

Leadership In Focus Series

Understanding Proximity Leadership: Trends and Implications for Europe

About Great Place To Work, Certification™ and Best Workplaces™ Lists

For over 30 years, Great Place To Work's Certification, Best Workplaces Lists, and global benchmarks have become the industry standard—built on data, updated annually, from more than 20 million employees in 170 countries around the world.

We are the global authority on workplace culture, providing leaders and organisations with the recognition and tools needed to foster a thriving workforce and robust employee engagement that ultimately leads to a healthier bottom line.

Our employee sentiment data is captured directly and confidentially from employees, empowering employers to use their workplace culture insights to achieve tangible business gains and a clear return on investment through enhancing their employee experience.

The global
authority on
workplace
culture

1 survey.
21,000 customers.
20m employees.
170+ countries.
Annually.

Certification & Lists

Our recognition is the most coveted and respected in the world for elevating employer brands to attract and retain the right people.

Platform & Data

Our proprietary methodology and survey platform enables organisations to truly capture, analyse, and understand the experience of all employees.

Research & Insights

Our tenable research empowers organisations to build cultures that retain talent and unlock the potential of every employee.

Resources & Community

Our experienced culture experts, data-driven content, and For All Community connect the boldest leaders, ideas, and innovations in employee experience.



Prof. Dr Koen Dewettinck
CEO, Great Place To Work Belgium



About this report...

Great Place To Work has been measuring the full spectrum of workplace culture through confidential employee surveys for over 30 years globally. Part of this process includes capturing survey data which can support our clients to understand their organisation's leadership skills, strengths, and areas for improvement.

Our 'Leadership In Focus' series of reports examines the average employee and leader experiences across Europe on a number of topics, including proximity leadership.

It's important to state that this report is not intended to be a highly academic analysis, but rather a walkthrough of the data and insights regarding proximity leadership, uncovered from our survey of close to 25,000 employees across the region.

Our findings revealed key insights regarding the current state of proximity leadership within the region. Countries where leaders are more closely connected with their teams are reaping the benefits of a more engaged workforce and higher levels of trust between managers and employees. In striking the right balance between closeness and distance (both physically and emotionally), proximate leaders are able to maintain the perspective needed for successful leadership.



A special thank you to Ozoda Muminova at The Good Insight, whose independent third-party data analysis was pivotal to this research.

Note: The data within this report is taken from our 2025 [European Workforce Study \(EWS\)](#) – a Europe-wide survey using Great Place To Work's proprietary [Trust Index²](#) – to understand the landscape of workplace culture across Europe.

European Workforce Study 2025

24,938
Respondents

**Annual Online
Quantitative Survey**
Fieldwork conducted in Summer
2024 and compiled in Jan 2025

19
Countries

Austria	France	Luxembourg	Spain
Belgium	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden
Cyprus	Greece	Norway	Switzerland
Denmark	Ireland	Poland	UK
Finland	Italy	Portugal	

Approx 1500 respondents per country with the exception of Austria (500), Finland (500), Luxembourg (1000), Spain (900) and Poland (700).

Note: The abbreviation 'pp' is used in this report to denote 'percentage points'.

What is proximity leadership?

Proximity leadership is a leadership style fundamental to building high levels of trust between leaders and their teams through consistent, meaningful interactions – regardless of the working environment.

True proximity is about quality engagement, not mere physical presence. This is a crucial factor in today's diverse workplaces.

At Great Place To Work, we sought to measure and benchmark proximity leadership across Europe. Using data from our largest-ever European Workforce Study, alongside insights from Certified and Best Workplace organisations across the region, our aim is to provide a considered view of how proximity leadership is practiced as well as its business impact.

Proximity Leadership Considerations:

Trust & Empowerment

Are people given autonomy and trusted to do a good job?

└ **Trust** is foundational to proximity leadership. Leaders who empower employees create a sense of ownership and motivation.

Are mistakes recognised as part of doing business?

└ A culture that **normalises mistakes** fosters both psychological safety and innovation.

Are managers genuinely open to suggestions and ideas?

└ **Encouraging feedback** creates a culture of innovation and inclusion.

Are people involved in decisions affecting their work?

└ Employees feel valued and engaged when they have **a voice in decision-making**.

Approachability & Communication

Are management approachable and easy to talk to?

└ Proximity leaders **remove barriers** between themselves and employees, making communication easy.

Do leaders and managers make expectations clear?

└ **Clear expectations** ensure alignment and reduce misunderstandings.

Are employees kept informed about important issues?

└ **Transparent communication** prevents uncertainty and builds trust.

Are questions answered with honesty by leadership?

└ **Honest responses strengthen** credibility and reinforce an open-door culture.

Care & Appreciation

Is work-life balance actively encouraged?

└ Proximity leadership values employees as whole **individuals**, not just workers.

Do leaders and managers show interest in employees as people?

└ **Genuine interest** in employees' lives fosters deeper relationships and a positive work environment.

Is appreciation shown for good work/ extra effort?

└ **Recognition** boosts morale and motivates

Trust & Empowerment
Approachability
& Communication
Employee Care
& Appreciation



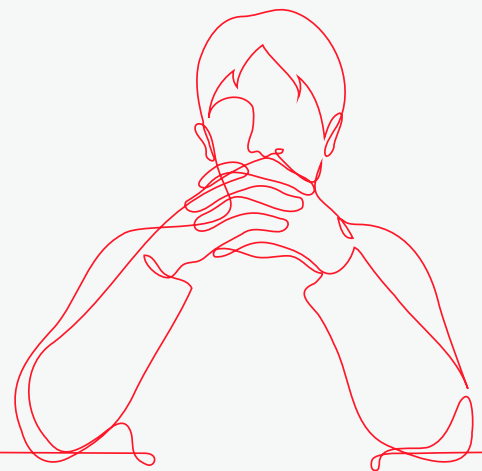
11 Proximity Leadership statements

% Agree (all 24,938 European Workforce Study Respondents)



These 3 statements are in the bottom 10 of all the statements asked in the survey

We identified 11 key statements from our [Trust Index™ survey](#), which we included in our European Workforce Study 2025, related to proximity leadership. These statements have allowed us to assess the prevalence of proximity leadership across Europe, and how it influences various business outcomes, providing valuable insight into its impact and effectiveness.

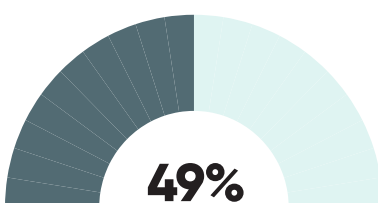


Important

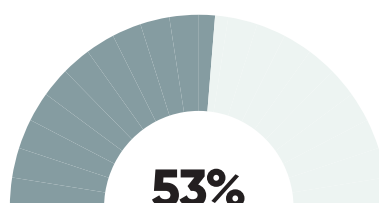
Why proximity leadership is not determined only by physical proximity

Slightly less than a quarter of working adults in Belgium (23%) are hybrid working – which more or less aligns with our European (26%) results. However, 'proximity leadership' can easily be misunderstood as directly related to purely onsite or in-person interactions.

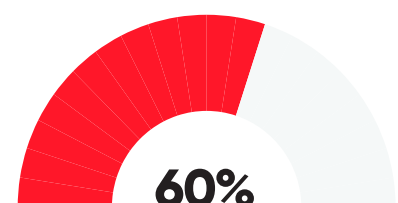
Whilst this may be beneficial, our results show that hybrid workers are more likely to have managers and leaders with strong proximity skills – outperforming both remote and onsite working environments. These skills are about enhancing interactions, not forcing people to work in close physical proximity.



Remote



Onsite




Hybrid

% Agree with leadership proximity statements, by mode of work (All Europe)

Top traits employees value in their Senior Leaders/C-Suite

As part of the European Workforce Study, we also explored what leadership traits employees valued most in their senior leadership. Approachability, listening, transparency, communication and caring about people's wellbeing topped the list of desired senior leadership traits by employees.

 **Important:** As a senior leader, it's important not to underestimate the value of actively advocating for your people's wellbeing and development. In fact, this is the second most important leadership quality according to all other employee levels.



Source: European Workforce Study 2025 (all Europe);
Top 5 ranking senior leadership qualities (out of 10) split by seniority



Leaders are well aware of their proximity skills

As seen in our report on [psychological health in the workplace](#) across Europe, there is often a gap between how employees assess their workplace (or, in this case, their managers and leaders) and how senior leadership perceives this.

While Belgium appears to have the smallest gap, our overall level of Proximity is one of the lowest too. Senior leaders are close to employees, however, the overall culture needs to change.

Country	Score
Belgium	1.1
Netherlands	1.2
Cyprus	1.2
Spain	1.2
Luxembourg	1.2
Sweden	1.2
Norway	1.3
Finland	1.3
Denmark	1.3
Switzerland	1.3

Country	Score
Poland	1.4
Ireland	1.4
Portugal	1.4
Greece	1.4
Austria	1.4
France	1.4
Germany	1.4
UK	1.5
Italy	1.6

 Smaller Proximity Gap (≤ 1.3)
 Larger Proximity Gap (> 1.3)

Belgium has the smallest proximity gap



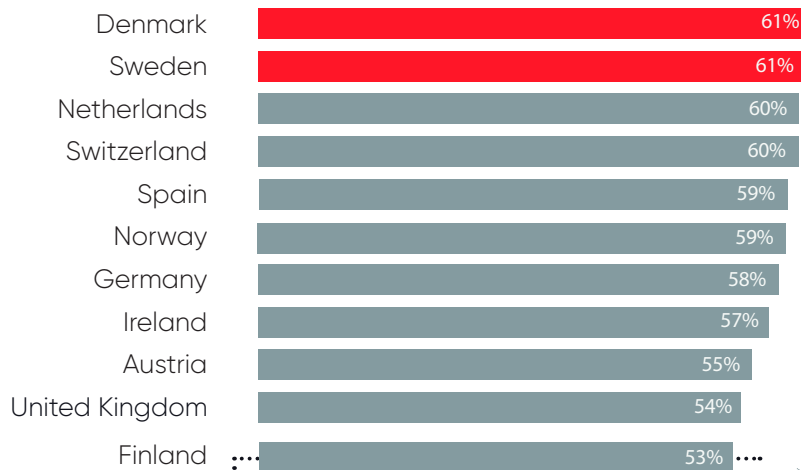
Important: A perfect 1.0 score = no gap between how leaders and employees perceive Leaders' proximity skills. The higher the score, the greater the disconnect.

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a green sweater, is leaning over a desk and smiling. A man with a beard and short dark hair, wearing a tan jacket, is sitting at the desk and looking at a tablet with a surprised expression. On the desk, there is a laptop, a tablet, and a white mug. In the background, there are large windows with blinds. A red crosshair graphic is in the top right corner.

European & Belgian overview

Proximity leadership skills vary widely across Europe

In our study of 25,000 people, leaders in Northern Europe operate more proximately than their Southern counterparts.

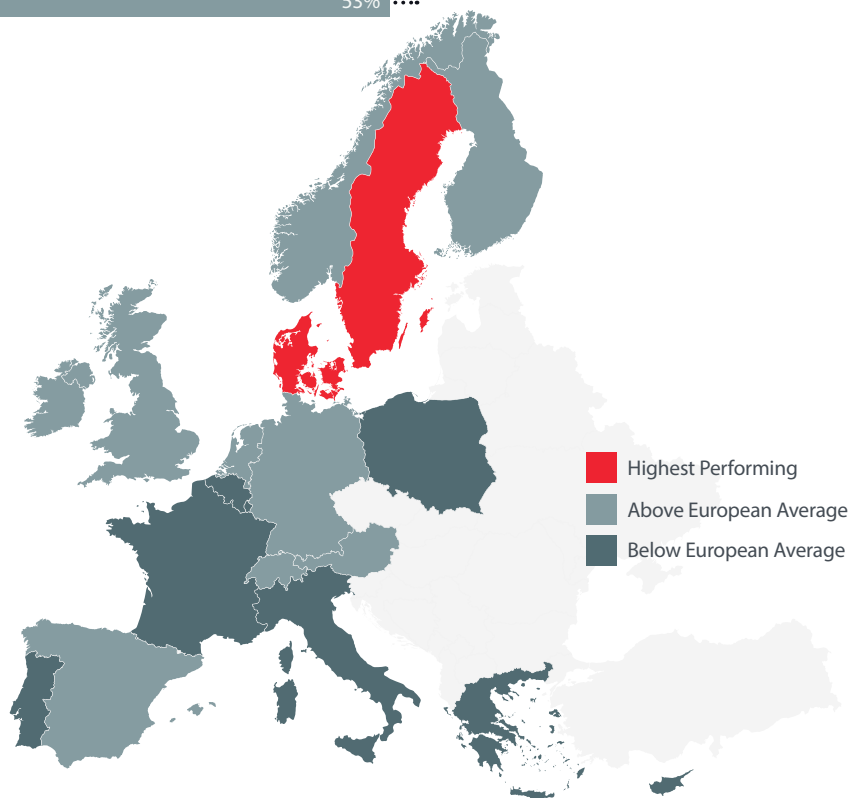


Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and Switzerland all closely top the table for proximity leadership skills.

On average, only



of the European Workforce have 'Proximate Leadership'

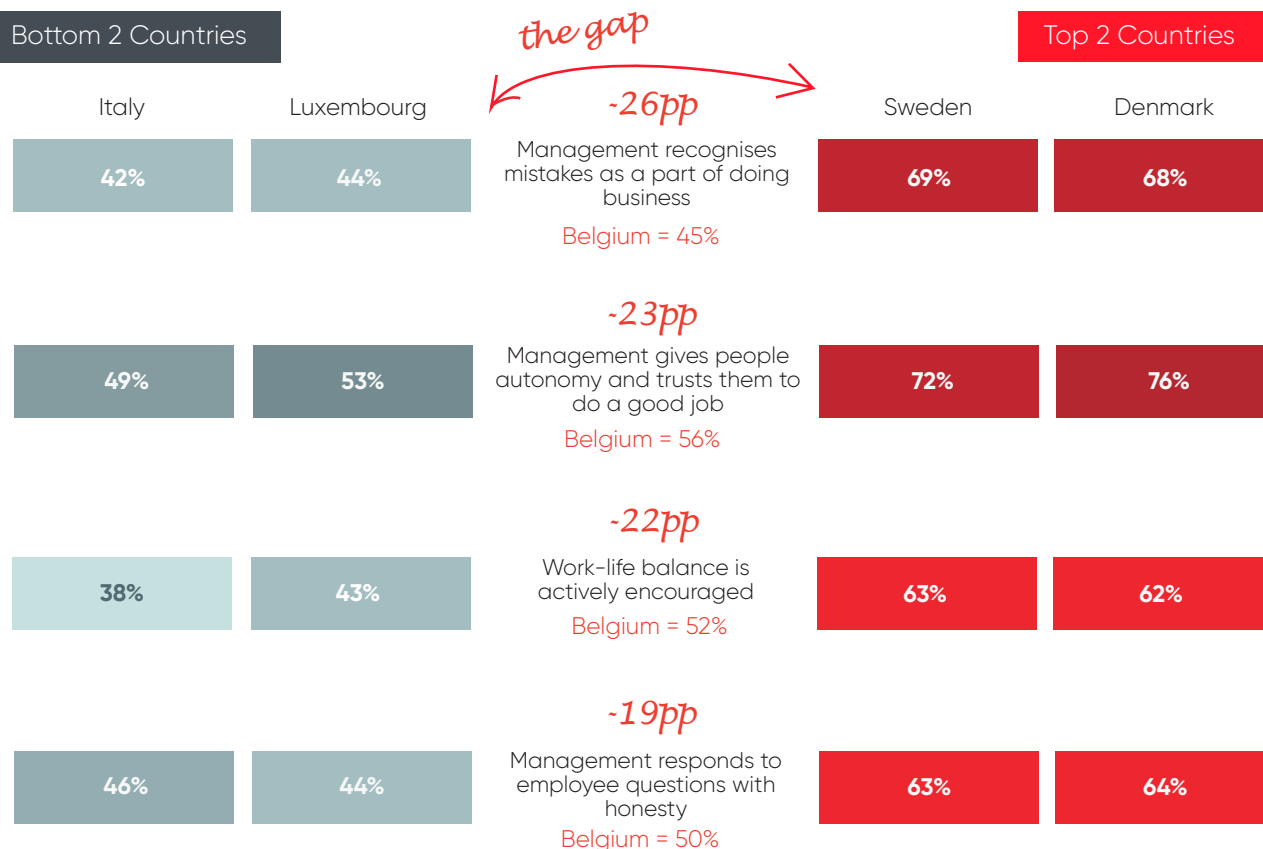


Belgium sits below the European average. Taking inspiration from top-performing Nordic countries, leaders in Belgium may become more proximate by adopting a coaching style of leadership, increasing employee involvement in decision-making, fostering trust, and encouraging better work-life balance.

% Agree: average percentage agreement with the 11 proximity leadership statements for each country

Denmark and Sweden top the proximity skills league table in Europe, with Italy and Luxembourg coming in last – but why?

Denmark and Sweden are the top two countries for proximity leadership. Arguably egalitarian, they often employ quite autonomous work environments with consensus-based decision-making, and managers are seen as colleagues rather than authority figures. Below are the four statements with the widest gap between the two top-performing and the two lowest-scoring countries.



The Nordic approach to leadership offers valuable insights for Belgian leaders looking to strengthen their proximity skills.

Drawing inspiration from countries like Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, Belgian leaders can adopt practices that encourage **closer relationships with employees and enhance overall workplace effectiveness**.

For example, **prioritising trust** as the foundation of one's leadership style, and functioning more as a coach than traditional boss, can decrease the power distance between a leader and their team. This helps to develop a work environment where people are given sufficient autonomy and


responsibility, seeing their leaders as inspiring and motivating figures rather than authoritarian.

Similarly, Nordic leadership often allows **decision-making to involve communication from the bottom up**, with leaders valuing input from all levels of the organisation to ensure a diversity of viewpoints and ideas. This emphasis on teamwork and a stronger dependency on employees leads to more sustainable decisions made within a culture of collaboration and high levels of trust.

Belgian employees and senior leaders' perception about management's proximity leadership skills are in balance

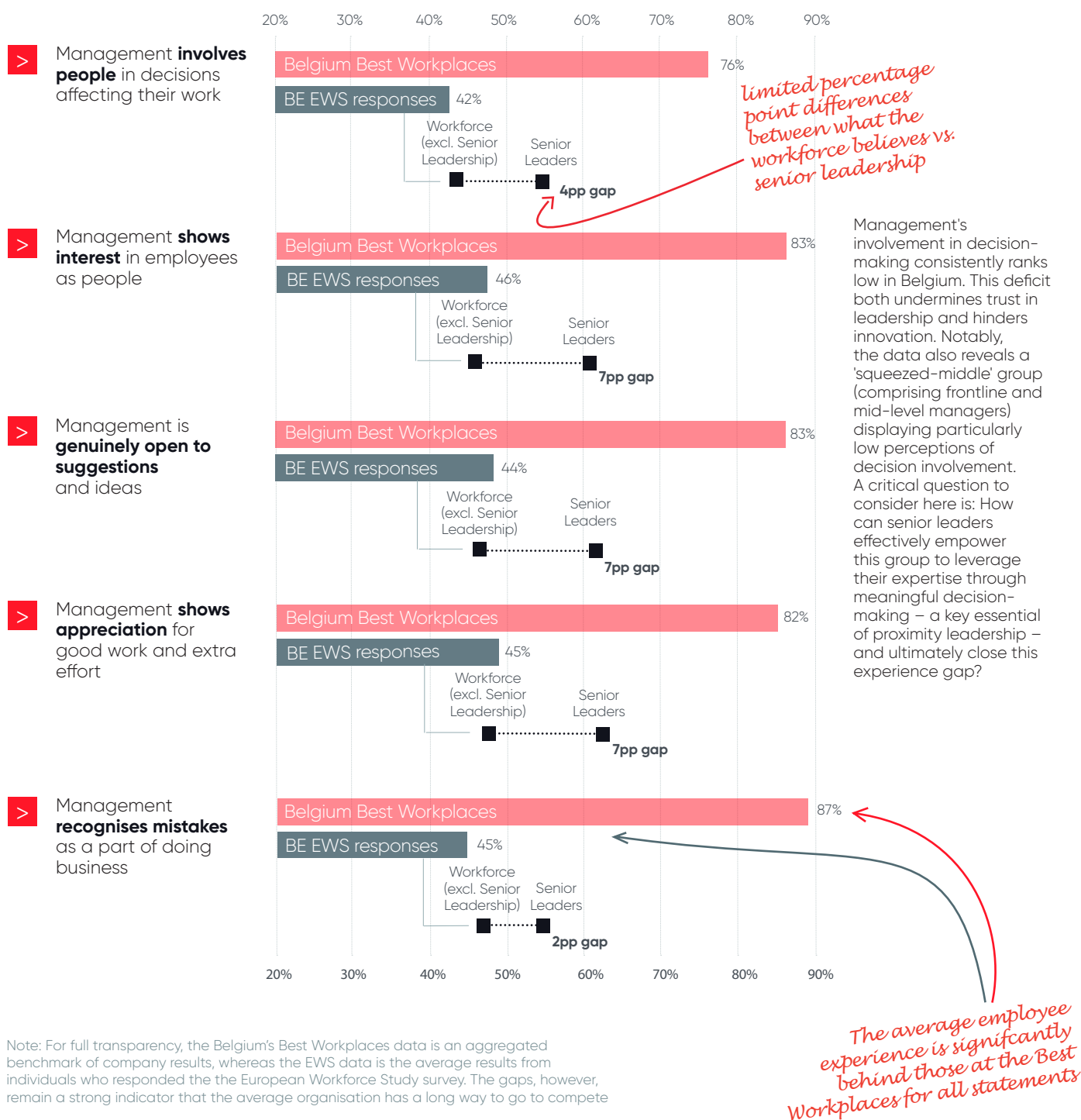
Although still negligible, the lowest-scoring proximity leadership statements also correspond with the largest disconnect between senior leaders' perceptions of management's effectiveness and the reality experienced by the wider workforce. It's important to reiterate that Belgium has the smallest perception gap (about proximity leadership) between its workforce and leaders in Europe.

We, however, also have to note that the overall level of Proximity in Belgium is one of the lowest too. In conclusion, senior leaders are close to employees, however, the overall culture needs to change.

 **Tip:** It's vital that leaders assess different demographics when analysing employee experience!

Lowest Scoring Proximity Leadership Statements (UK)

% Agree with Leadership Statement



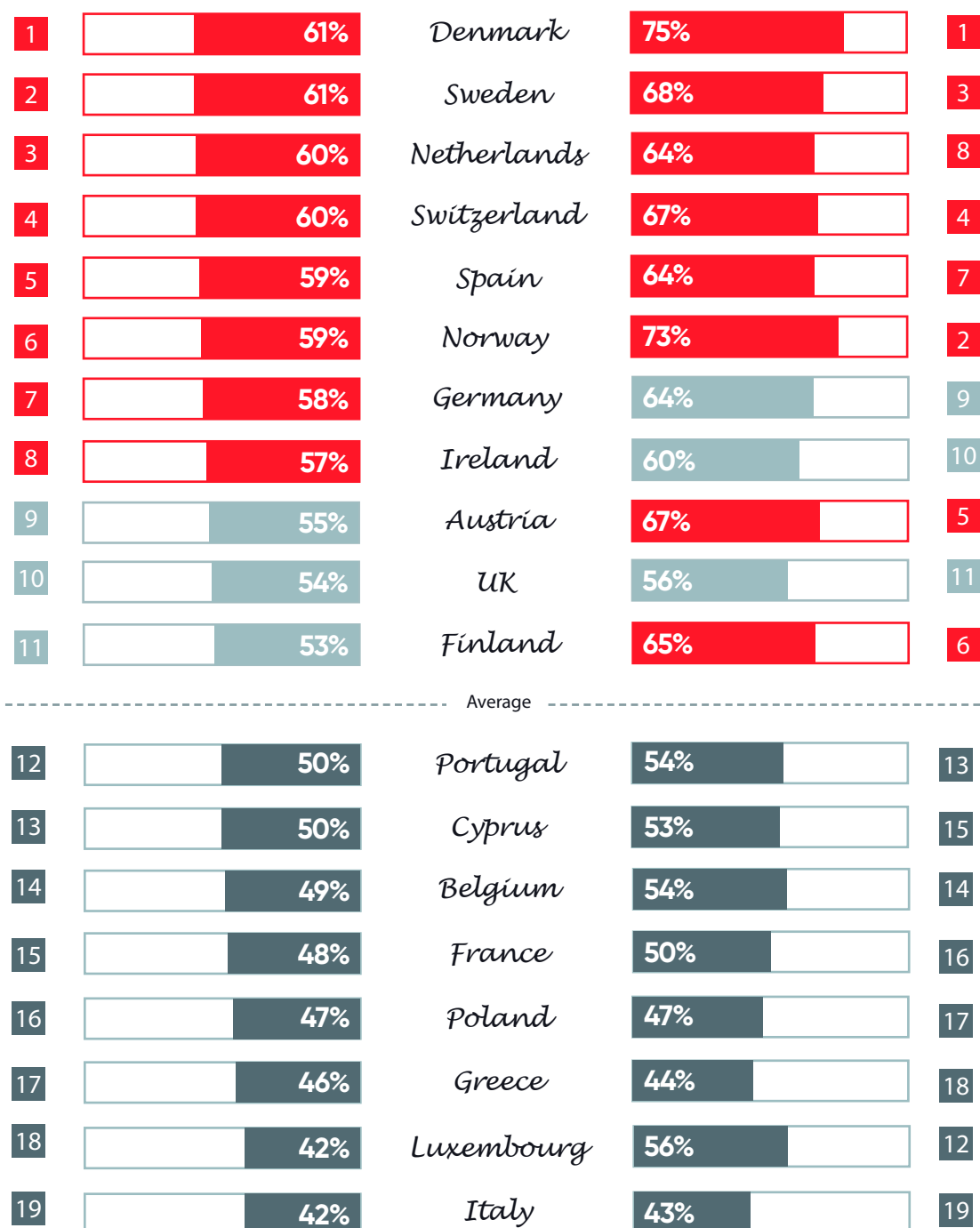
A photograph of two men in a meeting. One man, with light hair and a beard, is pointing his right arm towards the top left. The other man, with dark skin and a beard, is looking at the same direction. They are sitting at a desk with a laptop, a glass of water, and some papers. The background is a brick wall. There are several red geometric shapes overlaid on the image: a large red rectangle on the left side, a red square in the top right corner, and a red rectangle in the bottom left corner.

The business impact

Proximity leadership strongly correlates with higher workforce satisfaction...

Highest Performing Countries for
Proximity Leadership

Highest Performing Countries for
Workforce Satisfaction



Lowest Performing Countries for
Proximity Leadership

Lowest Performing Countries for
Workplace Satisfaction

Source: European Workforce Study 2025 (All 24,938 European Workforce Study Respondents)

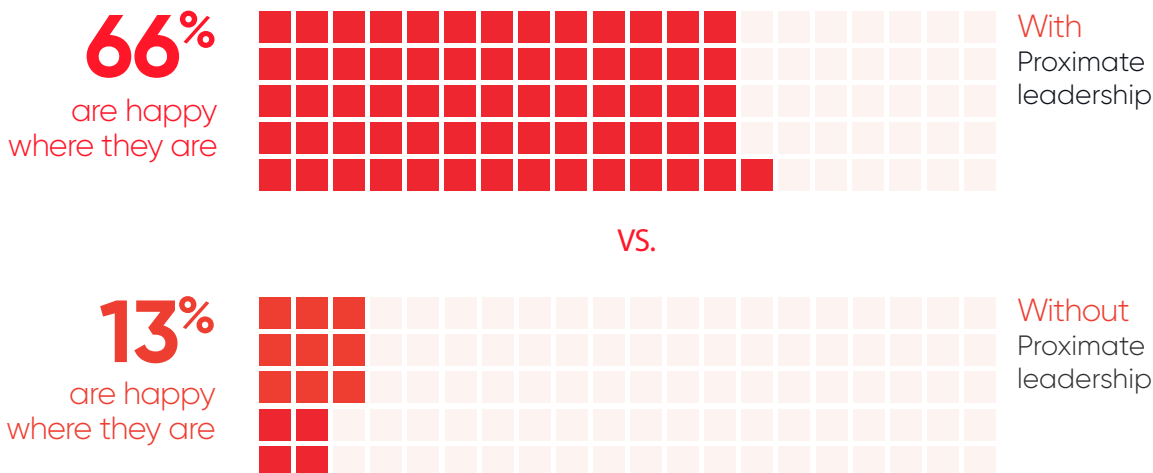
...and workforce satisfaction correlates with productivity



Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Note: Cyprus is not a member

Proximate leaders are 5X more likely to retain their talent this year

"Will you be looking for a new job this year?", all European employees



Source: European Workforce Study 2025 (All 24,938 European Workforce Study Respondents)



Luciana Barchet
Senior Consultant
Great Place To Work UK

Cultivating effective proximity leadership needs a strategic shift towards valuing and fostering **strong leader-employee relationships**. Companies must recognise that these proximate and healthy connections are the bedrock upon which a robust culture and the achievement of organisational goals are built.

This understanding should translate into **tangible action**, beginning with the empowerment of both leaders and employees at all levels to participate in decisions that directly impact their work environment,

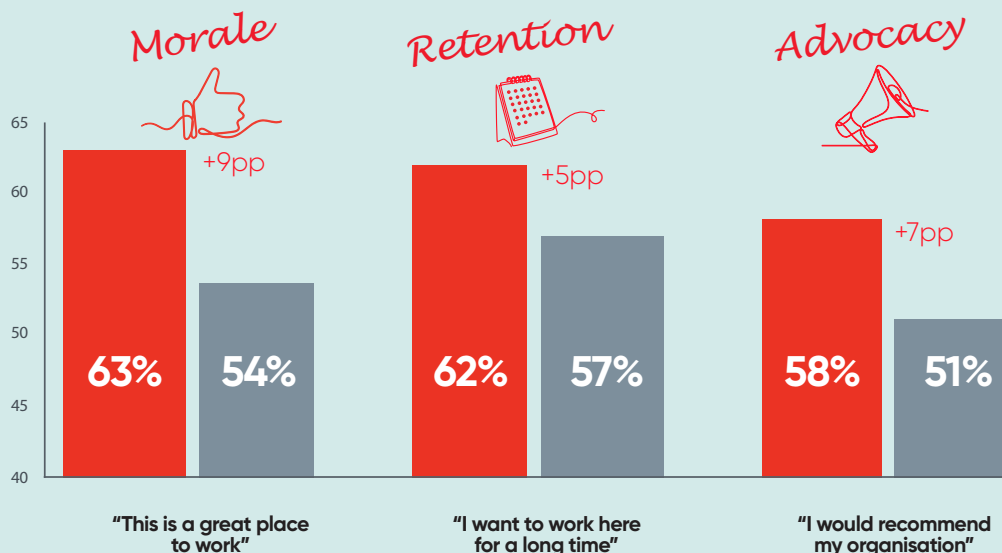
aligning employee efforts with the company's strategic objectives. Moreover, organisations must also evolve their leadership development programmes to integrate relational skills alongside technical expertise.

Beyond empowerment, a crucial aspect of proximity leadership lies in **recognition and appreciation**. To this end, we must ask: How are leaders effectively recognising people's efforts? How are companies building a culture of recognition and appreciation, and understanding the pivotal role that leaders play in shaping the employee experience?

By addressing these questions and implementing the right strategies, organisations can unlock the full potential of their workforce, ensuring that every individual **feels valued and empowered** to contribute to the company's success.

Smaller proximity gaps foster higher employee satisfaction and better business outcomes.

Similarly to satisfaction, employee morale, advocacy, and intent to stay also improve when there are smaller proximity gaps between leaders and employees.



Key:

Countries with Smaller Proximity Gaps (≤1.3)

Belgium
Netherlands
Cyprus
Spain
Luxembourg
Sweden
Norway
Finland
Denmark
Switzerland

Countries with Larger Proximity Gaps (>1.3)

Poland
Ireland
Portugal
Greece
Austria
France
Germany
UK
Italy

% Employees who agree to the statements above. Comparison between countries with a smaller and a larger gap between the perceptions of Employees vs. Senior Leaders.

Our European Workforce Study data shows that closer alignment between leaders and employees drives positive engagement outcomes. Countries with smaller proximity gaps (closer alignment) consistently show higher

levels of employee morale; improved retention (reducing turnover and preserving institutional knowledge and expertise); and strong advocacy, enhancing reputation and attracting talent.

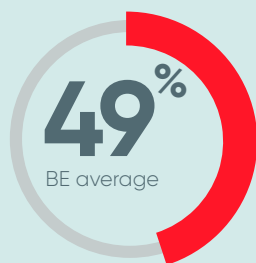
Belgium's Best Workplaces excel at proximity leadership – resulting in an even smaller proximity gap between employees and senior leaders

Best Workplaces are the best for a reason. They are known for creating environments which enable leaders to be accessible to their teams. They are adept at building strong interpersonal relationships between colleagues across departments and locations.

Senior leaders at these organisations are often lauded by their employees for their ability to communicate the company's strategy and vision clearly, and in a way that inspires and motivates their workforce. The result: **smaller proximity gaps, higher levels of trust, and better retention.**

Belgium's Best Workplaces surpass the national average proximity leadership score by 35 percentage points...

Source: Global Workforce Study (BE data)
v. 2025 BE's Best Workplaces



Belgium's average proximity leadership score **vs.** Belgium's Best Workplaces™ average



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Certification is based on the results of an anonymous, company-wide survey. Organisations who surpass the required Trust Index™ score are Certified 'great' for 12-months.



Best Workplace recognition is awarded to a maximum of 100 companies, within each size category, annually. Great Place To Work have national Best Workplaces lists all around the world.

E: BE_Info@greatplacetowork.com