

on-ramps

State of the Social Sector:

Understanding the Impact of Political and Economic Uncertainty

SURVEY RESULTS & ANALYSIS | SEPTEMBER 2025



Introduction

Since the beginning of the year, we've been hearing—and feeling—the pressures of a rapidly shifting landscape. As an organization that holds equity as a core value and embeds it into everything we do, the federal government's undermining of DEI posed an unprecedented challenge, not only to us but also to the many organizations and individuals that share our values.

At the same time, abrupt threats to federal funding and rising economic uncertainty have created a new wave of challenges across the sector. And amid these shifts, leaders are also grappling with questions about morale, culture, and whether remote work is making an already difficult moment even harder.

Taken together, these challenges have felt both existential and murky. With so many forces acting at once, it's hard to see the forest for the trees. So we conducted a survey to better understand how senior leaders across the social sector are navigating the heightened political, economic, and cultural tension. What's changing? What's holding? Where are leaders recalibrating? We invited leaders responsible for stewarding organizational culture to help us answer these questions.

We hope the findings we've synthesized in this report offer those across the social sector a sense that they are not alone in facing the challenges of this moment, along with actionable insights to help them move forward.

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SECTION 1:

Executive Summary

This year's survey underscores the strain leaders are under and the trade-offs they're making. Financial sustainability is the dominant concern, with both political and economic uncertainty weighing heavily across organizations. Leaders also continue to affirm equity commitments, even as public messaging adapts to external scrutiny.

Concerns about engagement, retention, and morale are widely acknowledged, but they often take a back seat to more immediate financial priorities. Hybrid work has become a durable feature of organizational life, and is generally viewed as stabilizing, though leaders note mixed results from efforts to bolster culture and support staff.

The following key takeaways outline how leaders are navigating these pressures, what challenges are most acute, and where uncertainty continues to shape the sector's path forward.

“Given the current political climate, our leadership and staff are approaching this moment with a mix of caution and resolve. We’re engaging in strategic planning that includes scenario modeling and advocacy work, ensuring we’re prepared regardless of which way the winds blow. We’re prioritizing transparency and communication—keeping staff informed, acknowledging challenges, and involving them in forward planning.”

A NOTE OF GRATITUDE

We're deeply grateful to the senior leaders who took the time to share their experiences with us. Your honesty, insight, and willingness to reflect on both the challenges and complexities of this work make this report possible. We also want to acknowledge all of the leaders across the sector who continue to show up for their teams, their missions, and the communities they serve—often under enormous and evolving pressures. Your work matters, and we're grateful to be in partnership with you.



SECTION 1:

Executive Summary (continued)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Revenue sustainability is the dominant priority.

While leaders are navigating a wide spectrum of challenges, funding stands out as the most pressing. When asked what is of greatest concern, the vast majority of leaders (80%) name sustaining or growing revenue—well ahead of any other organizational issue, even as other challenges remain critical. Open-ended responses reflect rising anxiety about future funding often tied to both political and economic shifts.

2. The climate—both political and economic—is weighing heavily on the sector.

Leaders across the social sector are feeling the pressure of a shifting environment where funding, policy, and public discourse are in constant flux. Nearly 90% of social sector leaders cite recent economic and political pressures as at least moderately pressing, with more than half describing both as “extremely pressing.” Leaders directly link these pressures to operational strain and financial instability, making clear the significant impact of these forces on day-to-day operations.

“My biggest concern over the next few months is the uncertainty around federal funding. With shifting priorities at the national level and the potential for delays or reductions in allocations, it’s critical for us to anticipate how these changes might impact our operations. Federal funds are a key component of our budget, particularly for supporting our most vulnerable populations and sustaining essential programs.”

“Economic uncertainty and federal funding cuts mean that every line of our revenue budget is uncertain.”

SECTION 1:

Executive Summary (continued)

3. Leaders continue to value equity, even while softening public messaging.

Real pressures are forcing organizations to adapt public-facing language around their equity commitments. In fact, more than half of leaders (51%) report softening their external messaging in response to external pressures.

Internally, however, commitments and messaging have remained more stable, with many reaffirming or even strengthening them. That said, when asked about their immediate priorities,

enhancing equity work ranks among the lowest for leaders in the survey. We hypothesize this reflects the financial constraints leaders are navigating, rather than a shift in values.

4. Engagement and retention challenges are widely recognized, but not leading priorities.

While nearly two-thirds of leaders acknowledge these as serious concerns, relatively few place them among their top organizational priorities. This gap reflects a familiar tension: even where leaders see staff well-being as urgent, financial and external pressures are crowding out capacity to act.

Given the state of the economy, organizations may be able to hold on to staff despite weakening engagement and morale, but that retention may be illusory, with pent-up demand for new roles when conditions improve.

“With growing attacks on civil rights, environmental protections, and economic justice, we’ll need to be nimble enough to respond to urgent challenges while staying grounded in our long-term mission and values. There’s also the ongoing challenge of sustaining organizational capacity—ensuring our team feels supported, resourced, and connected to the impact of their work, especially as demands increase. Balancing that internal well-being with bold, external advocacy will be critical to our continued success.”

SECTION 1:

Executive Summary (continued)

5. Some organizations are feeling the pressures more acutely than others.

Economic and political concerns are weighing more heavily on organizations where BIPOC staff make up the largest racial or ethnic group. In these organizations, 66% of leaders describe economic uncertainty as extremely pressing (compared to 56% overall), and 63% say the same of the political environment (compared to 57% overall).

Financial concerns are also hitting smaller-budget organizations harder. Among those with annual budgets under \$10 million, 86% cite revenue sustainability as a top priority—compared to just 54% of those leading larger institutions. Together, these findings underscore how structural inequities continue to shape which organizations face the greatest strain in today's climate.

6. Hybrid work models are firmly established and generally viewed as positive.

Almost three-quarters (73%) of leaders say their organization operates in a hybrid model, and many describe it as a stabilizing force—for both culture and overall resilience.

Still, shifts in work structure continue to carry weight. Leaders whose organizations have become more remote are more likely to report negative cultural impacts than those moving toward more in-person time.

Even as hybrid work becomes the norm, leaders are still working to find the right balance—one that supports connection, flexibility, and alignment across their teams.

7. Support efforts for staff are common, but few describe them as fully effective.

Despite good-faith efforts to improve culture, such as flexible work arrangements (60%), enhanced communication (59%), and team-building (42%), many leaders (43%) describe these interventions as only moderately effective, if that. This raises questions about whether current approaches are enough to sustain morale and productivity—and prevent burnout—in the long term, especially when so many stressors are related to factors beyond the workplace.

SECTION 1:

Executive Summary (continued)

8. Big questions remain as leaders try to balance stability, mission, and care for their people.

As leaders focus heavily on revenue sustainability, questions remain about how organizations will address ongoing retention concerns—and what solutions may emerge to stabilize funding while staying true to mission. The pressures leaders face are immediate, but the longer-term path forward remains uncertain.

For BIPOC-led organizations, which often feel the challenges of this moment more acutely, that uncertainty can carry even greater weight. It is critical that we continue to listen, learn, and direct support where it's needed most.

“There is a general fear that can best be described as waiting for the next shoe to drop. While there is great joy in doing direct service and truly helping, there is a feeling that it could go away at a moment’s notice.”

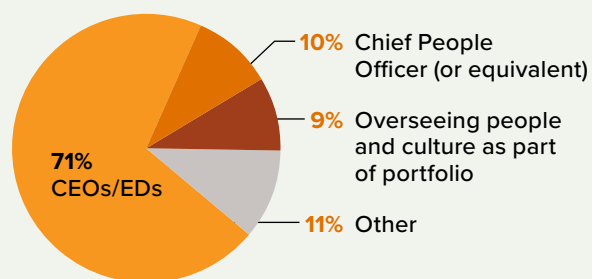
“We are scared. The challenging thing is that we are committed to serving those furthest away from opportunity—who are usually BIPOC, marginalized or rural—and we are unapologetic about it and will continue to be. The words and language may have changed but the work and ensuring that our agency appropriately reflects the community served on the board, volunteers, leadership and staff is critical.”

SECTION 2:

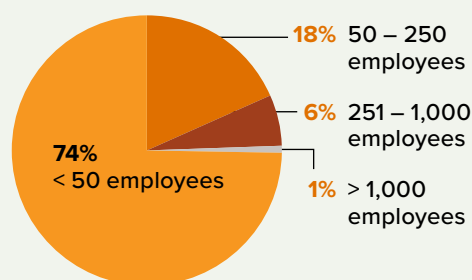
Methodology and Respondent Demographics

FORMAT: Online Survey | **DATE:** April 14 – May 8, 2025 | **RESPONSES:** 188 social sector leaders responsible for organizational culture

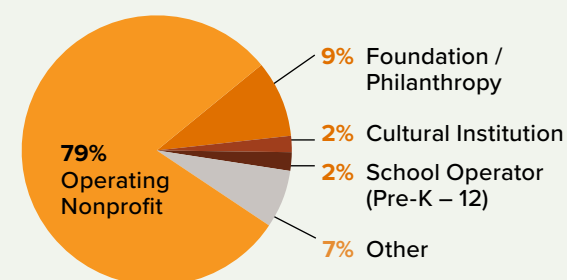
Role



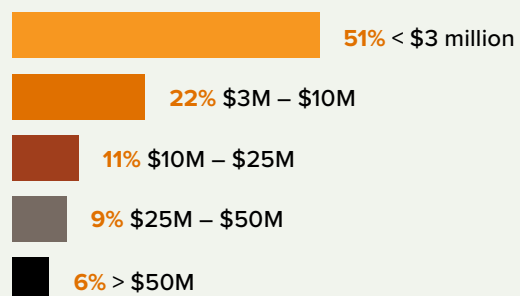
Organization Size



Organization Type

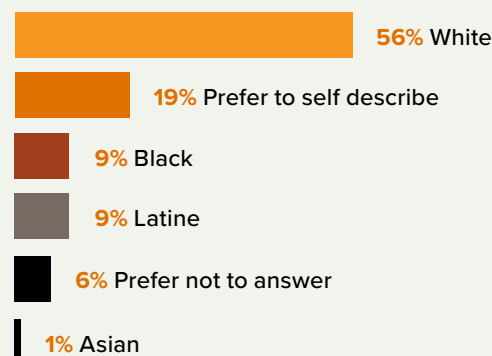


Annual Budget

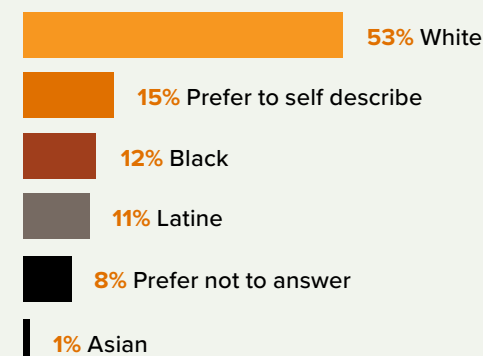


Organization Racial / Ethnic Composition

LEADERSHIP



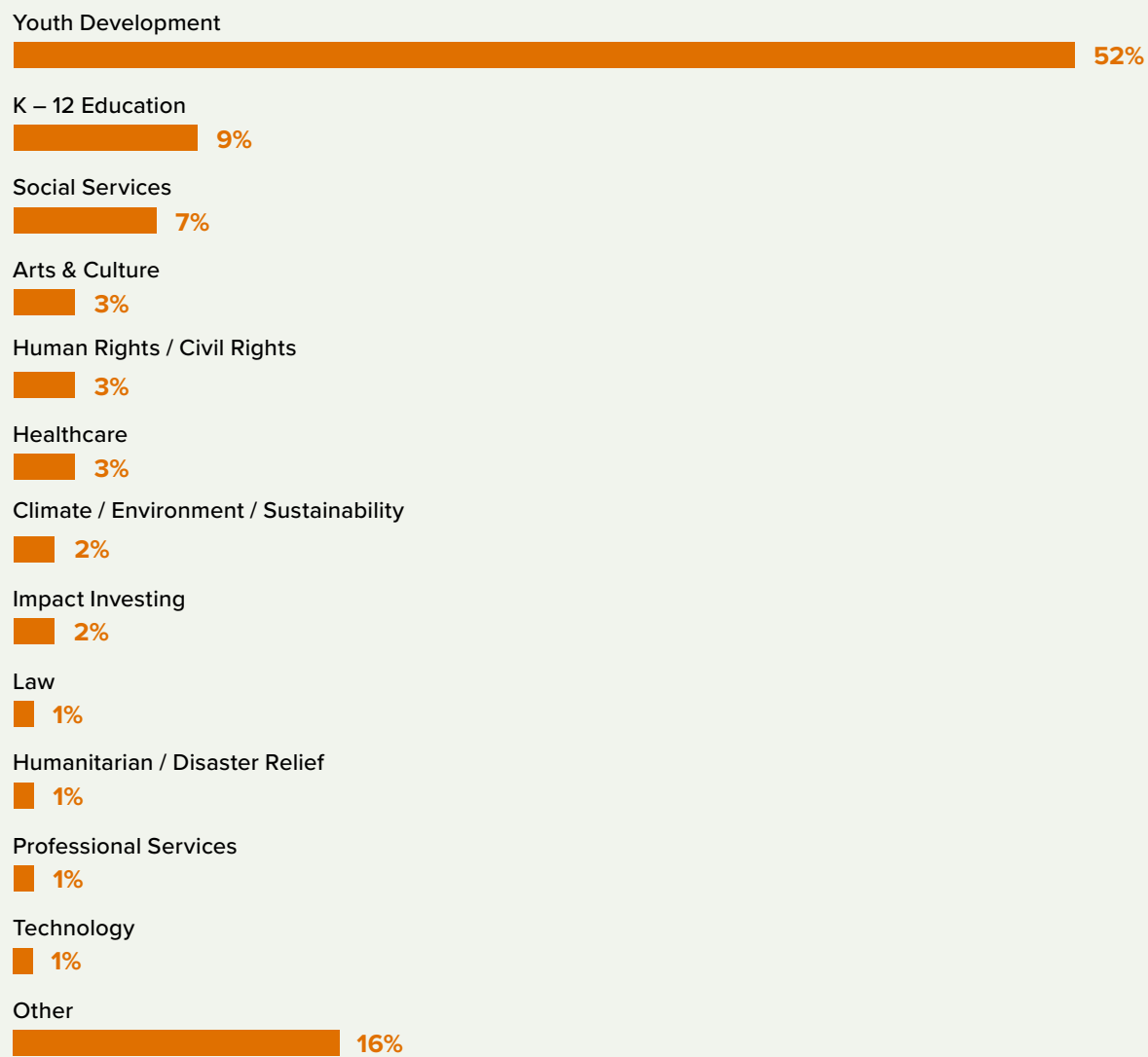
FULL STAFF



SECTION 2:

Methodology and Respondent Demographics (continued)

Which of the following issue areas best describes the primary focus of your organization?



SECTION 3:

Organizational Challenges

Leaders across the social sector are feeling acute pressure from both economic and political forces, and these pressures are directly influencing day-to-day decisions. Nearly all survey respondents identified these as their top concerns.

Financial concerns rise above other challenges.

- The vast majority of leaders (80%) cite sustaining or growing revenue as a top priority—well ahead of all other organizational concerns.
- Leaders' responses repeatedly link this financial strain to the broader political environment, with many expressing unease about how both current and potential future policy shifts may destabilize funding streams.
- The funding environment may be uncertain for everyone, but its weight is not evenly distributed. While revenue sustainability is a top concern across the board, it's felt most urgently by leaders at smaller organizations. Among those with annual budgets under \$10 million, the vast majority (86%) identified it as a top priority—compared to just over half (54%) of those leading larger institutions.

What are the top three priorities for your organization over the next 12 months?



SECTION 3:

Organizational Challenges (continued)

Political and economic pressures are front and center.

- The vast majority of leaders describe both economic uncertainty (89%) and the political environment (84%) as at least moderately pressing concerns, with more than half describing both as “extremely pressing.”
- These are not distant concerns: The majority of leaders report these pressures are actively impacting their organizations’ operations, with 71% noting at least moderate impact from the economy, and 69% saying the same of the political climate.
- These pressures are felt even more acutely in organizations where BIPOC staff make up the largest racial/ethnic group. Leaders from these organizations were more likely to describe both economic and political pressures as “extremely pressing”—with 66% citing economic uncertainty and 63% naming the political environment, compared to 56% and 57% among the broader group.

They were also more likely to report that these pressures are actively affecting their operations, with 77% indicating at least moderate impact from both the economic and political climates, compared to 68% of leaders from majority White organizations. This disparity demonstrates the disproportionate strain BIPOC organizations are navigating in the current climate.

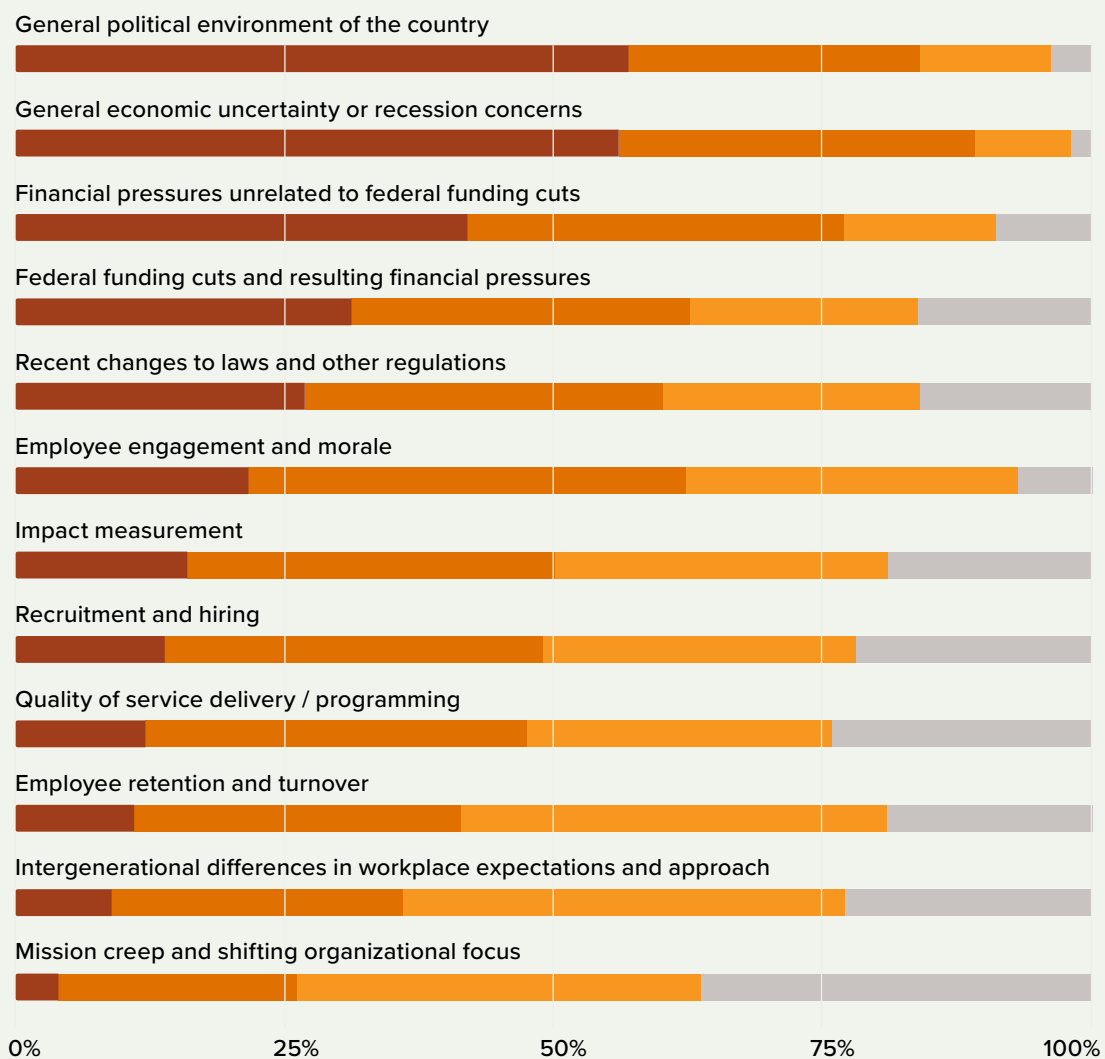
“We are very concerned about what our organization will look like in 1 year. We are 100% community facing and are already cutting back. We’re trying to figure out how we can make the most of our limited funds. If we lose federal funding, we will be forced to make cuts and reduce our impact.”

SECTION 3:

Organizational Challenges (continued)

Rate each of the following challenges for your organization from “not pressing” to “extremely pressing.”

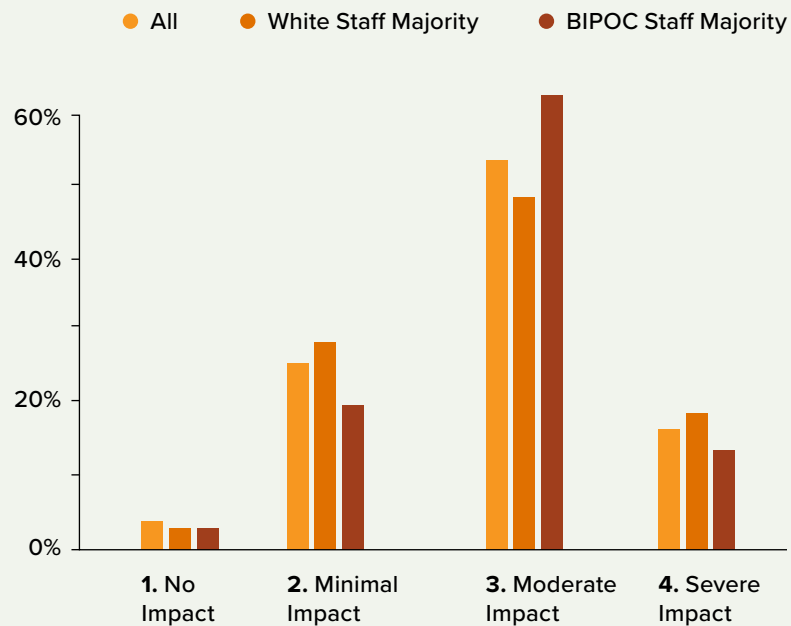
- Extremely pressing
- Moderately pressing
- Minimally pressing
- Not pressing



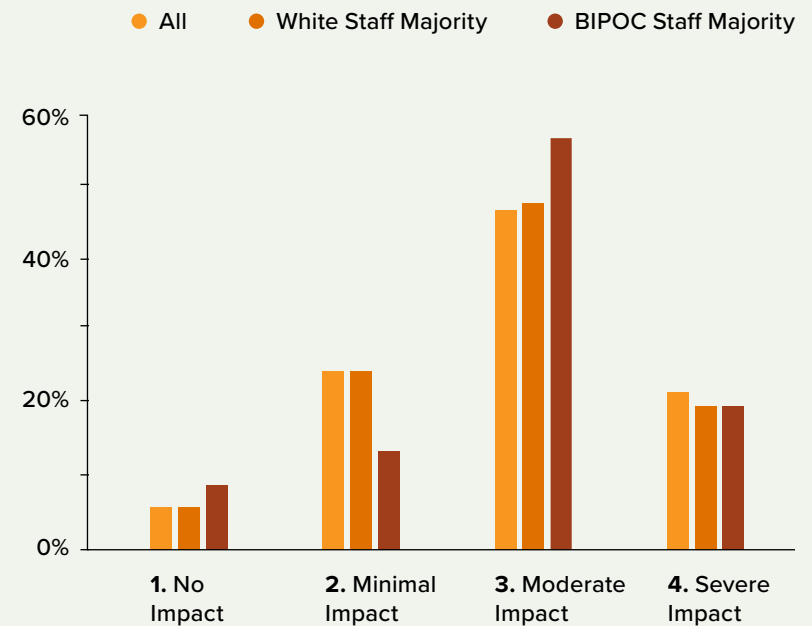
SECTION 3:

Organizational Challenges (continued)

On a scale of 1 to 4, how has the current political climate affected your organization's operations?



On a scale of 1 to 4, how has the current economic climate affected your organization's operations?



SECTION 3:

Organizational Challenges (continued)

Leaders value engagement and retention, but are focusing elsewhere first.

- Nearly two-thirds of leaders (63%) describe employee engagement and morale as moderately or extremely pressing, and 41% say the same of retention and turnover.
- Despite that, just 21% of leaders name strengthening employee engagement and retention as a top priority, and only 9% say the same of addressing employee wellbeing and mental health.
- This gap points to a difficult reality: even when leaders recognize pressing internal challenges, many feel limited in their ability to respond—constrained by financial strain, political uncertainty, and the urgent demands of the moment. We also hypothesize that some leaders see staff stress and dissatisfaction as rooted in broader societal forces beyond their control, making solutions feel even more elusive.
- This tension is even more pronounced among CPOs and other people and culture leaders. Compared to CEOs and EDs, they were more likely to say engagement and retention are serious concerns—78% said it was at least moderately pressing, and they were more than twice as likely to describe it as extremely pressing (36%). Despite this, they were actually less likely to name these issues as top priorities. Even those most directly responsible for organizational culture appear to be navigating limits on what's possible—and what would actually help—right now.

“In day-to-day operations, the impact is time spent away from mission work to adjust language and respond to the evershifting legal/cultural landscape. Morale of the team is very negatively impacted. Nearly every person on our staff is personally impacted or has impacted family members, and our staff is really hurting for the young people and families we serve who are being targeted by EO's and other federal action and rhetoric.”

SECTION 4:

Changes and Continuities

As leaders navigate ongoing pressures, they are making deliberate choices about where to focus limited resources, how to frame their organizational commitments, and which areas to adjust—or protect—in public and internal messaging.

Leaders are adjusting external equity messaging in response to external pressures.

- More than half (51%) of leaders report softening their external equity messaging, but these adjustments are more often described as moderate (33%) than significant (18%), suggesting a careful recalibration rather than a full retreat.
- While updates to external messaging were most likely to be attributed to political or regulatory pressures (24%) and potential impact to funding (26%), changes to internal language were more likely to be made in alignment with mission/values.
- Many leaders continue to actively reaffirm (28%) or strengthen (5%) their internal DEI commitments, suggesting that even as leaders adjust their public posture in response to external risks, they are working to preserve clarity and consistency inside their organizations, reinforcing commitments that matter to staff.

“We are disturbed by the current administration’s position on DEI and the instability of federal funding. While we have dialed back the JEDI language on our outward-facing materials, my staff have indicated that they are relatively unfazed because nothing is changing in how we will provide programming.”

“Like many, we are fearful about the prospect of attacks on non-profits, particularly those exclusively focused on serving people of color. Thus far we have made the decision not to capitulate in terms of external messaging, we fear having to do so. We also fear for the safety and freedom of our staff and program participants, many of whom are immigrants... Financially, we feel significant pressure to raise more money so we can expand and offset possible losses or cut backs. Long term, we intend to expand, despite these challenges.”

SECTION 4:

Changes and Continuities (continued)

Internal messaging around staff wellbeing is being reinforced, even as concrete action remains limited.

- Leaders were most likely to reaffirm (31%) or strengthen (37%) internal statements about employee engagement and wellbeing.
- The contrast between stronger internal messaging and limited prioritization reflects the complex tradeoffs leaders are managing: a desire to signal care and commitment to staff even when capacity to invest in new solutions is constrained.

Changes to actual services and policies are relatively limited

- Across all areas surveyed, most leaders report no major changes or planned changes to services, policies, or offerings.
- When changes have been made, however, they're most likely to occur in areas tied to internal culture and staff experience—such as workplace culture, employee engagement, and compensation or benefits.
- Notably, while not broadly considered top strategic priorities, staff engagement and well-being are among the areas where leaders continue to proactively make changes to policies and practices.

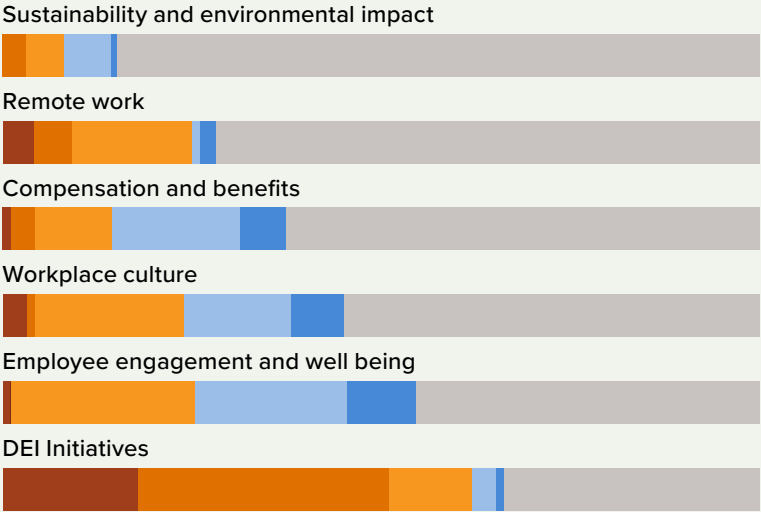
“We continue to do the work we do and have not changed that focus. Our staff are more affected by the constant rhetoric and moving parts of the current political climate. We do our best to continue to lead with consistency, support and strength.”

SECTION 4:

Changes and Continuities (continued)

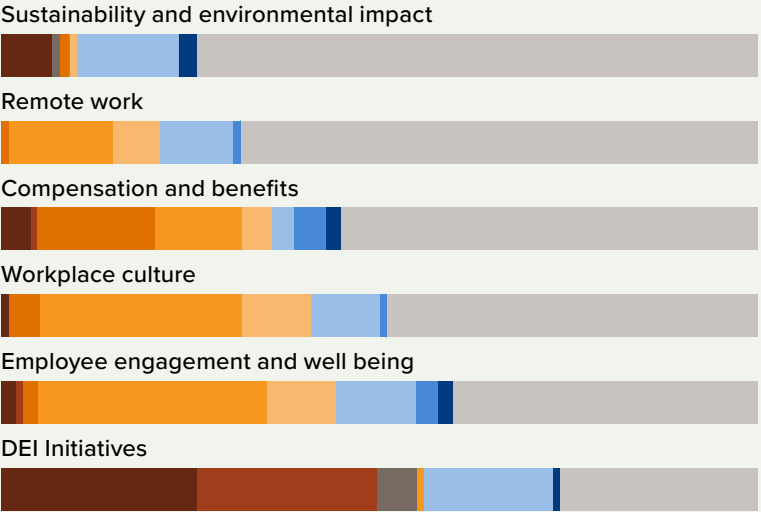
Since the beginning of 2025, how has your organization updated public-facing statements or descriptions regarding your work or policies in the following categories?

ADJUSTMENT TYPE



- Significantly softened or walked back
- Moderately softened or walked back
- Reaffirmed
- Moderately strengthened or emboldened
- Significantly strengthened or emboldened
- No change

PRIMARY REASON



- Potential impact to funding
- Political or regulatory pressures
- Public relations concerns
- Employee feedback
- Mission / values alignment
- Expansion or maintenance of transparency
- Certain impact to funding
- No change

SECTION 4:

Changes and Continuities (continued)

Since the beginning of 2025, how has your organization updated internally facing statements or descriptions regarding your work or policies in the following categories?

STATUS

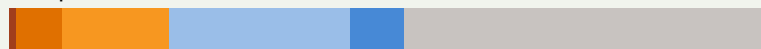
Sustainability and environmental impact



Remote work



Compensation and benefits



Workplace culture



Employee engagement and well being



DEI Initiatives



Public Relations



● Significantly softened or walked back

● Moderately strengthened or emboldened

● Moderately softened or walked back

● Significantly strengthened or emboldened

● Reaffirmed

● No change

PRIMARY REASON

Sustainability and environmental impact



Remote work



Compensation and benefits



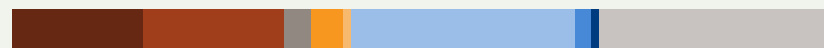
Workplace culture



Employee engagement and well being



DEI Initiatives



Public Relations



● Potential impact to funding

● Political or regulatory pressures

● Public relations concerns

● Competitive landscape

● Employee morale

● Employee feedback

● Mission / values alignment

● Expansion or maintenance of transparency

● Certain impact to funding

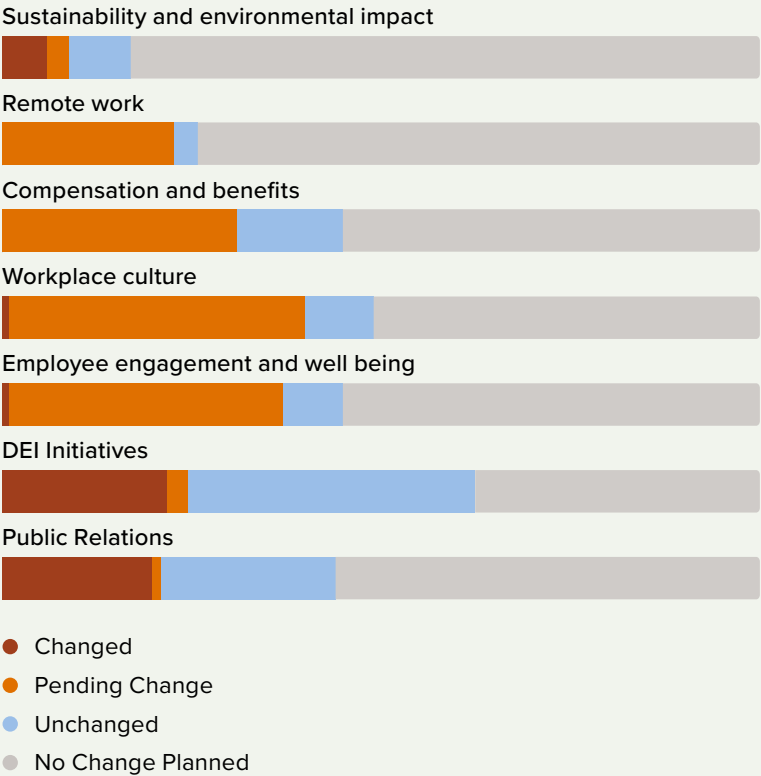
● No change

SECTION 4:

Changes and Continuities (continued)

Since the beginning of 2025, has your organization made changes to its actual services, policies, or other offerings in the following categories?

STATUS



IN ALIGNMENT WITH



SECTION 5:

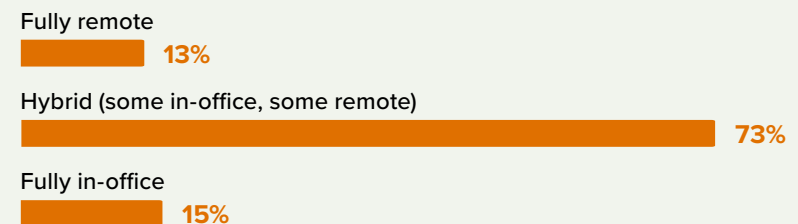
Workplace Model and Culture

Alongside financial and external pressures, leaders continue to adapt their workplace models and staff support efforts. Despite some positive outcomes, the data suggest the long-term effectiveness of these adaptations remains uncertain.

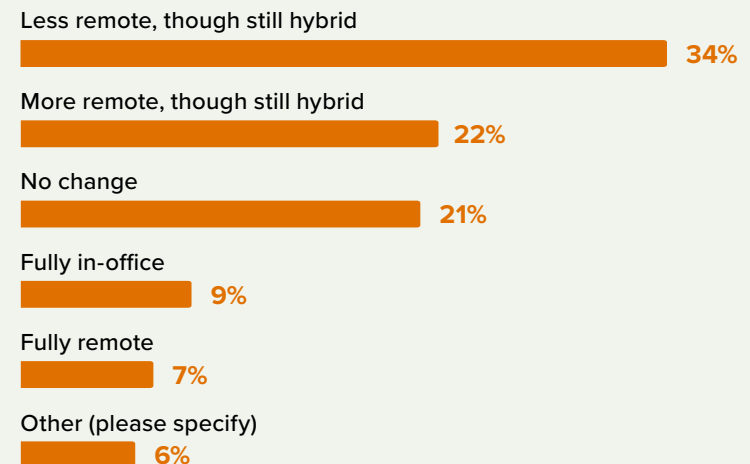
Hybrid work is the dominant model.

- 73% of leaders in the survey indicate their organizations are now operating in a hybrid work model.
- The largest share of leaders (34%) report shifting to be less remote since 2023, indicating some gradual recalibration toward in-person presence.
- The widespread adoption of hybrid models reflects organizations' efforts to balance flexibility with the perceived cultural and operational benefits of in-person interaction.

How would you describe your organization's current work model?



Since 2023, has your organization's work model changed to be:



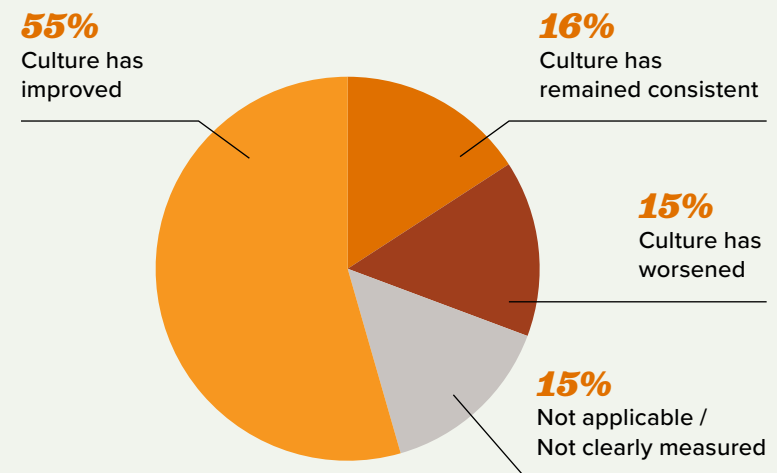
SECTION 5:

Workplace Model and Culture (continued)

Most leaders have seen their organization's culture improve or stay the same over the last 5 years.

- Leaders see hybrid work as a stabilizing force: 45% say shifts in their current work model have had a positive impact on organizational culture, and 41% report positive effects on their ability to meet present challenges.
- Importantly, not all shifts land equally. Leaders who say their organizations have become more remote since 2023 are more likely to report negative impacts on culture (32%) than those whose organizations have become less remote (22%). Though hybrid emerges as the dominant model, finding the right balance continues to be a work in progress as teams navigate connection across different configurations.

As internally measured, and separate from your personal perception, how has your organization's culture evolved over the past five years?

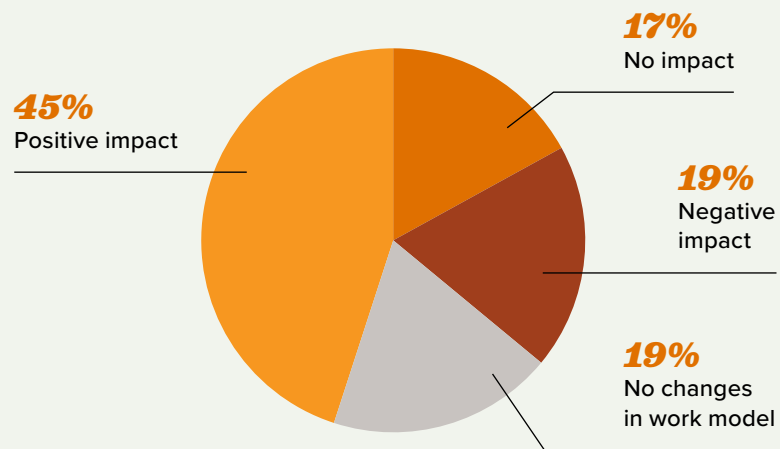


“Honestly, we are continuing to do the work that needs to be done with the populations who need us most. Agency culture remains internally good, but we are all just so emotionally exhausted that we are likely somewhat less effective as we balance compassion fatigue and internal grief.”

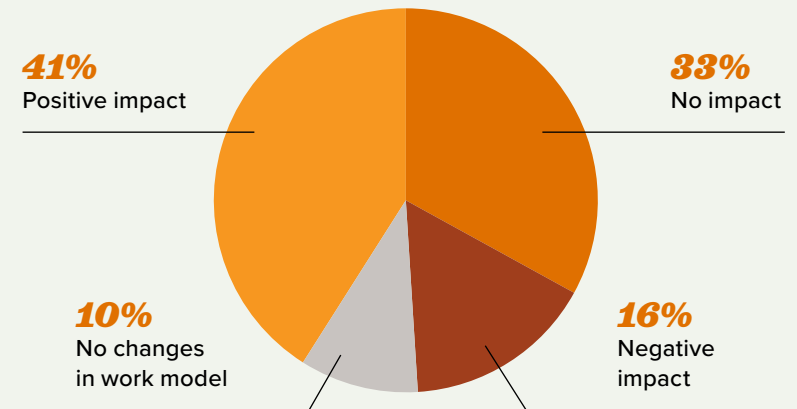
SECTION 5:

Workplace Model and Culture (continued)

How have shifts in your organization's work model affected its overall culture?



How has your organization's current work model impacted its ability to meet the challenges of the present moment?



SECTION 5:

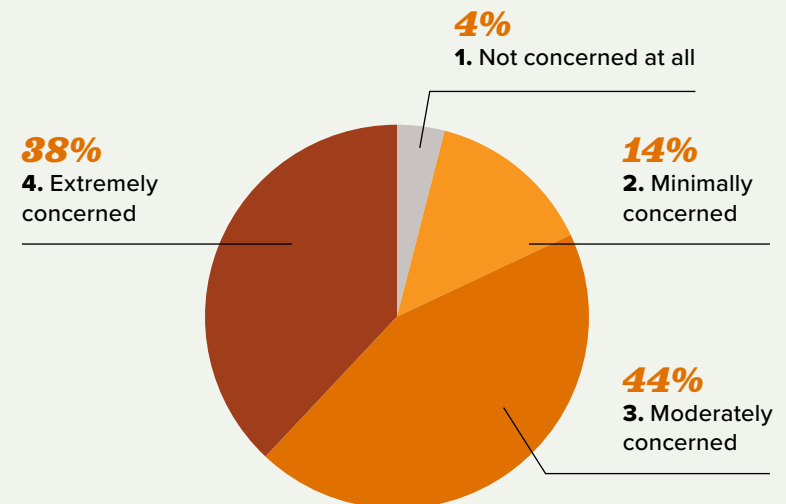
Workplace Model and Culture (continued)

Staff support efforts are widespread, but rarely seen as highly effective.

- The vast majority of leaders (82%) express at least moderate concern about how broader societal pressures (i.e., political shifts, economic instability, social movements, etc.) are affecting employees' well-being, engagement, and performance.
- Flexible work arrangements (60%), enhanced communication (59%), and team-building efforts (42%) are among the most commonly implemented support strategies.
- Despite these efforts, leaders do not consistently rate their effectiveness as significant, with 43% indicating these interventions are only moderately effective in improving staff morale and productivity.
- These moderate ratings suggest that while organizations are making good-faith efforts to support staff, many leaders remain unsure whether these approaches are fully addressing staff needs or preventing longer-term burnout.

“Employees are stressed and demanding more of themselves and each other, which is leading to some interpersonal conflict about whether we’re doing ‘enough.’”

On a scale of 1 to 4, how concerned are you about the impact of societal pressures on your employee’s well-being, engagement, or performance?



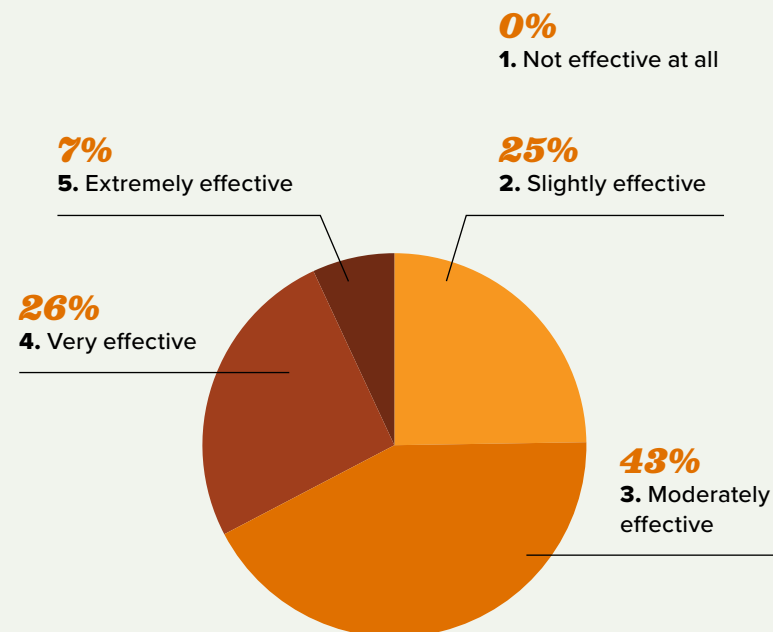
SECTION 5:

Workplace Model and Culture (continued)

Of the following, select up to three which you believe to be most relevant to supporting staff through current challenges.



On a scale of 1 to 5, to what extent do you believe these efforts have been effective in supporting employee morale and productivity?



SECTION 6:

Questions for Further Consideration

While this report provides a snapshot of how leaders are navigating the present moment, it also surfaces important questions that remain unresolved—and will likely continue to shape the sector in the months ahead:

- **How will organizations address retention challenges they acknowledge but are unable to prioritize?** Leaders widely recognize that engagement and turnover are pressing concerns, but relatively few list it as an immediate priority. As staff needs continue to evolve, how will organizations respond?
- **What long-term funding strategies will emerge to help organizations weather political and economic uncertainty?** Revenue sustainability is the dominant short-term priority, with leaders tying funding anxieties directly to political and economic pressures. The sector's resilience may depend on how organizations adapt their funding models amid growing instability.
- **How will ongoing external scrutiny continue to shape how organizations publicly express values and commitments?** Leaders are recalibrating public-facing messaging. As the social and political environment continues to evolve, will organizations feel greater pressure to compromise—or find new ways to reinforce their pre-existing messages?
- **How can the sector better support BIPOC-led organizations navigating greater strain?** These organizations are more likely to report intense political and financial pressure. What forms of targeted support could help address the disproportionate challenges they face?
- **What will it take for smaller organizations to withstand growing volatility?** With fewer resources and less margin for risk, smaller organizations are especially vulnerable to disruption. What new models or approaches will emerge to support their resilience over time?

SECTION 7:

Conclusion

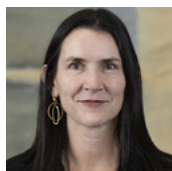
This moment is asking a great deal of social sector leaders. As financial, political, and cultural pressures intensify, leaders are recalibrating in real time—navigating difficult tradeoffs, adjusting messaging, and working to sustain staff and organizational health with limited certainty about what lies ahead.

Throughout this report, we've seen how leaders are working to hold mission and values steady, even as they face increasing complexity across the spectrum. The choices they're making reflect not only the major demands of the present moment, but a deep commitment to the communities and causes they serve.

We remain committed to supporting leaders and organizations, helping them navigate what's immediate while staying grounded in what matters most.

SECTION 8:

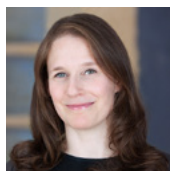
About the Authors



Sarah Grayson
Founding Partner

Sarah brings over twenty five years of experience

in human capital consulting and people management to On-Ramps. With experience both as a strategy consultant and Head of HR, and a strong focus on creating change and impact, she has successfully served a wide-variety of clients, leading large change efforts and designing and implementing a range of talent development programs.



Michelle Kedem
Founding Partner

Michelle currently leads On-Ramps'

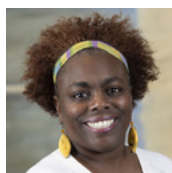
Communications and Community (aka: CommSquared) working group, supports the firm's strategy development, and manages financial forecasting. She also leads client engagements, working with organizations across a range of issue areas, with an emphasis on impact investing, democracy, advocacy, and social services.



Robert Mayer
Partner

Robert leads client engagements across

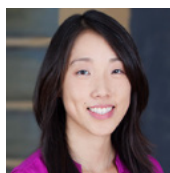
a broad range of issue areas including policy and advocacy, education, and philanthropy. He also leads the firm's client development work.



Nakia James-Jenkins
Partner

Nakia has spent her career in leadership positions

at organizations in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, driving the development of their people and cultures. At On-Ramps, she works with social sector organizations focused on changing the world, leading searches and advising leaders on best practices in recruitment and hiring. She also supports On-Ramps' internal talent/HR and operations work, as well as its work on diversity, equity, and inclusion.



Sarah Kwon Johnson
Partner

Sarah leads strategic planning and internal

operations, including talent and the firm's diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. She also leads client engagements, partnering with organizations across a range of issue areas, with an emphasis on education and philanthropy.

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On-Ramps is a full-service search and consulting firm serving organizations in the social sector. Our passion for social change fuels our determination to put the right people in the right positions. And our track record of successful placements reflects our hard work and high standards.