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The Improvement Paradox: A Spotlight On The Manufacturing Industry

Manufacturing Results From The January 2026 Thought Leadership Paper, “The Improvement Paradox”

A FORRESTER CONSULTING THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PAPER COMMISSIONED BY SAFETYCULTURE, FEBRUARY 2026

Executive Summary

Manufacturing operates at the intersection of high operational complexity and relentless performance pressure. The frontline manages environments where improvement intent is strong with leaders investing in systems, tools, and governance, but execution often stalls at the point of work.

This disconnect is not about lack of belief: Frontline supervisors and strategic decision-makers alike overwhelmingly agree improvement should be part of daily work, yet many say it is not embedded in practices today. The gap between aspiration and reality is widening as manufacturers face tighter production schedules, rising compliance demands, and workforce constraints.

In October 2025, SafetyCulture commissioned Forrester Consulting to assess how improvement operates across organizational layers. Forrester's findings revealed a pattern of fragmented execution: tools are adopted but rarely integrated; governance frameworks exist but slow decision-making; and feedback loops fail to close, leaving frontline teams disengaged.

This spotlight will focus on those survey respondents from the manufacturing industry, which includes 107 frontline supervisors and 53 decision-makers across North America, the UK, and Australia. It will provide a manufacturing-focused lens on continuous improvement maturity, highlighting where progress stalls and what leaders can do to close the gap. It concludes with practical recommendations designed to help manufacturing organizations move from intent to impact by making improvement worker-centric, digitally enabled, and embedded in the rhythm of daily work.

Key Findings

Daily improvement practice on the factory floor remains inconsistent. Survey respondents agree that improvement should be part of daily work, yet this belief does not translate into action. Improvement feels uneven as production pressure and equipment dependencies force trade-offs. Only 39% of supervisors say improvement is embedded; leaders hold a more optimistic view (72%). This gap weakens the impact of improvement efforts.

Operational pressures and structural misalignment remain key barriers. Supervisors point to insufficient resources/budgets (31%), lack of leadership sponsorship (31%), and added workload (24%) as barriers to improvement. These pressures make improvement hard to execute in fast-paced production settings. Leaders view the issue as behavioral, which leads to treating symptoms instead of structural constraints.

Tools, governance, and routines exist but rarely drive action. Manufacturing sites have the right components (e.g., digital tools, tiered meetings, escalation paths), but they often operate in isolation. Tools capture information without guiding next steps, governance centralizes decisions away from where work happens, and routines are inconsistently reinforced. Weak feedback loops further erode momentum.

Improvement gains momentum when autonomy, clarity, and follow-through converge. Success is highest when frontline teams have clear authority to act, simple routines that support action, and reliable feedback on outcomes. When leaders reinforce expectations through predictable rhythms and when systems help rather than hinder the flow of work, improvement becomes part of the operating model. Greater autonomy and consistent follow-through build confidence, reduce delays, and help improvements hold across shifts and equipment cycles.

Why Improvement Breaks Down — And What It Costs

Manufacturing-specific dynamics heighten the difficulty of sustaining improvement because production schedules, equipment dependencies, and safety and quality requirements tightly constrain the work. Frontline teams often experience improvement as extra workload because they operate in fast-paced, interruption-sensitive environments where even small delays ripple across shifts, lines, or customer commitments. As a result, any downtime that unclear decision rights or inconsistent feedback loops cause has a significant impact.

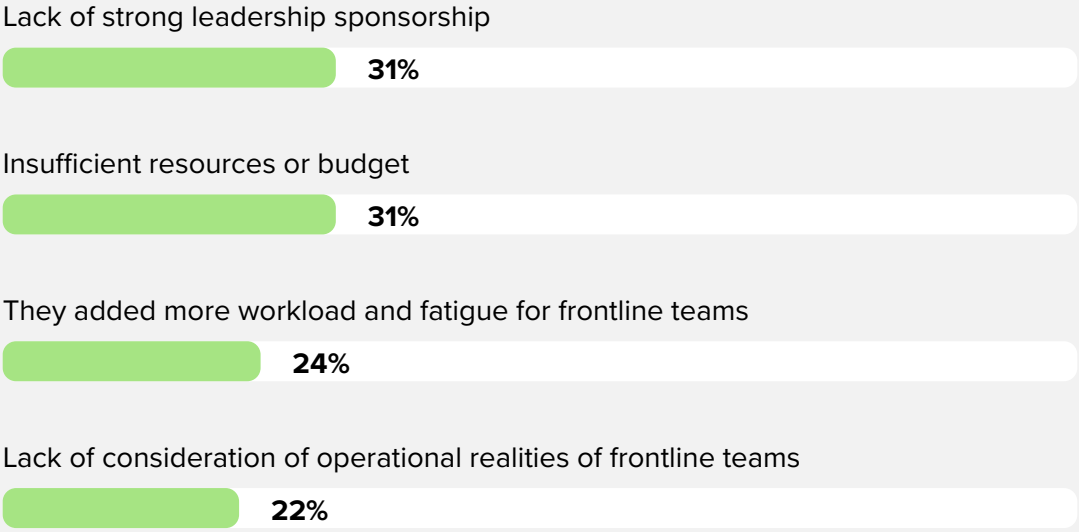
The root causes of failure are not lack of intent but structural misalignment. Leadership focuses on ownership and strategic goals, while frontline teams seek relief from operational strain.

- **Frontline teams and leaders pull toward different operational signals.** When improvement breaks down, frontline supervisors attribute this to leadership gaps and practical enablement barriers, citing lack of strong leadership sponsorship (31%), insufficient resources or budget (31%), additional workload and fatigue (24%), and concerningly, lack of consideration of operational realities of frontline teams (22%) (see Figure 1).

In manufacturing, frontline supervisors report uncertainty about who can approve or resource changes, causing promising opportunities to stall.

FIGURE 1

Why Do Improvement Initiatives Fail?



Note: Showing top four responses
Base: 107 operational managers and site leads from the manufacturing industry who are responsible for day-to-day operations and team oversight
Source: Forrester's Q4 2025 Frontline Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637]

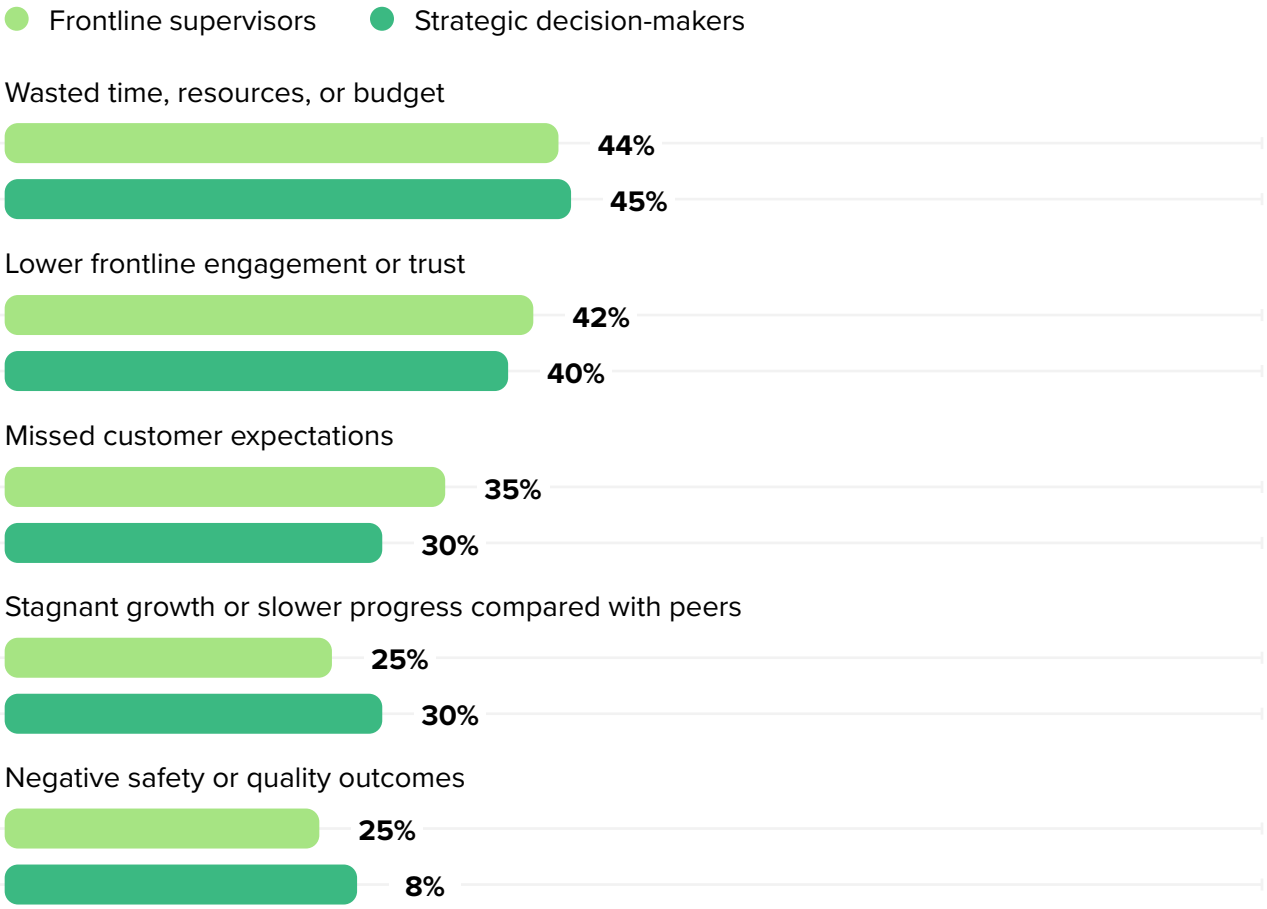
As a result, manufacturing supervisors primarily prioritize workload relief and execution stability, while manufacturing leadership prioritize growth (43%), technology improvement (40%), and efficiency gains (34%). Together, these patterns indicate supervisors feel workload friction, while leaders believe strategic alignment is strong, an obvious mismatch.

- **Centralized governance slows action.** Decision-making authority often sits far from where work happens, delaying issue resolution. Nearly half of manufacturing decision-makers (49%) describe their improvement governance model as centrally controlled. This concentration of decision rights at senior levels slows the translation of frontline insights into action.
- **Ownership is unclear and fragmented.** Responsibility for improvement is shared across roles, but decision rights are not. Approximately one in three manufacturing frontline supervisors report uncertainty about who can approve or resource changes, causing promising opportunities to stall.

- **The cost of weak systems compounds over time.** When improvement breaks down, organizations pay in operational, cultural, and customer outcomes. Manufacturing supervisors most frequently cite wasted time, resources, or budget (44%); lower frontline engagement or trust (42%); and missed customer expectations (35%) as the main consequences when improvement initiatives fail to stick. Decision-makers' responses are consistent with this while also emphasizing financial, safety, and growth dimensions (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

What Are The Consequences When Improvement Breaks Down?



Base: 107 operational managers and site leads from the manufacturing industry who are responsible for day-to-day operations and team oversight and 53 strategic decision-makers from the manufacturing industry with responsibility for driving operational excellence across their organization
Source: Forrester's Q4 2025 Frontline Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637] and Forrester's Q4 2025 Decision-Maker Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637]

Closing The Digital Tools Gap: High Adoption, Low Integration

Digital adoption is widespread, but effectiveness and integration remain weak links. Manufacturing teams rely heavily on asset uptime and quality control, making digital systems critical. Yet usability issues and siloed tools undermine potential gains.

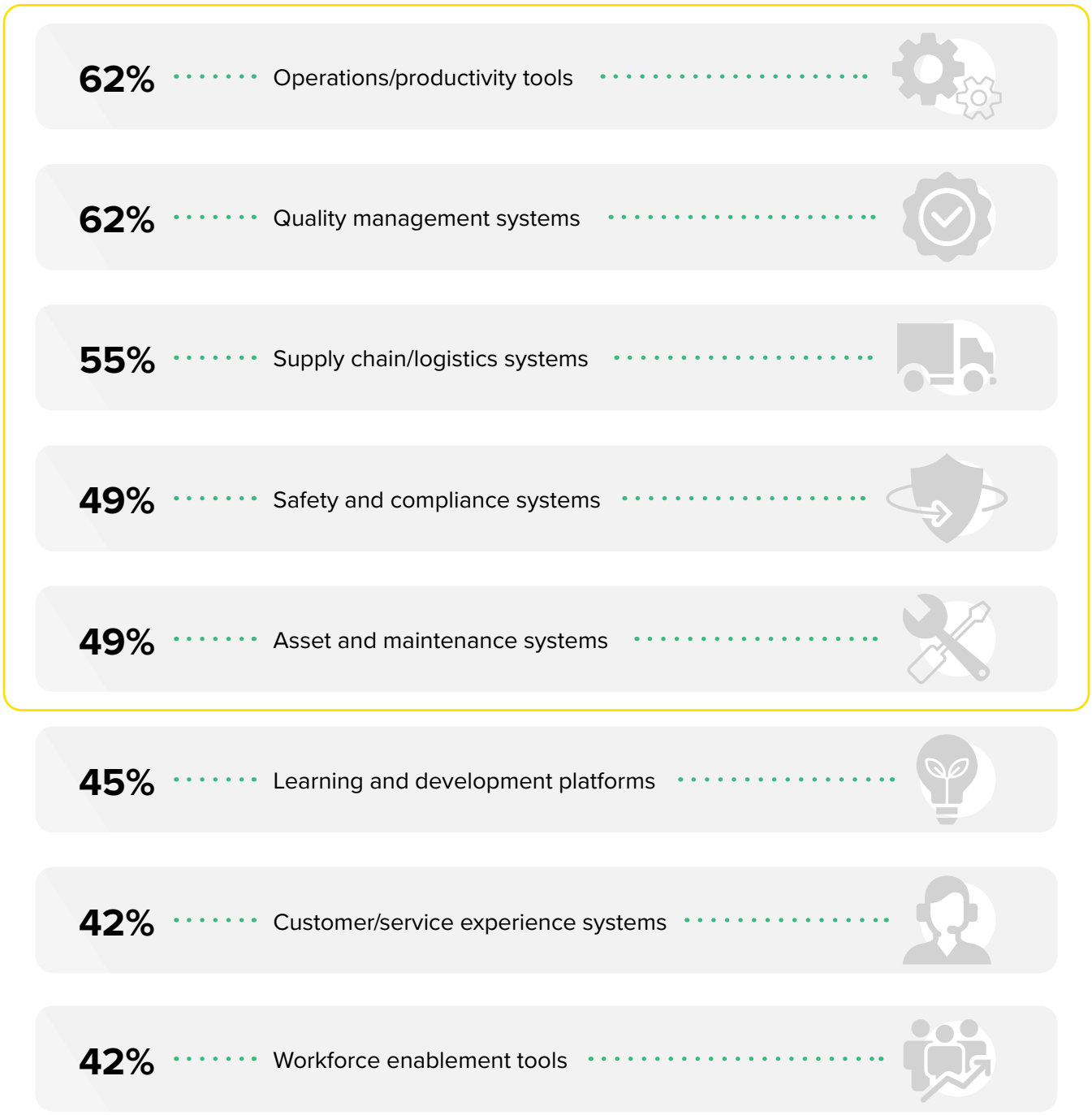
Only 20%

of manufacturing frontline supervisors strongly agree that their digital tools are effective at providing visibility to enable timely action.

- **Digital adoption sits at around the halfway mark across manufacturing sites.** Most manufacturing teams are provided with tools for safety, quality, maintenance, and operations, with adoption rates ranging from 42% to 62% across all major system categories (see Figure 3).
- **Tools capture information but do not drive action.** Current systems record issues but rarely support next steps or resolution workflows. Strong agreement on the effectiveness of digital tools is relatively low among frontline supervisors (20%) and higher among decision-makers (45%), indicating a difference in how each group perceives the ability of current systems to support real-time visibility and follow-through on improvements.
- **Integration remains a key chokepoint.** Most digital systems do not work together, resulting in duplicate effort and lost context. Fifty-nine percent of manufacturing supervisors say their workflows remain fragmented due to poor integration between systems.

FIGURE 3

“What digital tools does your organization adopt to support continuous improvement objectives?”



Base: 53 strategic decision-makers from the manufacturing industry with responsibility for driving operational excellence across their organization
Source: Forrester’s Q4 2025 Decision-Maker Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637]

Building A Culture Where Improvement Is The Norm

Manufacturing supervisors value worker-centric improvement embedded in daily work, but maturity is uneven. Culture is the ultimate enabler. Frontline supervisors want improvement to feel like part of the job, not a separate program.

Only 39% of frontline supervisors report that improvement is sufficiently integrated today, and only 32% of decision-makers describe their organization's approach to empowering frontline teams as truly embedded and proactive.

- **Frontline supervisors and strategic decision-makers agree that improvement should be part of daily work, yet this is not the reality.** While 78% of supervisors and 83% of decision-makers believe it is very important or essential that improvement efforts are worker-centric and embedded in daily work, only 39% of supervisors report that this is the reality. There is a stark disconnect between decision-makers who are more optimistic at 72% (see Figure 4).

- **Cultural permission exists but is not matched by execution.** Supervisors feel safe raising issues and ideas but lack consistent support to follow through. While 75% of manufacturing supervisors report psychological safety to speak up, more than one-third believe that the improvement ideas most likely to be successfully implemented come from outside the frontline. These include those who are the loudest or most vocal, departments that have more influence, external consultants, people favored by senior management, or top-down from senior management themselves.

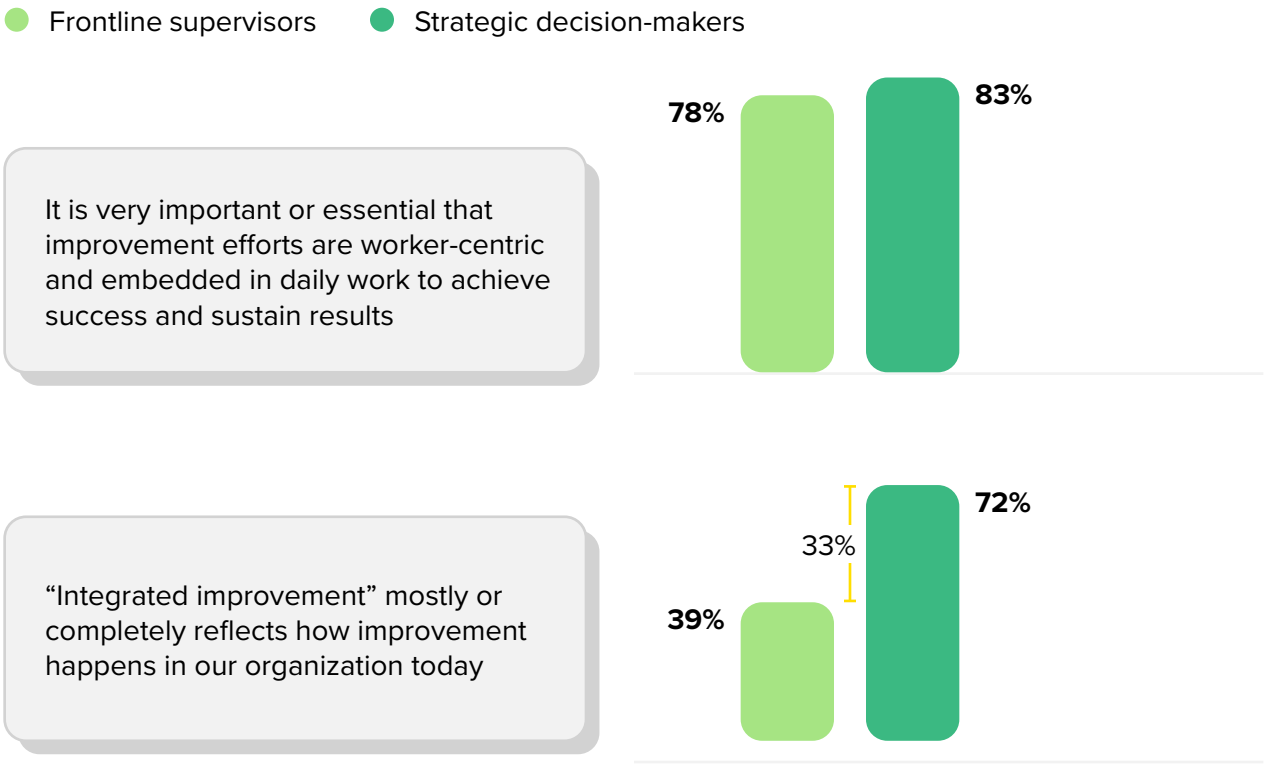
- **Operational urgency frequently reduces the time and attention available for improvement activity on the floor.** Sixty-six percent of decision-makers report they track time to implementation and escalate

delays, signaling a leadership push for speed that frontline enablement does not match. Indeed, a similar two-thirds of decision-makers concede that their organization's approach to empowering frontline teams to drive improvement is either supportive but inconsistent (43%), reactive and compliance-driven (21%), or downright resistant/indifferent (4%).

- **Future priorities reflect a desire for clarity and consistency.** In forward-looking questions, manufacturing supervisors most frequently select simple goals (33%), effective systems (33%), and adequate time and space (31%) as the top factors that would meaningfully build a stronger integrated improvement culture.

FIGURE 4

Integrated Improvement: Belief Is Met With A Hard Reality Check



Note: Showing respondents who selected "Strongly agree" and "Agree"
Base: 107 operational managers and site leads from the manufacturing industry who are responsible for day-to-day operations and team oversight and 53 strategic decision-makers from the manufacturing industry with responsibility for driving operational excellence across their organization
Source: Forrester's Q4 2025 Frontline Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637] and Forrester's Q4 2025 Decision-Maker Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637]

What Works: Practices That Turn Intent Into Impact

Manufacturing environments demand simplicity and clarity. Success comes from pairing autonomy with consistent feedback and from streamlining routines so that they fit the rhythm of work. The evidence shows that review cadence is necessary but insufficient; teams act with confidence when they know what happened to the ideas they raised and what they can authorize themselves.

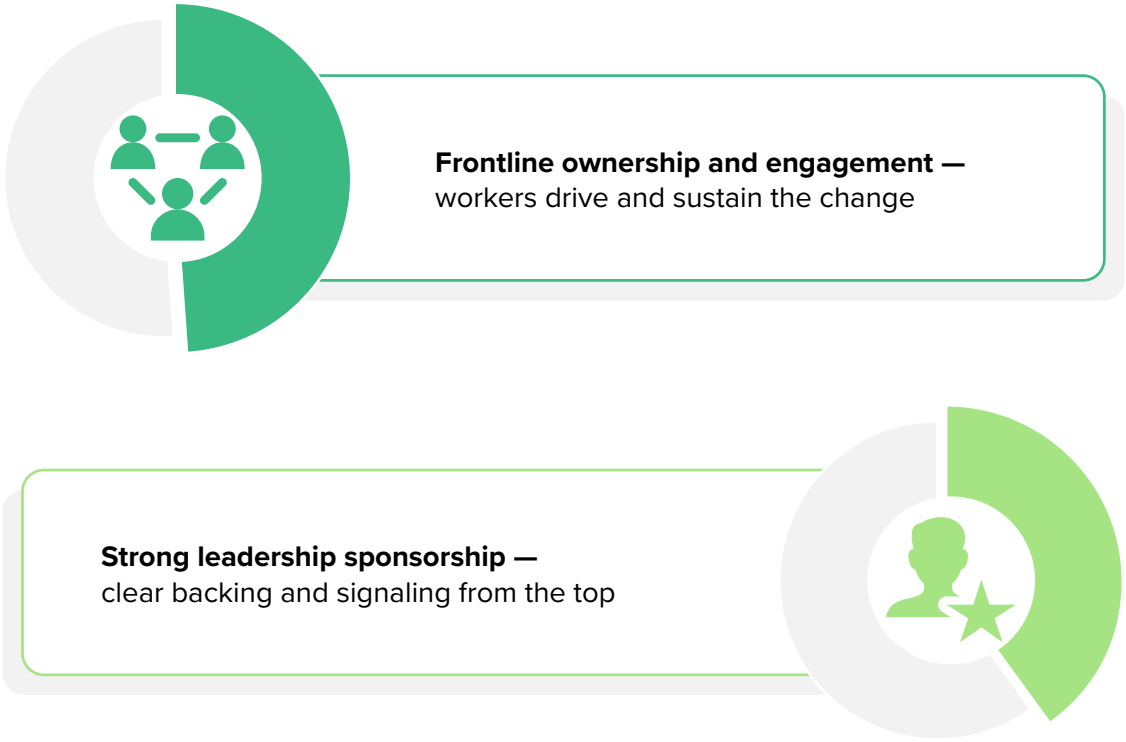
> Impact happens when frontline teams have the clarity, autonomy, feedback, and simple habits that make improvement part of how work gets done, not an extra layer.

- **Empowerment must be paired with feedback.** Improvements accelerate only when supervisors have the authority to act and receive consistent follow-through. This relationship is reflected in performance: Where manufacturing supervisors report both autonomy and consistent follow-through, seven out of 10 achieve success in nearly all improvement initiatives. This drops sharply to a mere two in 10 when one of these elements is missing.
- **Daily rhythms reinforce improvement.** Improvement is sustained when it becomes part of the workday and is not an extra task. Manufacturing teams that use daily huddles, visual triage, and microchanges, for example, can improve the success rate of improvement initiatives by embedding these rituals as part of daily work culture.

- **Simple goals and visible measures matter.** Clear, easy-to-understand goals make improvement easier to prioritize and track. Manufacturing frontline supervisors identify top predictors of improvement success include frontline ownership and engagement where workers drive and sustain the change, and clear backing and signaling from the top via strong leadership sponsorship (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5

Top Predictors Of Improvement Success According To The Frontline



Note: Showing top two responses
Base: 107 operational managers and site leads from the manufacturing industry who are responsible for day-to-day operations and team oversight
Source: Forrester's Q4 2025 Frontline Continuous Improvement Survey [E-65637]

Key Recommendations

Organizations in the manufacturing sector do not strengthen improvement culture through tools or processes alone: They do it by aligning authority, behavior, and feedback within the flow of daily production work.

Forrester's in-depth survey of manufacturing supervisors and strategic decision-makers yielded several important recommendations to build a dependable, worker-centric improvement system. These recommendations outline the core actions manufacturers can take to turn improvement from an aspirational program into an operational habit. The following actions represent the most important steps:

Align goals and measures across all layers. Manufacturing teams operate under intense production pressure where small delays can cascade across shifts or equipment cycles. Supervisors prioritize workload relief, stability, and keeping the line moving, while leaders often focus on efficiency, technology adoption, and output targets. To close this gap, define a small, transparent set of performance measures that link daily operational pain points, such as quality, safety, uptime, and flow, to strategic outcomes. When goals reflect both frontline constraints and leadership priorities, teams can pursue improvement with clarity rather than trade-offs.

Standardize a small set of high-impact behaviors. The manufacturing workforce relies on predictable rhythms like shift handovers, daily briefings, and safety routines, yet improvement behaviors (e.g., leadership follow-through, timely decisions, and small-change experiments) vary widely by site and supervisor. This inconsistency makes improvement feel uneven and dependent on individual managers rather than the operating model. Codify a few simple, nonnegotiable behaviors that fit naturally into the manufacturing day, such as short, structured huddles; clear escalation and triage routines; and visible, predictable follow-up. These behaviors build trust, reduce ambiguity, and help teams embed improvement into their workflow rather than treating it as extra work.

Shift decision-making closer to the frontline. Most improvement opportunities emerge at the point of production, but when decision rights sit too far up the hierarchy, valuable opportunities stall and frontline teams lose momentum.

Clarify the decisions supervisors can make independently. Clear authority accelerates response times, reduces bottlenecks, and encourages confident local problem-solving. When supervisors no longer need to escalate routine fixes, improvement becomes faster, smoother, and more consistent across shifts.

Make digital tools drive action not just documentation. Although manufacturing teams have access to multiple digital systems covering safety, quality, maintenance, and operations, these tools often collect information without helping teams move work forward. When systems do not guide next steps or connect with each other, operators and supervisors must manually translate insights into action. Tools should trigger follow-up tasks, route issues into the right channels, and help teams confirm closure to simplify workflows. Integrated systems that reduce admin, remove duplication, and support real-time visibility make improvement more intuitive and more likely to stick.

Close feedback loops every time. Frontline supervisors regularly raise improvement ideas, but many never hear how, or whether, those ideas were acted upon. Over time, this weakens motivation and creates the perception that improvement is symbolic rather than meaningful. Establish a simple, repeatable cadence that confirms what was raised, what was done, and what was learned. Predictable feedback reinforces participation and shows that frontline insight is valued. When teams consistently see their input translated into real change, momentum builds and improvement becomes part of the culture.

Appendix A: Methodology

In Forrester's Q4 2025 Frontline Continuous Improvement Survey, Forrester conducted an online survey of 427 operational managers and site leads. This spotlight focuses on 107 operational managers and site leads from the manufacturing industry who are responsible for day-to-day operations and team oversight. Their organizations have US$250 million or more in annual revenue and are based in North America, the United Kingdom, 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 at the director level or higher. This spotlight focuses on 53 strategic decision-makers from the manufacturing industry who have responsibility for driving operational excellence across their organization by embedding a culture of continuous improvement. Their organizations have US$250 million or more in annual revenue and are based in North America, the United Kingdom, or Australia. The custom survey began and was completed in October 2025.

To read the full results of this study, please refer to the Thought Leadership Paper commissioned by SafetyCulture titled, "The Improvement Paradox."

Appendix B: Demographics

FRONTLINE SUPERVISORS

REGION	
North America	**35%**
UK	**35%**
Australia	**31%**

REVENUE	
$250M to less than $500M	**7%**
$500M to less than $750M	**8%**
$750M to less than $1B	**19%**
$1B to less than $3B	**20%**
$3B to less than $5B	**26%**
$5B to less than $10B	**15%**
$10B or more	**5%**

INDUSTRY	
Manufacturing	**100%**

EMPLOYEES	
1,000 to 2,999	**9%**
3,000 to 4,999	**15%**
5,000 to 6,999	**26%**
7,000 to 8999	**16%**
9,000 to 10,000	**18%**
More than 10,000	**16%**

POSITION	
Manager, supervisor, or equivalent (manages a team of functional practitioners)	**52%**
Project manager (manages ad hoc project teams) or equivalent	**48%**

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Appendix B: Demographics (Continued)

FRONTLINE SUPERVISORS

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT ADOPTION STAGE	
My organization is currently piloting a continuous improvement initiative with a small group of employees	**20%**
My organization had previously implemented continuous improvement initiatives but have plans to stop	**7%**
My organization has implemented a continuous improvement initiative across several departments and/or applications	**23%**
My organization has implemented and are expanding continuous improvement initiatives across the relevant departments/ applications in the organization	**24%**
My organization's continuous improvement initiative is fully embedded in the organization's processes, with ongoing updates and enhancements	**26%**

RESPONSIBILITY	
I am not involved in making decisions for my organization's continuous improvement strategy, but I manage its implementation	**64%**
I am part of the team that drives the implementation of continuous improvement strategies at my organization	**36%**

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Appendix B: Demographics (Continued)

DECISION-MAKERS

REGION	
North America	**40%**
UK	**34%**
Australia	**26%**

REVENUE	
$250M to less than $500M	**13%**
$500M to less than $750M	**21%**
$750M to less than $1B	**17%**
$1B to less than $3B	**21%**
$3B to less than $5B	**13%**
$5B to less than $10B	**9%**
$10B or more	**6%**

INDUSTRY	
Manufacturing	**100%**

RESPONSIBILITY	
I am the final decision-maker for my organization's continuous improvement strategy	**38%**
I am part of a team making decisions for my organization's continuous improvement strategy	**38%**
I influence decisions related to my organization's continuous improvement strategy	**25%**

EMPLOYEES	
1,000 to 2,999	**28%**
3,000 to 4,999	**26%**
5,000 to 6,999	**17%**
7,000 to 8999	**19%**
9,000 to 10,000	**8%**
More than 10,000	**2%**

POSITION	
C-level executive (e.g., CEO, CTO, CIO, CRO, CHRO) or equivalent	**15%**
Vice president (in charge of one/several large departments) or equivalent	**30%**
Director (manages a team of managers and high-level contributors) or equivalent (55%)	**55%**

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Appendix B: Demographics (Continued)

DECISION-MAKERS

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT ADOPTION STAGE	
My organization is currently piloting a continuous improvement initiative with a small group of employees	**8%**
My organization had previously implemented continuous improvement initiatives but have plans to stop	**8%**
My organization has implemented a continuous improvement initiative across several departments and/or applications	**26%**
My organization has implemented and are expanding continuous improvement initiatives across the relevant departments/ applications in the organization	**30%**
My organization's continuous improvement initiative is fully embedded in the organization's processes, with ongoing updates and enhancements	**28%**

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.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