



# **Leadership Performance & Development: IBM**

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# Leadership Performance & Development

This report offers a comprehensive analysis of a company's leadership performance and leadership development. It evaluates key areas such as leadership effectiveness, training programs, decision-making processes, and leadership influence on company performance and culture in order to pinpoint strengths, identify areas for improvement, and recommend actionable strategies for enhancing leadership across the organization.

## International Business Machines Corporation

### Executive Summary

IBM's leadership demonstrates notable strengths in leveraging diverse communication methods, robust leadership development programs, and an employee-centric, innovation-driven culture. However, persistent challenges—including centralized decision-making, inconsistent managerial practices, and ineffective executive communication—undermine organizational agility and employee trust, highlighting critical areas for improvement to support sustained success and resilience.

### Key Leadership Strengths

- **Diverse Communication Channels and Operational Engagement**

IBM utilizes a blend of formal (emails, town halls, one-on-ones) and digital (Slack, Microsoft Teams, internal platforms) channels. This approach is broadly appreciated at the operational level, fostering real-time collaboration, knowledge sharing, and a supportive work environment.

- **Comprehensive Leadership Development and Training**

The company offers an extensive array of programs, from foundational courses for emerging managers to advanced leadership modules for senior executives. Mentoring, cross-functional projects, and continuous skill development underpin a culture of continuous learning and personal growth.

- **Employee-Centric and Innovation-Focused Culture**

Many employees value leadership practices that prioritize well-being, work-life balance, and professional development. The commitment to innovation and continuous learning reinforces IBM's reputation as a technology leader and supports diverse career pathways for high-potential talent.

### Key Leadership Risks and Areas for Improvement

- **Bureaucratic and Centralized Decision-Making**

The heavily layered approval processes create delays, restrict decentralized innovation, and diminish responsiveness to market and internal demands. This bureaucratic inertia particularly undermines technical teams and agile divisions.

- **Inconsistent Managerial Quality and Accountability**

Variability in leadership approaches across departments—from supportive to toxic behaviors—creates disparities in employee experience. Micromanagement, favoritism, and a disconnect between executive decisions and frontline realities contribute to inconsistent performance and diminished trust.

- **Ineffective Executive Communication and Change Management**

While operational-level communication is strong, strategic messaging from senior leadership is often perceived as opaque and detached. Rapid restructuring and frequent policy shifts without clear communication lead to uncertainty, hampering employee engagement and crisis readiness.

### Key Takeaways and Recommendations

- **Streamline Decision-Making Processes**

Assess and reduce unnecessary layers of approvals to empower middle and technical teams. Simplifying decision-making can boost agility, foster innovation, and better integrate frontline insights into strategic choices.

- **Standardize Managerial Practices and Accountability**

Implement uniform leadership training and accountability frameworks across all levels. Emphasize emotional intelligence, transparent feedback mechanisms, and rigorous performance evaluations to mitigate inconsistencies and build trust.

- **Enhance Executive Communication and Change Management**

Foster a culture of bi-directional, transparent communication from top leadership. Ensure that strategic vision and changes are clearly articulated, contextualized for all teams, and coupled with timely follow-up to align day-to-day operations with long-term objectives.

In conclusion, while IBM benefits from strong operational communication and robust leadership development programs, addressing centralized decision-making, managerial inconsistencies, and executive communication gaps is essential. By strategically streamlining processes and enhancing accountability, IBM can reinforce organizational alignment and improve its capacity to navigate change effectively.

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## 1. Leadership Effectiveness

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How do employees rate the effectiveness of current leadership?

Negative

### Key Findings

While frontline managers are praised for offering personalized support and mentorship, middle management is frequently seen as exhibiting favoritism, micromanagement, and bureaucratic inertia.

Senior leadership is perceived as detached and overly focused on short-term gains, which creates a disconnect between strategic decisions and the operational needs of employees.

There is considerable variation across departments, with agile, project-driven teams experiencing more supportive leadership compared to traditional finance and legacy tech units.

### Action recommendations

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What specific improvements in middle management training could address concerns of favoritism and bureaucratic inertia?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: How can senior leadership enhance transparency and better align their strategic decisions with the daily realities of employees?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What best practices from agile, project-driven teams can be scaled to improve leadership effectiveness in departments facing legacy operational challenges?

- Overall Sentiment:

IBM's leadership performance is perceived as uneven. While frontline managers often provide strong support and foster skill development, the broader leadership spectrum suffers from inconsistency and communication gaps.

- Frontline and Middle Management:

- Many employees appreciate direct supervisors—one noted, “Managers and colleagues invest time in

sharpening your skills,” signifying effective day-to-day mentorship.

– However, middle management is frequently criticized for favoritism, micromanagement, and bureaucratic inertia. Several employees highlighted issues such as “management is toxic and incompetent,” underscoring persistent challenges related to transparency, career development, and fair treatment.

• Senior and Executive Leadership:

– There is marked dissatisfaction with senior leadership, which many view as detached and overly focused on short-term gains. An employee remarked, “CEO and upper management are looking for short term quick buck,” reflecting concerns about strategic vision and accountability.

– The disconnect between executive decisions and on-the-ground realities is most evident in departments with legacy processes, where delays and top-down edicts impede innovation.

• Department/Function Variations:

– Agile, project-driven teams often enjoy more flexible, supportive leadership, while departments anchored in traditional finance or legacy tech express frustration with slow decision-making and shifting priorities.

• Recommendations:

– Invest in consistent middle management training to promote equitable career advancement and reduce bureaucracy.

– Enhance transparency and communication from senior leadership to ensure strategic decisions resonate with daily operational needs, thereby strengthening overall employee trust and engagement.

## What are the greatest perceived strengths and weaknesses of company leadership?

Neutral



### Key Findings

IBM's leadership is appreciated for its strong employee-centric approach, offering flexible policies and support for work-life balance.

There is a notable commitment to development and mentorship, which enhances career growth and skill-building opportunities.

Some teams experience inconsistent leadership quality with significant instances of micromanagement and bureaucratic processes that can stifle innovation.

Frequent shifts in direction, lack of strategic clarity, and internal politics contribute to reduced transparency and trust among employees.



### Action recommendations

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: How do employees perceive the impact of inconsistent leadership styles on their daily work and overall job satisfaction?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What specific measures are in place or planned to address issues related to micromanagement and excessive bureaucracy within certain teams?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: How does IBM plan to enhance strategic clarity and transparency to mitigate internal politics and build greater trust in leadership?

Below is a concise summary of the perceived strengths and weaknesses of IBM's leadership based primarily on employee feedback:

Strengths: • Employee-Centric Approach & Work-Life Balance

– Numerous employees appreciate leadership that prioritizes well-being and balance, as illustrated by one

employee remarking, “The leaders are not only knowledgeable and experienced but also genuinely care about the growth and well-being of their employees.”

– Supportive management practices and flexible work policies (e.g., unlimited sick days, remote options) reinforce a culture that values personal time alongside professional duties.

- Commitment to Development and Training

– IBM’s leadership invests in multiple training opportunities and mentorship, helping employees advance their skills and career paths.

– The culture of collaboration and hands-on guidance—“Managers care about employees’ well-being and career development”—fosters an environment wherein continuous learning is both encouraged and rewarded.

Weaknesses: • Inconsistent Leadership Quality and Micromanagement

– Employee feedback reveals significant variability; while some teams thrive under supportive managers, others contend with micromanagement and overly bureaucratic processes. One comment succinctly noted, “Micromanagement from certain managers makes for a drab environment,” highlighting a disconnect that can stifle innovation.

– This inconsistency—ranging from empowering to toxic leadership styles—suggests a need for stronger, standardized management practices across units.

- Strategic Clarity and Transparency

– Frequent shifts in direction, layering of bureaucracy, and reports of favoritism and internal politics indicate a lack of unified, clear vision at the upper and middle management levels.

– Such challenges, including poor internal communication and decision-making opacity, can hinder agility and erode employee trust over time.

Overall, while IBM’s leadership is commended for its supportive culture and investment in employee growth, addressing inconsistencies in management practices and strategic clarity remains critical for future success.

## How is leadership held accountable for their actions and decisions?

Negative

### Key Findings

IBM’s formal leadership evaluation processes, which include structured KPIs and performance milestones, are perceived by employees as overly rigid and disconnected from the dynamic realities of team operations.

There is a significant disconnect between the established accountability frameworks and actual leadership practices, as evidenced by reports of opaque decision-making, favoritism, and inconsistent application of responsibility at different management levels.

Frontline employees feel undervalued, noting that senior management tends to receive the rewards and credit while lower-level leaders are micromanaged and scrutinized, thereby undermining trust and morale.

### Action recommendations

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: Can you provide specific examples where the rigid performance metrics have directly led to negative leadership outcomes or impacted team morale?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: How are current KPIs and accountability measures linked to real-time business challenges, and what changes could make these metrics more reflective of the team’s needs?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What strategies can IBM adopt to enhance transparency and consistency in leadership accountability, ensuring a fair balance of recognition between senior management and frontline leaders?

Below is an analysis specific to IBM based on employee perceptions and broader best practices for leadership measurement and accountability:

- Leadership Performance Measurement

- IBM ostensibly employs structured performance evaluations, defined KPIs, and formal processes (e.g., utilization targets and project milestones) to assess leadership.
- Employees, however, note that these metrics often feel “textbook-style” and overly rigid, failing to reflect the real-world complexities and dynamic needs within teams. One employee remarked, “The current management style and KPI tracking feel as though being in an elementary setup,” highlighting a disconnect between formal measures and practical leadership outcomes.

- Leadership Accountability Assessment

- Although policies signal accountability, many employees perceive a gap between expectations and execution. Concerns include opaque decision-making, favoritism, and a disconnect between upper management and frontline challenges.
- One illustrative quote states, “My manager on the other hand would micromanage and then ask why I didn’t take ownership,” evidencing inconsistent accountability practices at the team level.
- Further, perceptions that “Senior management takes all the rewards and credit, leaving team members feeling undervalued” indicate a culture where accountability is unevenly distributed.
- This misalignment not only undermines trust but also stifles innovation and agile decision-making, as rigid structures and internal politics can delay essential changes and dampen employee morale.

Overall, while IBM’s formal performance management framework is robust on paper, the employee feedback suggests a need for improved transparency and consistency in leadership accountability. Enhancing two-way feedback, recalibrating KPI relevance, and reducing bureaucratic layers could help better align leadership actions with IBM’s stated performance values.



**Describe and evaluate leadership training programs and leadership development effectiveness, especially for high potential talent and managers in the company.**

Positive

### Key Findings

IBM has a multi-tiered leadership training framework that targets different levels of management, from new and emerging managers to mid-level executives, ensuring training is relevant to diverse needs.

The company effectively integrates formal courses with hands-on project experiences and department-specific tracks, which provides a balanced, sector-tailored leadership development approach.

Mentorship, peer coaching, and informal learning sessions such as town halls and Q&A sessions reinforce a culture of continuous personal and professional development.

Employee testimonials illustrate that IBM's leadership development initiatives are well-regarded internally, reflecting a supportive environment that extends beyond just formal training modules.

### Action recommendations

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What specific metrics and evaluation methods does IBM use to assess the effectiveness and ROI of its various leadership training programs?

How does IBM gather and incorporate feedback from participants to continuously update and improve both its formal and informal leadership development initiatives?

In what ways is IBM adapting its leadership development content to address emerging industry trends and the evolving needs of high-potential talent and managers?

IBM demonstrates a strong commitment to leadership training and development through a blend of formal programs and informal practices, supporting leaders at all levels and across functions.

#### • Formal Leadership Development Programs

- New and Emerging Managers: Structured modules, such as foundational leadership courses and manager essentials, focus on building core management skills and operational expertise. IBM's internal platforms (e.g., IBM SkillsBuild, free Udemy courses) ensure that early-career professionals receive consistent exposure to leadership essentials.
- Mid-Level Managers and Executives: Tailored programs combine leadership theory with real-world project experience and cross-functional rotations, emphasizing strategic decision-making, corporate governance, and advanced management skills.
- Department-Specific Tracks: Technical divisions pair leadership training with cutting-edge technological certifications, while business units focus on strategic leadership, operational efficiency, and client-centric management.

#### • Mentorship and Informal Development

- IBM fosters a culture of mentorship wherein experienced leaders regularly partner with emerging talent. As one employee noted, "Managers I've had have all been great too; they care about you as a person and want to help you grow even outside IBM," highlighting the emphasis on personal growth.
- Informal practices include peer coaching, town halls, and leadership Q&A sessions, which encourage knowledge sharing and provide additional channels for learning.

- Project-based learning and cross-departmental collaboration further embed leadership skills directly into daily work, allowing for real-time application and feedback.
- Integrated Learning Environment
  - Continuous access to extensive training, certifications, and digital resources ensures that leadership development evolves in tandem with industry trends. One employee reflected, “I learned a great deal about the latest technologies and industry trends, which helped me grow both professionally and personally,” illustrating how IBM infuses leadership growth with technical advancement.

This multi-tiered approach clearly delineates paths for managers, executives, and department-specific leaders within IBM.

## How do employees rate the availability and effectiveness of leadership development programs and opportunities?

Positive

### Key Findings

IBM offers a wide range of leadership development programs, including mentoring, training sessions, internal certifications, and interactive forums like CEO office hours and Slack Q&A sessions that make leadership accessible.

Employees appreciate the proactive engagement of managers and the culture of continuous learning, which supports personal and professional growth.

There are concerns about inconsistencies in the quality of mentorship programs and uneven career progression support across different departments.

Layered hierarchies and slow decision-making processes are cited as factors that can dilute the overall effectiveness of these leadership development initiatives.

### Action recommendations

Could you elaborate on the steps IBM is taking to standardize leadership training and mentorship quality across all departments?

What strategies are in place to address the slow decision-making processes that may be hindering the effectiveness of these programs?

How does IBM plan to further integrate technical and soft skills training to ensure a more consistent leadership development experience for all employees?

Below is an analysis based on IBM employee perceptions:

- Availability of Programs
  - IBM offers extensive leadership development initiatives, including mentoring, training programs, internal certifications, and forums like CEO office hours and Slack Q&A sessions. One employee noted, “Leadership is accessible and human (CEO office hours and Slack Q&As)”–highlighting the company’s commitment to making leadership approachable.
  - A diverse range of learning platforms and cross-functional project opportunities ensure that employees across levels have access to growth-oriented programs.
- Effectiveness of Development Opportunities



- Many employees praise the proactive engagement of their managers and the culture of continuous learning. As one shared, “Managers I’ve had have all been great too; they care about you as a person and want to help you grow even outside IBM.” This suggests that for those connected with supportive leaders, leadership development is both effective and personally enriching.
- The integration of technical and soft skills training has bolstered both individual performance and team collaboration, reinforcing IBM’s reputation as a learning-centered organization.
- Areas for Improvement
  - Despite robust offerings, several employees report inconsistencies due to layered hierarchies and slow decision-making processes. Some feel that structured mentorship programs and clear career progression paths are uneven across departments.
  - Addressing these disparities—by standardizing leadership training quality and aligning mentorship with career objectives—could further strengthen IBM’s leadership ecosystem.

In summary, while IBM is highly regarded for its accessible and varied development programs, ensuring consistency in mentorship and streamlining hierarchical processes could enhance the overall effectiveness of its leadership development initiatives.

## How are potential leaders identified and nurtured within the organization?

### Positive

#### Key Findings

IBM identifies emerging leaders primarily based on high performance and initiative, leveraging a merit-based system with clear internal mobility and career pathway opportunities.

The company invests in continuous leadership development through robust training programs, certification courses, and a blend of formal and informal mentorship initiatives.

An inclusive leadership culture is promoted by offering opportunities across different levels and backgrounds, ensuring a broad spectrum of employees can access development programs.

There is an ongoing effort to refine the leadership selection process by addressing potential biases, particularly regarding the impact of personal relationships on career advancement.

#### Action recommendations

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: How do employees perceive the balance between merit-based performance and the influence of personal relationships in the leadership selection process?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What specific metrics or feedback mechanisms does IBM use to assess the effectiveness of its training and mentorship programs for emerging leaders?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: How is IBM ensuring transparency and objectivity within its internal mobility and career progression frameworks to further enhance its leadership development strategy?

IBM’s approach to identifying and nurturing potential leaders is both systematic and supportive, reflecting a culture that values continuous learning and performance excellence.

- Identification of Emerging Leaders
  - Performance Recognition: Leaders are often identified based on consistent high performance and initiative. One employee noted, “Your managers recognize you as a high performer if you are also a good performer,”

underscoring the merit-based approach.

- Internal Mobility: Regular internal job postings and clear career pathways allow top talent to emerge as they take on broadened responsibilities and complex challenges.

- Nurturing Leadership Talent

- Robust Training and Upskilling: IBM offers extensive training programs and certification courses designed to keep employees at the cutting edge of technology and management practices. As one employee shared, “The management invests in continuous learning, and there’s always something new to explore and improve upon,” highlighting the company’s commitment to skill development.

- Mentorship and On-the-Job Development: Formal and informal mentorship initiatives connect emerging leaders with seasoned executives, fostering hands-on guidance through real-world projects and strategic decision-making.

- Inclusive Leadership Culture: IBM’s structured programs and diverse project assignments ensure that development opportunities are available across different levels and backgrounds, even as some employees have observed the influence of personal relationships in leadership advancement.

- Evaluation

- Strengths: A well-articulated career progression framework, comprehensive internal training platforms, and supportive mentoring are key strengths in nurturing leadership.

- Considerations: Continuous refinement in promoting objective and transparent selection criteria is recommended to further strengthen the process and reduce potential bias.

In summary, IBM’s blend of performance-based identification, continuous skill enhancement, and robust mentorship programs creates a promising pathway for future leaders, aligning individual growth with the company’s long-term strategic objectives.

## How effective is leadership in communicating to all levels of the organization?

Neutral

### Key Findings

IBM shows strength at the operational level where immediate supervisors and team leads provide supportive, one-on-one communication that helps employees address day-to-day challenges.

At the executive level, employees perceive strategic communication as inconsistent, unclear, and overly top-down, which creates uncertainty about the company's long-term direction.

The multi-layered bureaucracy is identified as a barrier that impedes timely decision-making and dilutes the effective cascade of important strategic messages.

### Action recommendations

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What specific improvements do employees suggest for enhancing clarity and consistency in executive-level communications, and how can leadership implement these changes?

How can IBM streamline its communication channels to reduce bureaucratic delays and ensure that strategic messages are effectively cascaded to all levels of the organization?

What concrete measures or evaluation mechanisms can be put in place to regularly assess and align executive communications with the operational realities and expectations of employees?

Overall, IBM's leadership communication appears to be a mix of strong, accessible operational-level interactions contrasted with less effective executive-level messaging. Key observations include:

#### • Strengths at the Operational Level

- Many employees report that immediate managers and team leads foster open, supportive communication. For example, one employee noted, "Managers and Supervisors always gave one on one time to discuss what's going right and how to improve."
- This frontline engagement helps create a collaborative atmosphere where day-to-day challenges are quickly addressed.

#### • Challenges at the Executive Level

- Several employees expressed that strategic communication from upper management is inconsistent and unclear. One employee commented, "Upper management added unnecessary burdens to my day-to-day work while also making the long-term plans of the company unclear."
- There is a recurrent perception that key decisions and strategic shifts are communicated in a top-down manner, with little transparency or follow-up, leading to uncertainty about the company's direction.
- The complex, multi-layered bureaucracy further hampers timely decision-making and the effective cascade of information across levels.

#### • Opportunities for Improvement

- IBM would benefit from greater transparency in how corporate strategy is communicated, ensuring that long-term directions are directly relevant to all employees.
- Streamlining communication channels across organizational layers and reducing bureaucratic obstacles could help align executive messages with operational realities.
- Emphasizing clarity and consistency in executive communications would likely enhance overall employee engagement and reduce cross-departmental disconnects.

Thus, while IBM's immediate management fosters a supportive work environment, a focused effort to improve top-down communication would strengthen organizational alignment and employee confidence across the board.

## What methods and channels of communication are most frequently used by leaders?

Neutral

### Key Findings

IBM leaders effectively use a combination of traditional channels (emails, town halls, one-on-one sessions) and digital tools (Slack, Microsoft Teams, in-house platforms, daily stand-ups) to communicate with employees.

Employees value the transparency and open-door culture resulting from these diverse communication methods, which support both formal updates and real-time, informal interactions.

There is concern over slow decision-making and cumbersome approval layers that can delay communication and hinder interdepartmental coordination.

The high frequency of meetings has raised issues of information overload, suggesting a need to balance regular updates with overall communication efficiency.

### Action recommendations

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: How can IBM streamline the decision-making process to minimize delays caused by multiple approval layers?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What strategies can be implemented to improve interdepartmental communication and reduce information bottlenecks?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: How can IBM adjust the frequency and structure of meetings to avoid information overload while maintaining transparency?

IBM leaders rely on a blend of traditional and digital communication channels to engage with employees. Based on employee perceptions, the following methods stand out:

- Channels in Use: – Internal emails, scheduled town-hall meetings, and one-on-one sessions provide formal updates. – Digital collaboration tools such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, and IBM's in-house platforms enable real-time, cross-functional interactions. One employee highlighted the benefit of "a ton of formal and informal interactions" facilitated by a matrix-based approach. – Daily stand-ups and team sync meetings keep project teams aligned and provide space for immediate feedback.

- Effectiveness of These Methods: – Strengths: Many employees appreciate the "great communication from leadership all the way down," noting that approachable leaders and open-door policies foster a supportive and inclusive culture. The use of digital tools enhances knowledge transfer and collaboration across international and cross-functional teams. – Areas for Improvement: Despite these strengths, some staff report that "decision-making processes could be slow" due to multiple layers of approvals. Employees also note that communication between different departments sometimes falls short, causing delays and confusion. Additionally, the high frequency of meetings can lead to information overload, reducing overall efficiency.

- Key Takeaways: – While the diverse array of channels and the overall transparency in communication are clear strengths, streamlining approval processes and reinforcing interdepartmental communication would further enhance effectiveness. – Balancing necessary updates with minimizing excessive meetings could

address concerns of bureaucratic red tape, ultimately ensuring that the messaging is both clear and actionable.

In summary, IBM's communication infrastructure is robust and well-received in many respects. However, refining its cross-departmental coordination and decision-making pathways will help in capitalizing on the full potential of these communication channels.

## How does leadership communication style and effectiveness impact employee satisfaction, performance, and key business outcomes?

### Negative

#### Key Findings

Bureaucratic layers and frequent restructuring slow down decision-making, resulting in delays that negatively affect project timelines and overall operational efficiency.

Middle managers are perceived as supportive and approachable, which boosts employee satisfaction, while executive-level communication is seen as disconnected and self-serving, undermining employee engagement.

There is a clear discrepancy between departments, with agile communication in cloud-focused divisions contrasting starkly with the sluggish, financially-driven messaging in legacy sectors.

The inconsistent communication practices across different leadership levels are causing misalignment between frontline needs and top-down directives, thereby impairing key business outcomes.

#### Action recommendations

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: Could you detail the specific metrics or employee feedback that illustrate how executive-level communication has impacted employee morale and retention?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What initiatives or strategies are currently being implemented to streamline the decision-making process and reduce bureaucratic delays within the company?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: How can the effective communication practices observed in cloud-focused divisions be adapted or integrated into traditional sectors to improve overall employee engagement and operational outcomes?

Below is an assessment of how IBM's leadership communication impacts key outcomes, with a focus on differentiating between management layers and functions:

#### • Impact on Productivity and Operational Efficiency

- Multiple layers of approval and frequent restructuring contribute to slow decision-making. One employee noted, "It can take time to get approvals or push through initiatives," directly affecting project timelines and productivity.
- Red tape and bureaucratic processes hinder innovation, especially in traditional legacy divisions where changes disrupt workflow.

#### • Impact on Employee Engagement and Satisfaction

- Middle management tends to communicate in a more supportive and approachable manner. Employees in some teams praise, "Managers are approachable and open to feedback," which fosters a positive work culture, enhances cross-team collaboration, and contributes to higher job satisfaction.
- In contrast, executive-level communications are viewed as disconnected. A candid remark, "the leadership is

not at all connected with the employees and doesn't care about anyone except themselves," highlights a gap that can result in lower engagement and diminished morale. Clear, consistent messaging from leaders is essential to align operational priorities with employee needs.

- Variations Across Departments and Functions

- Employees in newer, cloud-focused divisions often experience more dynamic and agile communication, leading to higher engagement and operational responsiveness.
- Conversely, those in more traditional sectors report slower adaptation to change, with cascading effects on career development, as decisions often seem driven by financial metrics rather than employee well-being.

In summary, while supportive and transparent communication from middle managers bolsters workforce productivity and satisfaction, inconsistent and top-down messaging at the executive level can impair overall operational efficiency and employee engagement. Streamlining communication practices across levels and ensuring leadership remains connected to frontline realities is key to driving balanced, sustainable business outcomes at IBM.



## How are key decisions made within the leadership team?

Negative

### Key Findings

Key decisions are predominantly made by senior executives through multiple layers, resulting in a centralized and bureaucratic decision-making process.

Employees express significant dissatisfaction, noting that every decision requires endless approvals, which hinders agility and responsiveness.

There is a marked disconnect between senior leadership and technical teams, leading to decisions that may not reflect on-the-ground realities or promote innovation.

Even in innovative divisions that show potential for collaboration, lengthy approval cycles persist, limiting the benefits of decentralized input.

### Action recommendations

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What specific operational challenges have emerged from this highly centralized decision-making process, and how are they impacting overall efficiency?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: Can you provide concrete examples where a decentralized approach might have improved decision outcomes, especially within innovative divisions?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What steps are being considered to enhance communication and input from technical experts to ensure that leadership decisions are better informed?

#### • Overview of Decision-Making

IBM's approach to key decisions remains largely centralized and hierarchical. Strategic determinations are driven by senior executives and filtered through multiple management layers—a process that employees consistently characterize as bureaucratic and sluggish.

#### • Centralization vs. Collaboration

- Executive and high-level managers maintain tight control, with one employee noting, “Every decision, no matter how minor, requires endless layers of approvals,” underscoring a pervasive red tape.
- In contrast, some departmental teams—especially in innovative divisions like design and AI—exhibit moments of collaboration and autonomy. However, even these groups face lengthy approval cycles that dampen responsiveness.

#### • Managerial Levels and Departmental Nuances

- Senior executives and upper management tend to make decisions in isolation, often neglecting direct input from technical experts. As one critique put it, “Executives make awful decisions that will obviously fail,” reflecting concerns over disconnected leadership.
- Middle managers sometimes offer supportive, hands-on guidance. Employees indicate that while “I feel supported and heard,” decisions remain tightly controlled by higher-ups, limiting true empowerment.
- Operational teams in legacy or traditional functions frequently experience a top-down mandate that curbs decentralized innovation and risks further delays during urgent client demands.

#### • Role of Collaboration and Consensus

- Although day-to-day project teams foster a collaborative spirit, major strategic choices lean heavily on centralized authority. Employee feedback and novel ideas are infrequently integrated into top-level initiatives, with one comment stating, “Management rarely encourages novel approaches.”

– Consensus-driven decision-making exists primarily within pockets of the organization but remains largely subordinate to the rigid hierarchy imposed by upper management.

Overall, while internal teamwork can be effective in executing tasks, the overall decision-making process is hindered by a highly centralized, approval-intensive structure that adversely affects agility and innovation.

## How are decision-making processes perceived by employees?

Negative

### Key Findings

Employees consistently describe decision-making as overly bureaucratic and slow, leading to delays and diminished responsiveness to issues.

There is a strong sentiment of disempowerment, with technical teams feeling sidelined and non-leadership employees constrained by top-down decision-making and micromanagement.

Middle managers and executives face challenges in balancing directive mandates with empowering team autonomy, resulting in a disconnect between leadership decisions and frontline operational needs.

### Action recommendations

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: How is IBM planning to streamline its decision-making processes to reduce bureaucracy and improve speed while still maintaining necessary oversight? Could you elaborate on any initiatives aimed at incorporating technical and operational feedback into strategic decisions? What measures are being considered to empower middle managers to balance enforcing executive directives with fostering team autonomy?

#### Overview:

Employees at IBM consistently describe decision-making as overly bureaucratic and slow. This pervasive sentiment is linked to extensive hierarchical layers and a top-down leadership approach, leading to reduced agility and increased frustration across the organization.

#### Non-Leadership Perceptions:

- Slow, opaque processes hinder timely actions. One employee noted, “It takes too long for decisions to be made,” capturing the core frustration.
- Micromanagement at the team level further restricts autonomy—exemplified by a comment, “My manager would micromanage and then ask why I didn't take ownership.”
- Technical groups feel sidelined when decisions are made without engineer input, resulting in missed innovation opportunities and a disconnect between frontline expertise and strategic priorities.

#### Leadership and Managerial Perspectives:

- Middle managers struggle to balance enforcing executive directives with the need to empower their teams. They face restrictive, multi-tiered approval processes that delay responsiveness. A sentiment shared by some indicates, “Too many people on upper management” impedes swift decision-making.
- Executives are often perceived as detached and reactive. Their decisions, driven by cost-cutting and shareholder concerns, rarely incorporate feedback from technical or operational levels. This disconnection reinforces feelings of uncertainty and diminishes trust among employees.

#### Departmental Variations:

- Technical and product-focused departments are particularly vocal about decisions made without adequate subject matter input.

- Conversely, departments with a more inclusive leadership style acknowledge openness to feedback, though they are still impacted by systemic delays.

Impact:

These perceptions erode morale, stifle innovation, and create an environment where employees—whether non-leadership or management—feel disempowered. To restore agility and trust, IBM must streamline decision-making processes, flatten hierarchical barriers, and ensure that both technical and managerial voices are integrated into strategic choices.

## Evaluate change management programs effectiveness at the company.

Neutral



### Key Findings

IBM faces frequent reorganizations and leadership turnover, which creates strategic uncertainty and inconsistency in the management of change.

Executive leadership demonstrates innovation, but their rapid changes in strategy and insufficient communication contribute to employee confusion.

Middle management performance is highly variable; while supportive managers help ease transitions, others provide insufficient guidance during change events.

Agile, cross-functional teams adapt more effectively compared to departments with legacy processes that suffer from bureaucratic delays.



### Action recommendations

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What specific strategies is IBM implementing to improve communication between executive leadership and middle management during periods of change?

How is IBM addressing the discrepancies in middle management performance to ensure consistent support for employees across all departments?

Can you provide details on any initiatives aimed at helping legacy departments reduce bureaucratic delays and better adapt to rapid strategic shifts?

Overview: • IBM's change management reflects the challenges inherent in a large, complex organization. Frequent reorganizations, shifting priorities, and leadership turnover create an environment where change is constant yet inconsistently managed.

Executive Leadership: • Many employees note that executive decisions can generate strategic uncertainty. One perception stated, "With a change in several leadership positions, there is no clear vision that seems reasonable," highlighting a disconnect between top-level goals and day-to-day execution.

• While senior executives occasionally demonstrate strong innovation—exemplified by their role as "leaders of Innovations"—their rapid shifts in strategy and policy can lead to employee uncertainty, especially when change is not clearly communicated.

Middle and Team Management: • The effectiveness of change management often hinges on immediate supervisors. Supportive managers who actively engage and communicate have managed transitions well, leading to a positive employee experience. Some employees commented on "good management" and "approachable leaders" that ease the transition during restructuring.

• In contrast, others reported inconsistent guidance. One employee noted, "If you have the bad luck to have a

PeopleManager who is also a Tech/Team Lead, they won't guide you at all besides the short chat," underscoring that middle management varies significantly in its ability to support teams through change.

Departmental Variations: • Agile, cross-functional teams benefit from flexibility and strong peer collaboration, mitigating the impact of corporate-level upheaval. Conversely, departments entrenched in legacy processes often suffer from bureaucratic delays and slow decision-making, intensifying the disruptive nature of change.

In Summary: IBM's change management is characterized by strong pockets of leadership that foster innovation and support employee growth, contrasted by a broader pattern of rapid strategic shifts and insufficient communication. Strengthening consistent, transparent communication and investing in middle management training across all departments would further align change initiatives with employee needs, reducing uncertainty and enhancing overall organizational resilience.

## If this company were to face a major crisis next week, how would it fare?

Neutral



### Key Findings

IBM's solid infrastructure, global resources, and strong brand equity provide a reliable foundation to maintain operations during a crisis.

Frequent reorganizations, layoffs, and bureaucratic delays create internal instability that could impede the company's ability to respond quickly.

Inconsistent leadership practices and management inexperience, evidenced by employee concerns over 'questionable management' and pervasive anxiety about job security, undermine confidence in agile crisis handling.

Workforce disengagement fueled by high performance pressure and internal politics may further erode the company's responsiveness when rapid adaptation is crucial.



### Action recommendations

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: How does the company plan to strengthen its leadership and streamline decision-making to counter the effects of internal instability during a crisis?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What initiatives are being implemented to reduce bureaucratic delays and better coordinate the workforce in the event of a major crisis?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: How is IBM addressing employee concerns regarding job security and internal politics to ensure improved morale and engagement in turbulent times?

## Key Strengths and Vulnerabilities

### • Robust Infrastructure & Brand Equity

– IBM's long history, extensive global resources, and established technology platform offer a solid foundation to absorb shocks.

– One employee noted, "all will be fine working in this company," reflecting confidence in its long-term stability and market presence.

### • Organizational Instability & Culture

– Frequent reorganizations, layoffs, and bureaucratic delays could undermine a rapid and coordinated response in a major crisis.

– As one employee expressed, "I was always afraid to be fired," underlining pervasive anxiety that may sap employee morale and willingness to innovate during turbulent times.

- Inconsistent leadership practices and management inexperience—as echoed in mentions of “questionable management” and “red tape”—could impede decisive action when quick turnaround is critical.

- Impact on Workforce Engagement

- The combination of high performance pressure, internal politics, and uncertainty regarding job security may further stress teams during a crisis.
- Persistent concerns over low market-aligned compensation and unclear career progression could lead to disengagement when rapid adaptation is required.

#### Overall Assessment

In a major crisis, IBM is likely to leverage its deep resource base, strong brand identity, and legacy infrastructure to maintain operational continuity. However, employees’ frequent references to layoffs, bureaucratic inertia, and leadership missteps suggest that internal instability and low morale may significantly hinder agile crisis management. Without swift improvements in communication, empowerment, and streamlined decision-making, the company’s positive attributes might be overshadowed by internal vulnerabilities, slowing recovery and potentially eroding trust among its workforce.

How well does leadership model the target culture to develop a unified and cohesive culture in the company?

Neutral

### Key Findings

IBM leadership is recognized for fostering a culture of innovation and continuous learning, with many employees praising supportive management practices that empower teams and promote creativity.

There is significant inconsistency in leadership across different teams, with some groups experiencing toxic environments and favoritism, which undermines morale and employee engagement.

The mixed feedback indicates a strategic need for IBM to standardize managerial practices to ensure that all teams benefit from a unified and cohesive culture.

### Action recommendations

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What specific steps has IBM leadership taken to standardize managerial practices across all units, and how are these initiatives measured for their impact on team cohesion?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: How does IBM address the reported biases and favoritism within some teams, and what measures are being implemented to promote a fair and consistent leadership approach?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What additional leadership development programs or training initiatives are planned to ensure consistency in modeling the target culture and enhance inclusive decision-making across the organization?

Leadership at IBM plays a pivotal role in shaping a dynamic yet sometimes inconsistent company culture. Employee feedback reveals both strong, supportive leadership practices that drive innovation and growth, alongside challenges arising from uneven managerial practices. Key observations include:

- **Fostering Innovation and Continuous Learning**

- Many employees praise leaders who empower teams and promote creativity. One respondent noted, “The management was highly supportive, fostering a culture of innovation and continuous learning.”
- Senior leaders champion cutting-edge projects and continuous upskilling, reinforcing IBM’s legacy as a technology innovator while encouraging cross-functional collaboration.

- **Impact on Morale Through Managerial Consistency**

- In several units, leadership practices have been inconsistent. While some teams benefit from “nice managers” and a collaborative ethos, others experience a more toxic environment. A contrasting perspective was captured in one comment: “It depends on the team, but for my team it was toxic culture, manager was biased towards their regional people.”
- Such disparities in management quality have led to challenges like low morale and, in some cases, a perception that decisions are marred by bureaucracy and favoritism. This inconsistency can undermine overall cohesion and hinder employee engagement.

- **Strategic Implications for Culture**

- IBM’s leadership faces the dual challenge of leveraging its rich heritage in innovation while addressing modern expectations for transparency and fairness.



– Aligning leadership practices across all levels could enhance trust, reduce internal friction, and further energize an already innovative workforce.

For IBM to maintain its competitive edge and a strong internal culture, leadership must continue to nurture innovation and professional growth while standardizing supportive practices across all teams. This balanced approach will not only reinforce IBM’s reputation as an industry leader but also ensure a resilient, inclusive work environment for all employees.

## What are the most important areas and activities where leadership could improve to better support a healthy corporate culture?

### Negative

#### Key Findings

Employees are experiencing significant communication gaps, with a lack of clear and timely updates during organizational changes, which fosters uncertainty and erodes trust.

There is inconsistency in managerial behavior, with some teams facing toxic practices such as scare tactics and gaslighting, indicating a need for more uniform and supportive leadership.

The pervasive bureaucracy and complex hierarchy are hindering agility and effective decision-making, negatively impacting innovation and team empowerment.

Rigid work policies, particularly around return-to-office mandates, are undermining work-life balance and contributing to employee dissatisfaction.

#### Action recommendations

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What specific initiatives is IBM implementing to improve communication and transparency during major changes such as restructures and layoffs, and how is the success of these initiatives being measured?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: How does IBM plan to standardize managerial practices across all teams, and what training programs are being introduced to address issues like toxic management behaviors and ensure consistent, empathetic leadership?

Follow-up questions to ask Annie: What concrete steps are being taken to streamline bureaucratic processes and introduce more flexible work policies that empower teams and enhance employee well-being?

Below are targeted areas where IBM leadership can make improvements to bolster a healthier corporate culture:

#### • Communication and Transparency

- Employees report that “lack of transparency in change activities made navigating hard for folks who were newer,” highlighting a need for senior executives and managers to enhance communication during organizational shifts.
- Clear, timely updates about strategic decisions and restructuring—especially amid layoffs or policy changes—can reduce uncertainty and build trust.

#### • Managerial Consistency and Support

- While some teams report supportive, innovative management, others experience negative practices. One employee noted, “scare tactics, politics, gaslighting, toxicity, poor and out-of-touch management, layoffs left and right.”

- Standardizing leadership training across middle management can help ensure that all managers employ consistent, fair, and empathetic practices. A focus on emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and constructive feedback can instill a more unified leadership approach.

- Streamlining Bureaucracy and Empowering Teams

- Several employee voices mention “major bureaucracy” and a “complex hierarchy” that impede agility. Executives should evaluate existing processes and eliminate unnecessary layers that limit decision-making speed and innovation.

- Cross-departmental mentoring and sharing best practices from high-performing teams can uplift departments struggling with internal politics and competitive fragmentation.

- Flexible Work and Well-Being

- Feedback on work-life balance challenges, particularly regarding return-to-office mandates, suggests that leadership should further empower local managers to adopt flexible, hybrid models.

- Empowering frontline leadership to tailor work environments to team needs can improve morale and performance.

By addressing these areas with targeted initiatives and consistent follow-up, IBM’s leadership at both executive and managerial levels can foster a more transparent, supportive, and agile culture throughout the organization.