leaders focus on growth, cost, and technology — explicating a mismatch that creates mixed signals and competing priorities. Define a small set of shared goals and common measures that link operational reality to strategic outcomes. When all layers optimize for the same results, improvement becomes easier to prioritize and far more coherent. Clear alignment reduces noise, sharpens focus, and increases the likelihood of lasting impact.

Standardize a small set of high-impact behaviors. Leadership responsiveness, follow-through, and daily integration are the behaviors most strongly linked to improvement success. Yet, they vary widely across sites. Codify a small set of non-negotiable routines, such as daily huddles, issue triage rhythms, and predictable recognition cycles. Standardizing these few behaviors strengthens trust and reduces inconsistency without limiting autonomy. Teams adopt improvement more naturally when expectations are clear and visible.

Shift decision-making closer to the frontline. Most improvement opportunities originate at the frontline, but centralized governance slows action and weakens outcomes. Shift routine decision rights to frontline leaders and define clear boundaries for what can be changed without escalation. This accelerates improvement cycles, reduces operational bottlenecks, and builds confidence in local problem-solving. Organizations that decentralize appropriately see faster resolution and higher sustained engagement.

Make digital tools drive action, not just documentation. Digital tools are common, but many function as reporting layers rather than workflow enablers. Redesign key systems so they guide next steps, automate simple decisions, and help teams to close loops quickly. When tools reduce friction instead of adding it, improvement becomes easier to start and easier to sustain. Organizations gain higher adoption, cleaner data, and more reliable daily execution.

Close feedback loops every time. Frontline supervisors frequently raise ideas but often do not hear what happens next, which weakens motivation and slows momentum. Establish a simple, repeatable rhythm that communicates what was raised, what was done, and what was learned. Reliable feedback reinforces effort, builds transparency, and makes contribution worthwhile. Closed loops create the compounding effect required for improvement to stick.

Appendix A: Methodology

In Forrester's Q4 2025 Frontline Continuous Improvement Survey, Forrester conducted an online survey of 427 operational managers and site leads responsible for their organization's day-to-day operations and team oversight. All respondents work for retail, manufacturing, transportation and logistics, or hospitality institutions with US$250 million or more in annual revenue and are based in North America, the UK, or Australia. The custom survey began and was completed in October 2025.

In Forrester's Q4 2025 Decision-Maker Continuous Improvement Survey, Forrester conducted an online survey of 213 strategic decision-makers (i.e., at least at the director level) with responsibility for driving operational excellence across the organization by embedding a culture of continuous improvement. All respondents work for hospitality, manufacturing, retail, or transportation and logistics institutions with US$250 million or more in annual revenue and are based in North America, the UK, or Australia. The custom survey began and was completed in October 2025.

Appendix B: Demographics

FRONTLINE SUPERVISORS

REGION	
UK	**34%**
Australia	**33%**
North America	**33%**

EMPLOYEES	
1,000 to 4,999	**43%**
5,000 to 8,999	**38%**
9,000 or more	**19%**

REVENUE	
$250M to just under $500M	**16%**
$500M to just under $1B	**34%**
$1B to just under $5B	**37%**
$5B or more	**12%**

INDUSTRY	
Retail	**26%**
Manufacturing	**25%**
Transportation and logistics	**25%**
Hospitality	**24%**

POSITION	
Manager, supervisor, or equivalent (manages a team of functional practitioners)	**59%**
Project manager (manages ad hoc project teams) or equivalent	**41%**

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Appendix B: Demographics (Continued)

FRONTLINE SUPERVISORS

RESPONSIBILITY OVER ORGANIZATION'S STRATEGY FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION	
I am not involved in making decisions for my organization's continuous improvement strategy, but I manage its implementation	**56%**
I am part of the team that drives the implementation of continuous improvement strategies at my organization	**44%**

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT ADOPTION STAGE	
Piloting	**19%**
Previously implemented but have plans to stop	**8%**
Implemented	**28%**
Implemented and expanding	**30%**
Fully embedded	**15%**

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

DECISION-MAKERS

REGION	
UK	**34%**
Australia	**33%**
North America	**33%**

EMPLOYEES	
1,000 to 4,999	**51%**
5,000 to 8,999	**38%**
9,000 or more	**11%**

REVENUE	
$250M to just under $500M	**15%**
$500M to just under $1B	**36%**
$1B to just under $5B	**35%**
$5B or more	**14%**

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

INDUSTRY	
Hospitality	**26%**
Manufacturing	**25%**
Retail	**25%**
Transportation and logistics	**24%**

POSITION	
C-level executive (e.g., CEO, CTO, CIO, CRO, CHRO) or equivalent	**21%**
Vice president (in charge of one/several large departments) or equivalent	**36%**
Director (manages a team of managers and high-level contributors) or equivalent	**44%**

Appendix B: Demographics (Continued)

DECISION-MAKERS

RESPONSIBILITY OVER ORGANIZATION'S STRATEGY FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION	
I am the final decision-maker for my organization's continuous improvement strategy	**41%**
I am part of a team making decisions for my organization's continuous improvement strategy	**36%**
I influence decisions related to my organization's continuous improvement strategy	**23%**

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT ADOPTION STAGE	
Piloting	**11%**
Previously implemented but have plans to stop	**6%**
Implemented	**28%**
Implemented and expanding	**34%**
Fully embedded	**21%**

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Appendix C: Endnotes

[1] Source: Melt The Snowflakes, Forrester Research, Inc., April 22, 2021.

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