

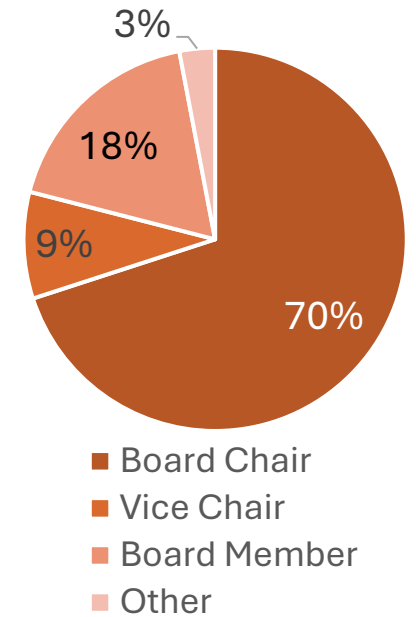
Global Leadership Network 2026 Research Findings

presented at
YMCA World Council
Toronto
July 22, 2026



Who filled out the survey?

	Leadership (n=55)	Volunteer (n=33)
Region		
Africa	9%	12%
Asia-Pacific	26%	30%
Europe	13%	12%
Latin America & Caribbean	9%	9%
Middle East	4%	6%
North America	38%	30%
Other	1%	
Length of Time in Role		
Less than 1 year	4%	6%
1 to 3 years	20%	12%
4 to 6 years	33%	36%
7 or more years	44%	58%



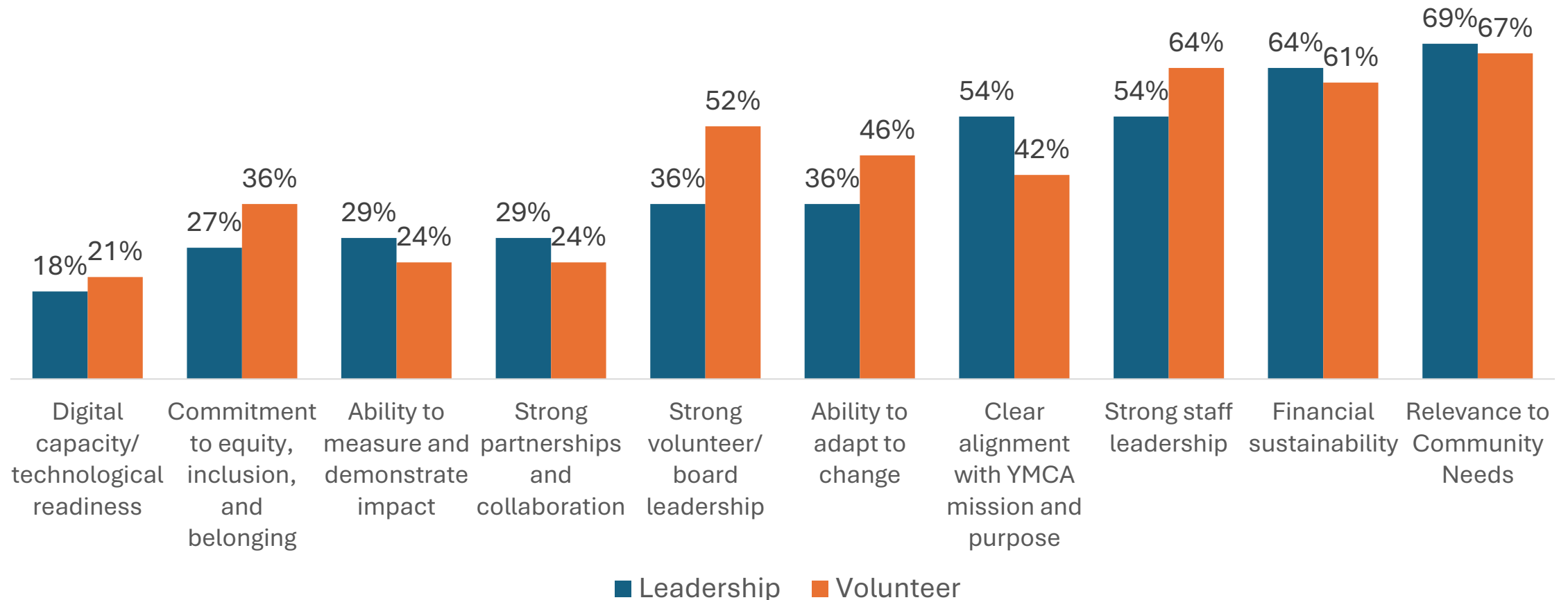
Relevance to community needs and financial sustainability are essential for defining a successful, thriving YMCA today



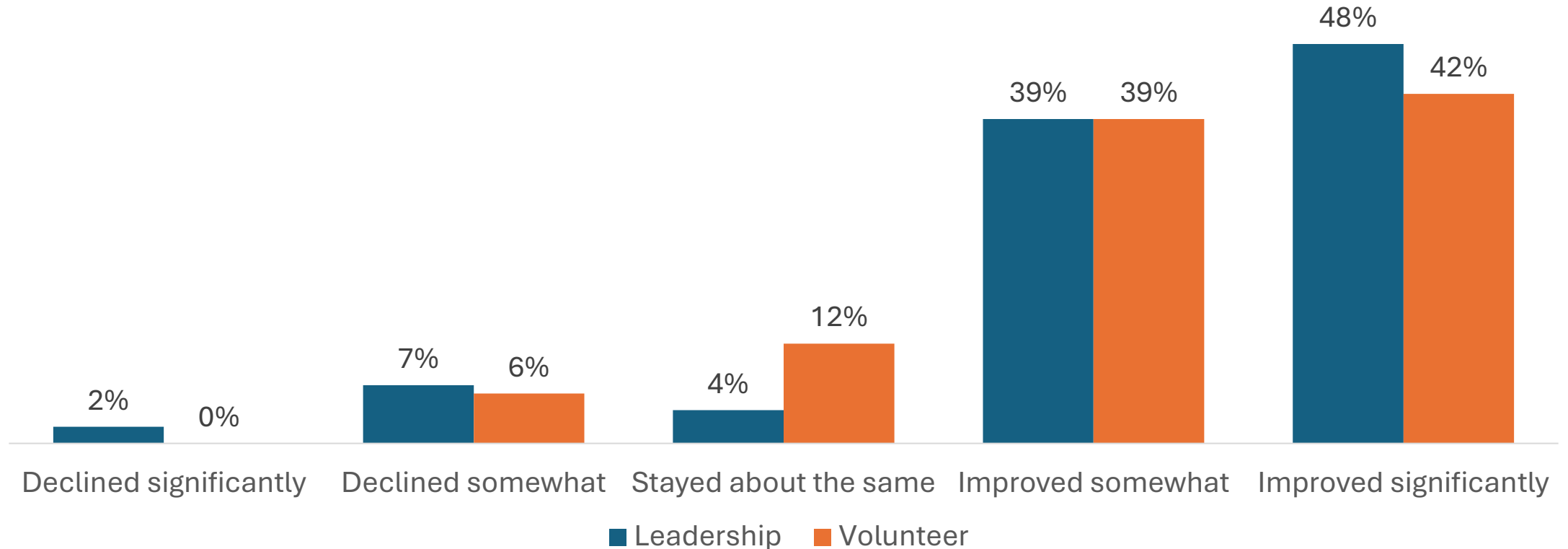
Relevance to community needs, strong staff leadership, and financial sustainability are essential for defining a successful, thriving YMCA today



Comparing leadership to volunteers (board members), there are differences in perceptions of how essential clear alignment with YMCA mission and purpose, ability to adapt to change, and having strong volunteer leadership are



Nearly half of respondents say that since 2022, their YMCA's ability to thrive has improved significantly



Leadership open text: What defines a successful, thriving YMCA today?

Theme	% of Responses	Representative Quotes
Financial sustainability & resource development	45%	"The ability to maintain financial sustainability." "Strong and diversified Financial Resource Mobilisation." "Income risk diversification. Relationships with key funders."
Community relevance, impact & responsiveness	44%	"One that is responsive to community needs, limber, and bold." "Being able to meaningfully respond to the needs of the youth and the communities that the YMCA serves." "What problems can we help solve in the community?"
Leadership, governance & organizational capacity	35%	"Clear strategy, strong governance, and transparent operations." "Effectively governed, motivated workforce, stable leadership." "Leadership in all levels of decision making and financially stable and growing."
Mission, values & purpose alignment	31%	"Mission-driven, community-rooted organization." "Ability to adapt to changes in our cities and yet maintaining mission clarity." "When we drift from the YMCA's foundational purpose... we are essentially failing."
Adaptability, innovation & future readiness	25%	"Ability to adapt and evolve to meet a changing environment." "Agility and relevance." "Capacity to innovate and build strategic relationships."
Youth development & youth focus	18%	"Empowering youth with leadership and livelihood skills." "Creates safe, inclusive and welcoming places where children, young people and families can belong, grow and thrive." "Young people grow in confidence."
Partnerships, collaboration & external influence	16%	"Strong partnerships." "Ability to collaborate globally." "Networking with partners and funding agencies."
Impact measurement & accountability	15%	"Ability to deliver measurable, high-impact outcomes." "Creating and measuring impact in the community." "Clarity in indicators to measure real impact."
Staff, volunteer & workforce engagement	13%	"Capable and caring workforce." "Staff and volunteers are skilled, compassionate, and mission-led." "Values that virtually all staff are committed to every day."

How Volunteers (Board Members) define a thriving YMCA

Theme	% of Responses	Representative Quotes
Financial sustainability / operational strength	52%	"Financial sustainability including of course ongoing positive financial management ensures ability to implement mission effectively and efficiently." "A thriving YMCA will need to be financially sustainable." "Operational strength and strong financial base that allows access to targeted growth opportunities and curated partnerships."
Community relevance, impact, and responsiveness	45%	"A successful, thriving YMCA today is one that has a clear sense of purpose and remains deeply connected to the needs of its community." "Understanding and responding to the emerging and current interests and issues impacting young people and communities." "Increasing community health outcomes across community for segments that are underserved."
Strong leadership and governance	28%	"A strong CEO that right-sizes an organization and surrounds oneself with subject matter experts." "Strong leadership, aligned culture, staff engagement." "Over the last few years... strong leadership combined with a major commitment to quality programming and quality facilities has enabled us to grow."
Mission, purpose, and values alignment	28%	"Aligned (purpose, strategy, impact) and sustainable." "Living the YMCA values and mission." "A YMCA that stays true to its roots while being adaptable to the world we live in."
Staff, volunteer, and member engagement	24%	"Employee and volunteer engagement and passion for this work." "Strong leadership, aligned culture, staff engagement." "Participating members transforming positively into volunteers and leaders." (translated)
Youth focus and youth development	17%	"Connects to the needs and aspirations of young people." "A safe place for young people." (translated) "Relevance to young people and the community."
Growth, innovation, and adaptability	17%	"Anticipating new revenue streams, future locations, and offering programs in demand." "Program development and delivery that responds to the times." (translated) "Understanding and responding to emerging interests and issues."
Partnerships, collaboration, and networks	14%	"Collaboration, communication and continued positive engagement." "Curated partnerships that build community strength and profile." "Network." (translated)

Common Themes Across Both Groups	More Prominent for Leaders	More Prominent for Volunteers (Board Members)
Financial sustainability	Governance and organizational discipline	Community connection and youth relevance
Mission and values	Impact measurement and accountability	Staff engagement and culture
Strong leadership	Resource diversification and philanthropy	Membership growth and community participation
Community impact	Strategic planning and operating models	Community "belonging" and social connection
Adaptability and innovation	Systems, infrastructure, and resilience	Volunteer engagement

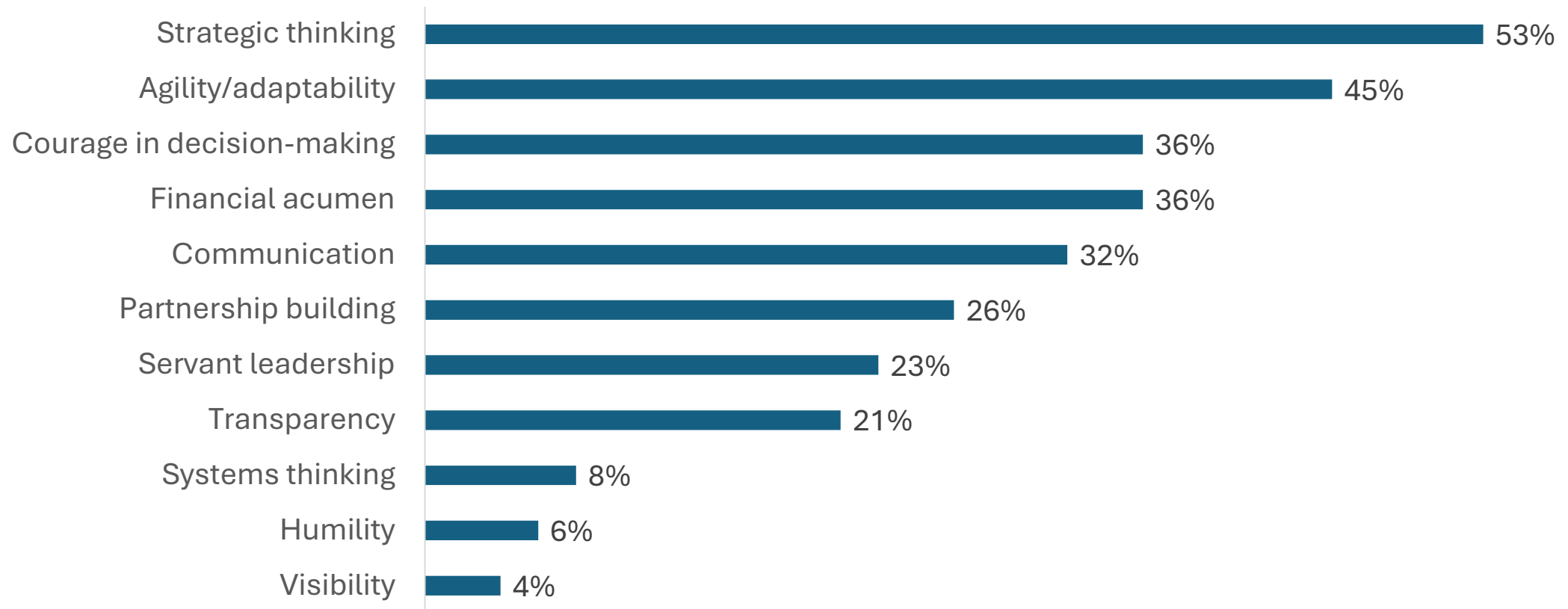
Leadership open text: Since 2022 what has most strengthened or weakened your YMCA's ability to thrive?

- Long-term financial resilience
 - "Becoming financially robust."
 - "Diversified social enterprises including childcare, accommodation, venues and gyms have reduced funding risk."
 - "Increasing fundraising strengthened our relevance."
 - "Real estate development projects that will provide improved financial sustainability."
- Strong leadership and organizational change were repeatedly identified as drivers of success.
 - "Change in leadership approach both at the board and executive management level."
 - "Higher calibre executive team, clearer strategy and values."
 - "Strong governance, transparent reporting and recognised leadership."
- External Factors
 - "Changing government policies / funding."
 - "Compliance costs, petrol costs, energy crisis."
 - "Poor economy and increased taxes."
- Many respondents emphasized that mission clarity has been critical during periods of uncertainty and change.
 - "Commitment to mission has enabled weathering of the storm."
 - "Stayed rooted in mission while moving boldly into the future."
- Partnerships are increasingly viewed as mechanisms for growth, funding, advocacy, and organizational resilience.
- Respondents highlighted both workforce strengths and challenges.
 - "Investments in employee market increases reduced staff turnover."
 - "Difficulty in hiring specialized staff."
 - "Vision of younger staff and volunteers driving change."
- Many YMCAs appear to be moving beyond recovery and into active growth and expansion phases e.g., building new facilities and service growth
- Respondents increasingly recognize the need to modernize systems, technology, and service delivery models.
- Impact measurement is emerging as a tool for strengthening credibility and demonstrating value.

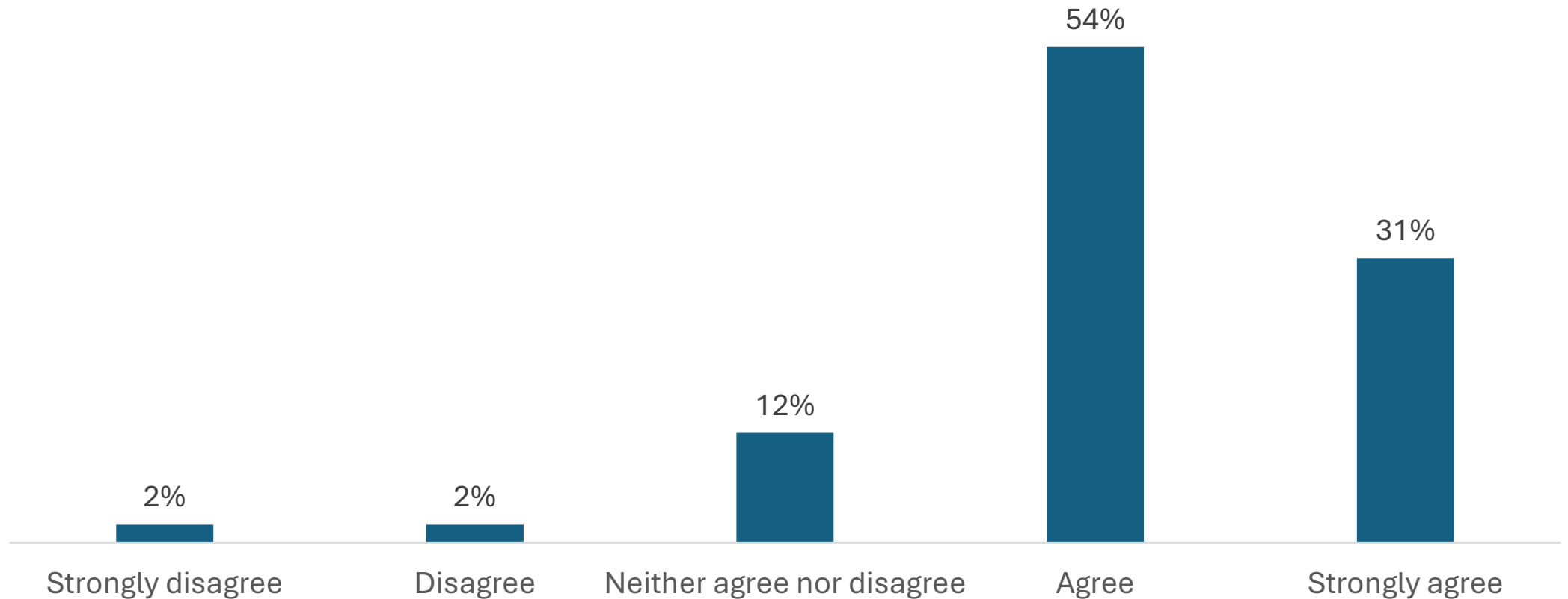
Volunteer (Board Member) open text: Since 2022 what has most strengthened or weakened your YMCA's ability to thrive?

- Many respondents attributed success directly to strong CEOs, boards, management teams, and strategic organizational change.
 - "Strong CEO, greater staff engagement."
 - "Transforming organizational capability to deliver on strategic agenda."
 - "Our governance has grown and strengthened"
- Financial sustainability emerged as both a strength and a challenge.
 - "Financial sustainability has been our weakest point."
 - "We had to make hard, very challenging decisions to right-size the Y's ability to thrive."
 - "A few well-timed financial gifts."
- Partnerships were frequently cited as a major source of organizational strength.
 - "Expansion of our network of partners."
 - "Partnerships with the public sector."
- Many respondents highlighted successful adaptation and growth following COVID.
 - "The financial recovery of individual Associations following COVID has been impressive."
 - "Return to activity has been strengthened following the Covid-19 crisis."
- Workforce capacity was both a strength and a challenge
 - "Staff feeling motivated and appreciated."
 - "Decline in staff leadership strength, volunteer quantity and quality." (translated)
- Broader social, political, demographic, and technological changes
 - "Current world events"
 - "AI and its impact"
 - "Declining birth rates, aging population, changing values" (translated)
- Increasing competition
 - "There are many new gyms attracting people who might otherwise become YMCA members."
 - "Growing competition in the fitness sector."

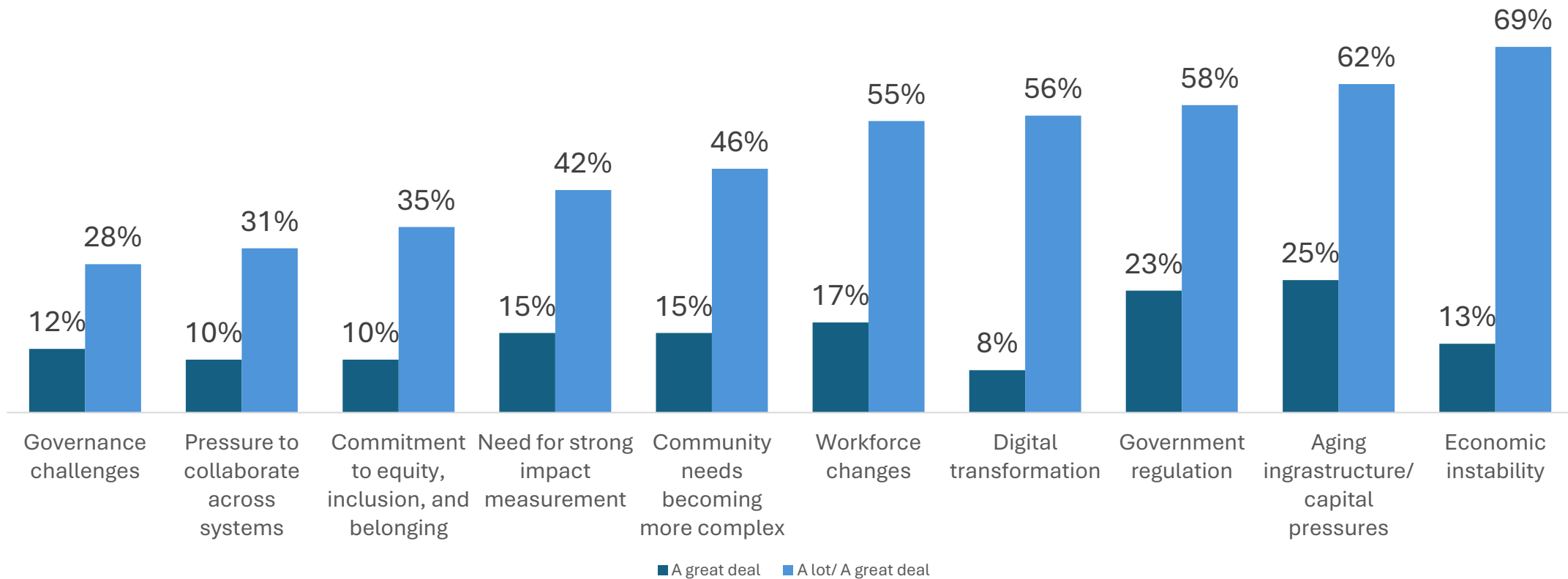
Strategic thinking and agility/adaptability are the most essential leadership qualities, regardless of context



Most respondents agree that since 2022,
the leadership environment for YMCA senior leaders
has become more complex



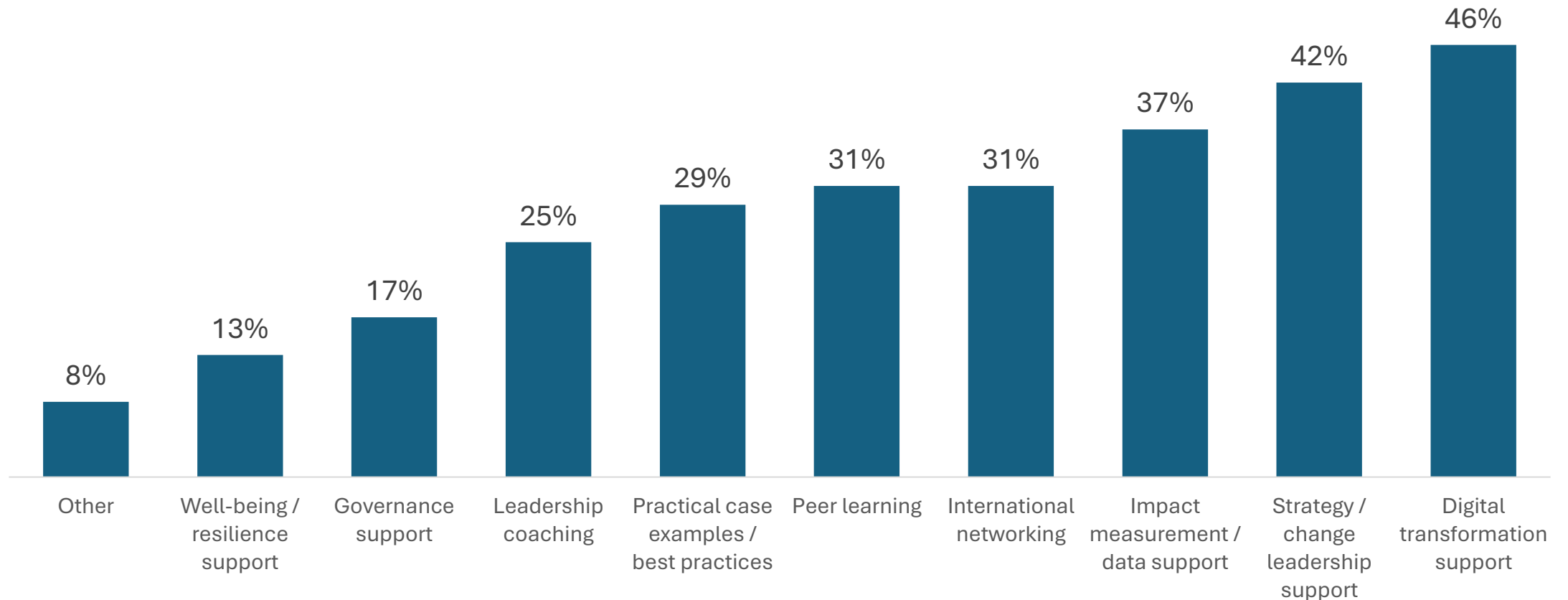
Leadership has been most influenced by economic, infrastructure and government regulation, since 2022



Leadership open text: Looking ahead 3-5 years, what do you think will be the most significant difference in effective leadership?

Theme	% of Responses	Representative Quotes
Adaptability, agility & change leadership	27%	"Ability to adapt quickly to change through informed decision-making." "Agility and adaptability, change management." "Ability to keep up with external factors."
Strategic thinking & long-term decision making	24%	"Will need to be very strategic in thinking and also willing to take risks." "Ability to create and execute on growth strategies." "Lead change, build sustainable services and still keep people and purpose at the centre."
Technology, AI & digital leadership	18%	"Digital skills to lead and fully incorporate AI in YMCA operations." "Big data usage and digitalization." "AI integration."
Collaboration, partnerships & systems leadership	16%	"Increased need for collaboration." "Accepting we can't go it alone." "Advancing partnerships with municipalities."
Impact measurement & data-informed leadership	15%	"Stronger impact measurement." "Ability to measure impact at the community level." "What was previously not measured will become visible and data-driven." (translated)
Leadership succession & generational transition	15%	"Generational transition." "New generation arriving, new perspective." "Preparing younger generations to take the baton."
Financial sustainability & commercial acumen	13%	"Making difficult decisions around sustainability." "Operate more commercially." "Growth strategy." "Commercial and strategic discipline."
Mission, values & purpose-centred leadership	13%	"The core is the same—remaining true to the YMCA's foundational mission and values." "Mission and values." "Keep people, purpose and local impact at the centre."
Governance, transparency & accountability	7%	"Transparency, accountability, and good governance." "Independent auditing processes." "Enhanced due diligence standards." "Clear responsibility toward members, communities, donors, and partners."

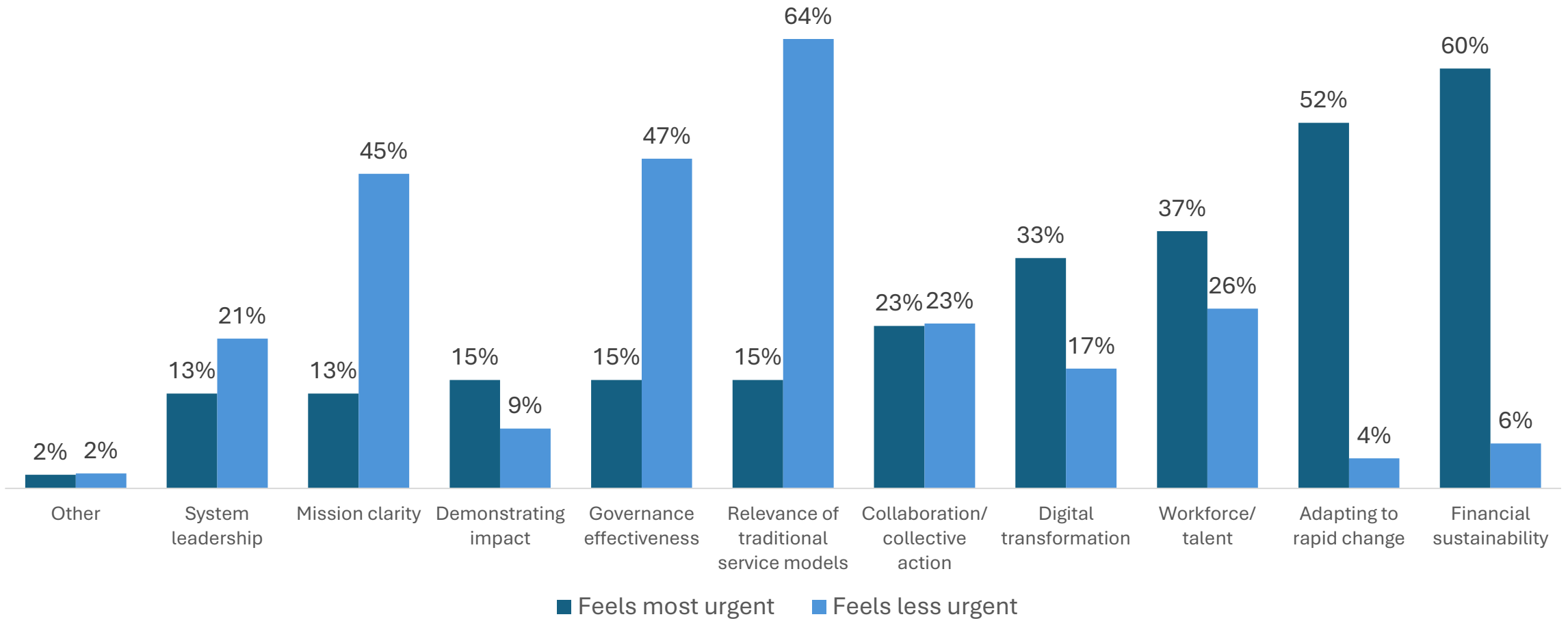
Leadership say that digital transformation and strategy/ change leadership support would most help their development as a YMCA leader right now



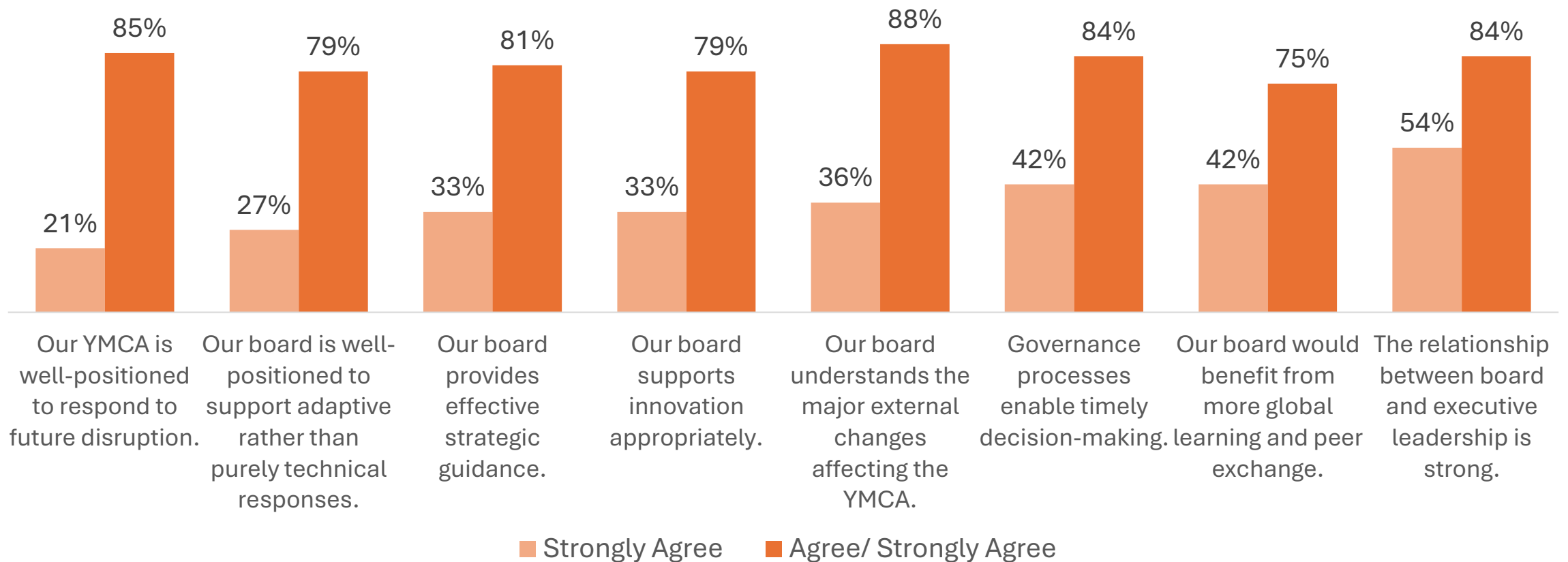
Leaders agree that collaboration is important, there is a need for YMCAs to act as system leaders, and that the pace of change is faster now, than in 2022



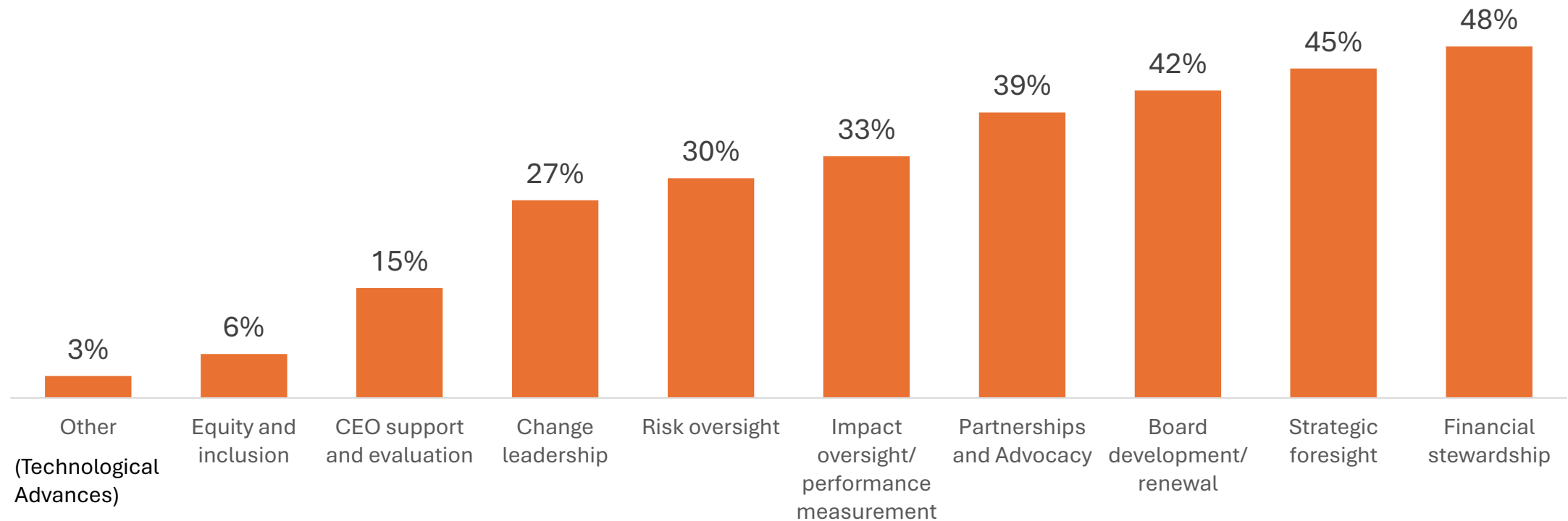
Themes that feel most or less urgent



Volunteers (Board Members) agree that their relationship to leadership is strong, they would benefit from global learning, and that governance processes enable timely decision-making



Volunteers (Board Members) vary in terms of what governance capabilities they think are most needed over the next 3 years



Volunteers (Board Members) open text: What will your board need to do differently in support of your YMCA's success?

Theme	% of Responses	Representative Quotes
Financial sustainability, fundraising & resource development	42%	"Need to find a way to bring on board members who can support the resource development function." "Build strategic partners especially to support income generation." "Developing a short- and long-term financial sustainability plan."
Board composition, succession & capability	38%	"Need more movers and shakers on our board." "Capacity building to enhance their capacity to lead." "Utilization of young talent." (translated)
Strategic leadership & governance effectiveness	33%	"Ensure strategic alignment." "Establish robust policies to help guide management." "More rigorous evaluation of programs, services and investments."
Partnerships & external relationships	25%	"Add stronger relationship building strategies with municipalities." "Build external partnerships." "Seek strategic allies" (translated)
Mission, purpose & youth focus	21%	"Work alongside staff to best benefit young people." "Mission should be valued even more." (translated) "Spread the YMCA vision in many places."
CEO support, succession & board-management relationship	17%	"CEO transition will require proactive support." "How the board collaborates with the CEO." (translated) "Support management and measure outcomes."
Innovation, future trends & AI	13%	"Focus on the impact of technology and AI." "What will these changes mean for us and what is our response?" "Complex and changing world."

What Boards Need to Do Differently

1. Become More Active Stewards of Financial Sustainability

- Fundraising
- Resource development
- Revenue diversification
- Asset optimization

2. Strengthen Board Composition and Capability

- Recruit members with influence and networks
- Develop younger leaders
- Build governance capacity
- Improve succession planning

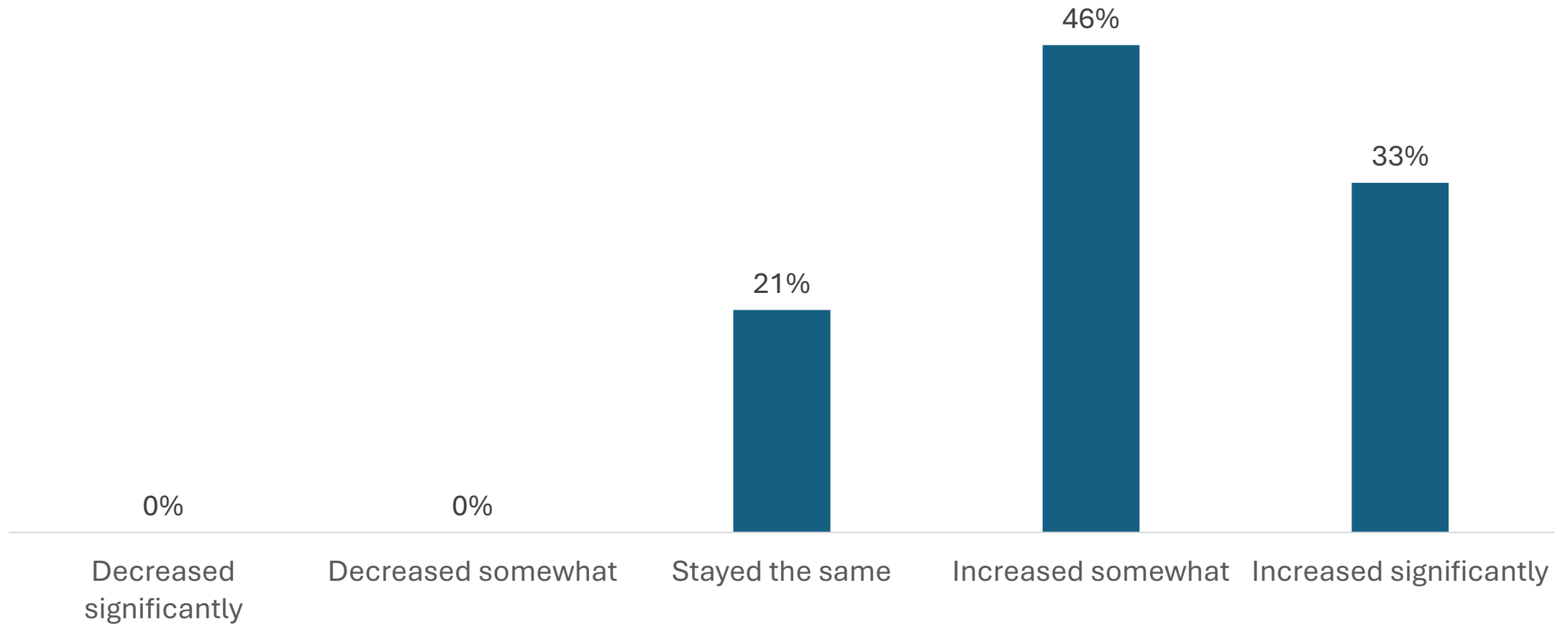
3. Focus More on Strategy and Long-Term Decision Making

- Evaluate programs and investments rigorously
- Maintain strategic discipline
- Anticipate future challenges

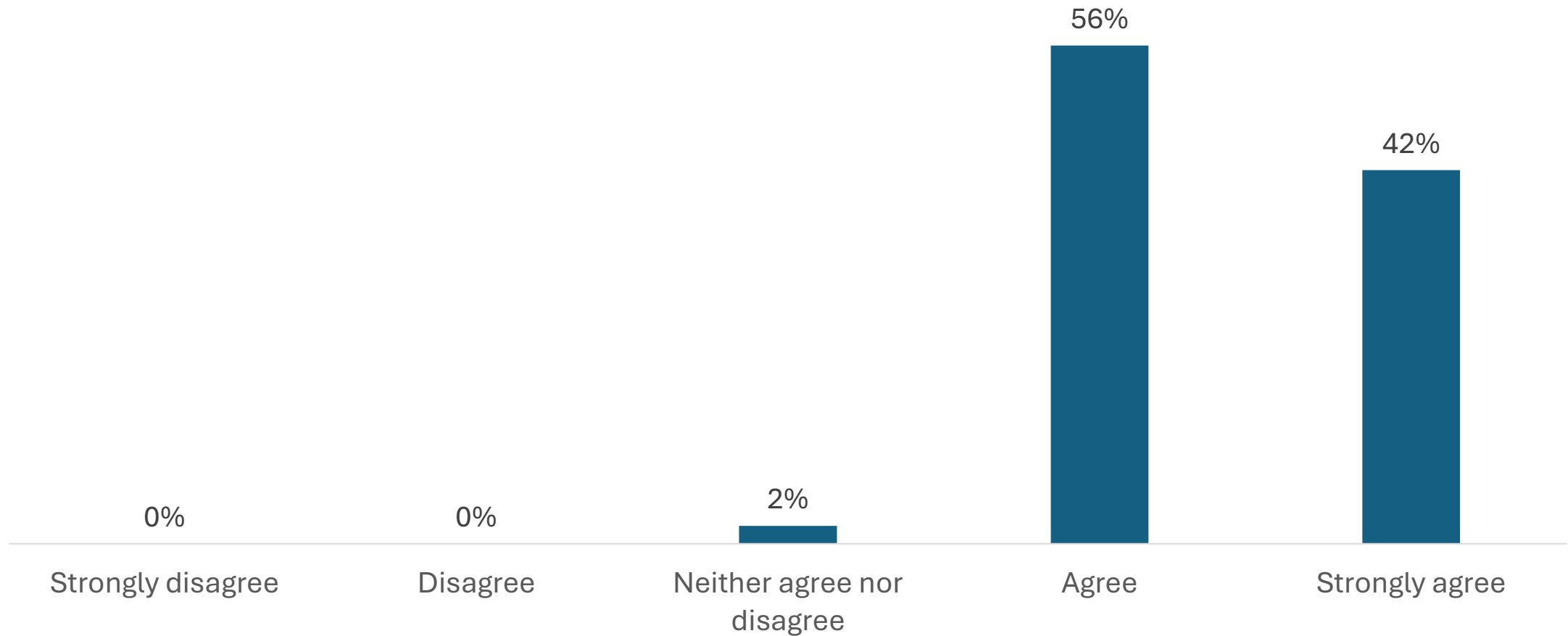
4. Expand External Influence

- Build partnerships
- Strengthen municipal and community relationships
- Leverage board networks

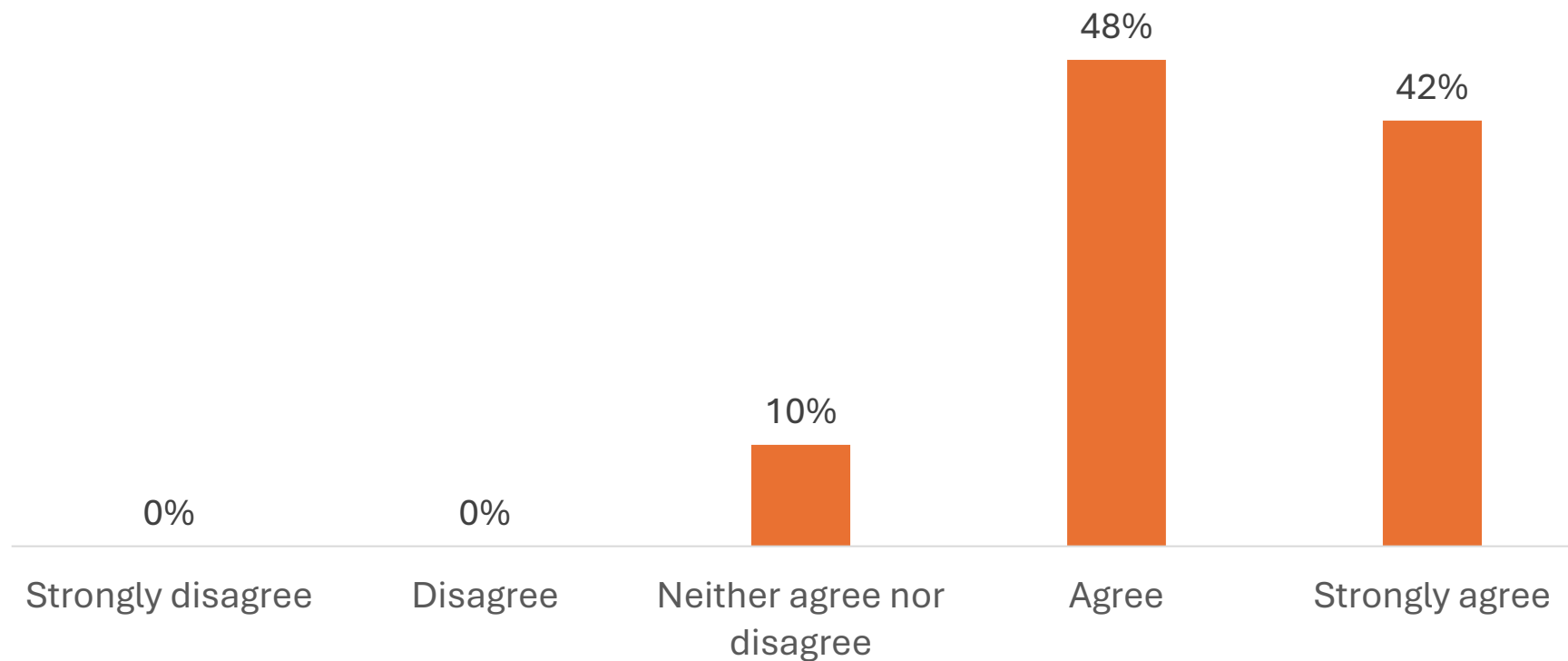
The majority of leaders report that their interest in global YMCA learning and exchange has increased, since 2022



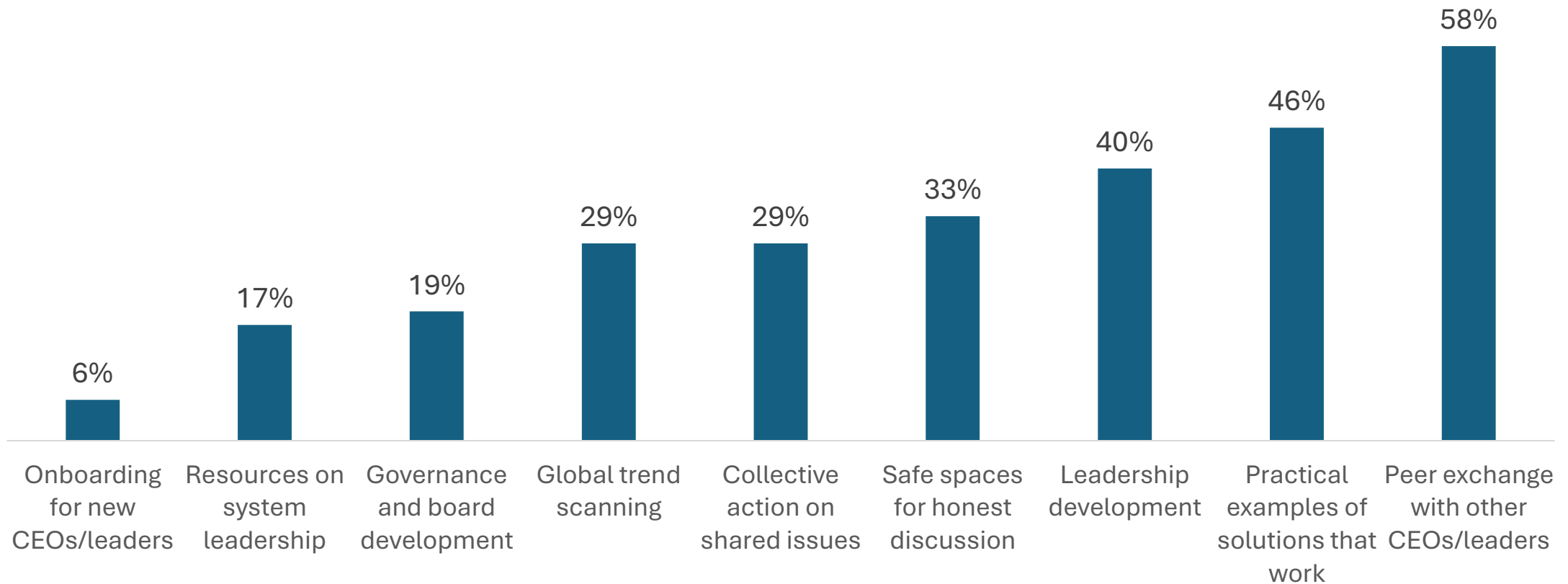
Almost all leaders agree that "Learning from YMCA colleagues outside my own national movement is valuable to me."



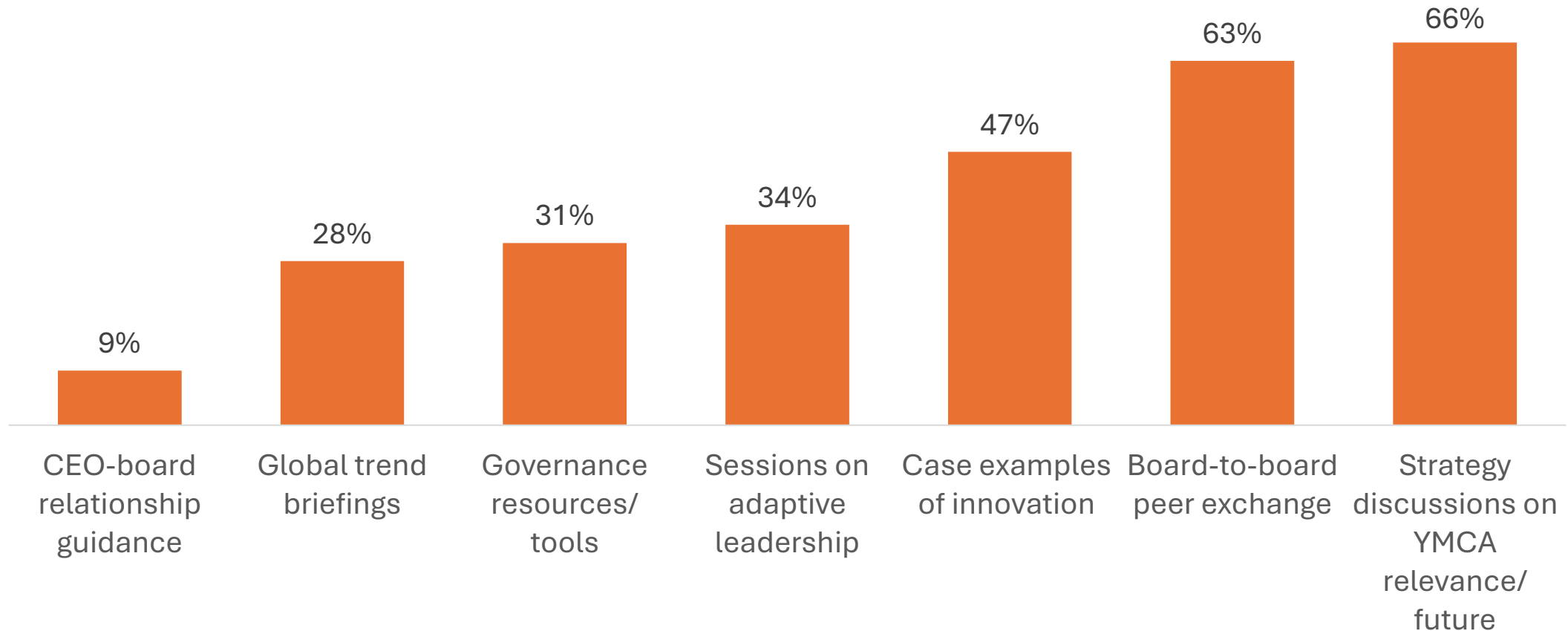
Most respondents agree that “Learning from YMCA leaders and boards outside my own national movement is valuable to me.”



Leaders say that the WUN (GLN) support that would be most useful now is peer exchange with other CEOs/leaders and practical examples of solutions that work



Volunteers (Board Members) say that strategy discussion on YMCA relevance/future and Board-to-Board peer exchange would be most useful



Leadership open text: What is the biggest opportunity for your YMCA right now?

Theme	% of Responses	Representative Quotes
Growth, expansion & new service opportunities	33%	"Growth into new communities and doubling our size." "Workforce development and growth in our childcare programming." "Extend health and wellbeing services to new segments, services and communities." "New service delivery model which joins various service lines."
Partnerships, collaboration & alliances	24%	"Collaboration with other NGOs/YMCAs in the same region." "Strategic partnerships and alliances." "Public-private partnerships."
Financial sustainability, fundraising & new revenue	20%	"GR & Philanthropy." "Financial sustainability and growth." "Making best use of capital opportunity." "Social Enterprise."
Youth development & community impact	20%	"Government appetite on supporting the work of young people." "Position itself as the go-to institution for youth empowerment and community wellness." "When the community thinks about youth opportunity and belonging, the YMCA is the first institution that comes to mind."
Innovation, AI & new delivery models	12%	"Incorporating AI in our systems and operations." "How we use AI to become more effective, relevant and impactful." "Technology and better systems to work smarter."
Leadership renewal & organizational transformation	10%	"Generational transition." "Young and committed Board and staff." "Leadership development and growth objectives." "Strong desire for change."
Housing, facilities & capital development	10%	"Hydrotherapy and wellness center." "New local facility." "Opportunities to receive donated properties."
Demographic & social change opportunities	8%	"Rapid increase in foreign workers and students." "Growing diversity in local communities." "More children unable to access traditional schooling." "Increasing needs in a large metropolitan area."

Leadership open text: What is one issue challenge or opportunity that was not top of mind in 2022 but is important now?

Theme	% of Responses	Representative Quotes
AI, digital transformation & technology	17%	"AI has to be top of mind for all of us." "Digital Transformation." "Technology and AI... now essential to how the YMCA operates, innovates, protects trust, and delivers mission."
Financial sustainability, fundraising & economic pressures	17%	"Biggest challenge right now is the fundraising environment." "Dwindling finances." "Income generating project to support sustainability." "Rising costs and difficulty securing liability insurance."
Government intervention, regulation & policy change	13%	"High government regulation and compliance." "Government intervention." "Government support." "Child Care and CWELLC." "National government's new strategy... significantly changing the landscape of cities."
Governance, leadership & organizational structure	13%	"Resource Building and Leadership Development." "Recruiting directors who bring external perspectives." "Coaching for a new executive director."
Growth, mergers & organizational transformation	10%	"Too many opportunities in the pipeline and not enough resources." "Need for amalgamation."
Geopolitical instability, resilience & external shocks	10%	"Goeconomic confrontation." "Increasing violence." "Resilience to shocks."
Partnerships, networking & movement cohesion	8%	"Networking with Global Leadership and YMCAs." "Strengthening meaningful relationships across the wider YMCA movement." "Rules of engagement with a neighboring YMCA."
Demographic and social change	8%	"Future of employment for young people." "Social cohesion." "Getting older." "Communities becoming more diverse."
Asset management & infrastructure	6%	"Asset management." "Capital infrastructure."

Leadership open text: Any advice for how WUN (GLN) can remain relevant and effective over the next 4 years?

Theme	% of Responses	Representative Quotes
Peer learning, networking & relationship-building	44%	"Bring leaders together and allow fertilisation to follow." "Learning circles have been extremely valuable." "Nothing strengthens Y leaders like being together talking about how we serve our communities better." "WUN provides a unique network for CEOs across different markets to learn and share."
Leadership development & CEO support	33%	"Continue leadership development and growth." "Supporting the development of CEOs." "Continue to bring in outside expertise."
Practical learning, tools & best practices	23%	"Share case studies." "Practical collaboration." "Support local Ys in adopting best practices." "Helping CEOs lead better in their own contexts."
Collaboration & collective action	21%	"Collective sustainability and innovation initiatives." "Use collective intelligence to strengthen movements." "International partnerships."
Community, belonging & safe spaces	19%	"You don't feel so alone." "Open space for sharing." "Authentic dialogue." "Safe space with those who understand the Y's uniqueness."
Future trends, innovation & strategic foresight	16%	"Consider global trends and future forecasts." "Digital innovation." "Helping our demographic change and adapt." "Challenge leaders' skills and leadership."
Accessibility, inclusion & global representation	12%	"Ensure the strategic agenda is balanced between regions." "Larger Western movements often dominate." "Support smaller Ys with subsidies." "Redignify participation."
Mission alignment & movement strengthening	12%	"Integrate with Mainline YMCA Mission and Vision." "Strengthen the feeling of community." "Build a stronger collective YMCA voice."
Research, insights & evidence	7%	"Research information on growth and capacity development." "This survey is fundamental." "Gather insights."

Volunteers open text: Is there anything new since 2022 that global YMCA leaders and boards need to pay more attention to?

Theme	% of Responses	Representative Quotes
Global change, uncertainty & geopolitical shifts	30%	"Global uncertainties and their local impact." "War in Iran, Russia-Ukraine war etc. have far reaching ramifications." "Migrants, newcomers, refugees, and the large-scale movement of people."
Technology, AI & digital adaptation	22%	"Innovation and Technology advances." "AI and other phenomena in a rapidly changing world." (translated)
Youth needs & changing youth realities	22%	"New preferences of young people." "Increasing levels of youth deprivation." "Youth and volunteer development."
Mission, values & YMCA identity	22%	"YMCA mission preservation." "Remaining an apolitical service and program-oriented institution." "Focus on peace, solidarity, and networks." (translated)
Governance, leadership & succession	17%	"Governance capacity, succession planning, and meaningful youth participation." "Leadership transition." "Board effectiveness." "Identifying and training genuine leaders."
Financial sustainability & operating pressures	17%	"Rising costs and reduced margins." "Financial sustainability." "Government supports have ended."
Global collaboration & movement cohesion	17%	"Greater cooperation among national YMCAs." "Drifting away from the global family." "Global trends need to be contextualized locally." "Global identity should not come at the expense of local realities."
Diversity, inclusion & social cohesion	13%	"Respect for diversity." "Fairness and inclusion." "Building understanding across communities."
Volunteer engagement challenges	4%	"It is harder to recruit volunteers."

What Global YMCA Leaders Need to Pay More Attention To

1. Navigating a More Complex World

- Geopolitical instability
- Migration and displacement
- Economic uncertainty
- Post-pandemic realities

2. Preparing for Technological Change

- AI
- Digital transformation

3. Remaining Relevant to Youth

- Changing expectations
- Youth deprivation and wellbeing

4. Preserving YMCA Purpose While Adapting

- Mission clarity
- Leadership development
- Governance effectiveness
- Balancing global alignment with local relevance

Learn More about the YMCA Global Leadership Network

