BUSINESS TRANSFORMATION

The CEO's Guide to Growth in 2026

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What's At Stake

After months of being pushed into defensive strategies by trade dynamics and market turbulence, CEOs are renewing their focus on growth. We've found that mentions of top-line growth on earnings calls in the fourth quarter of 2025 rose nearly 12% globally from the same period in 2024—and up 24% among companies based in Europe.

Those ambitions may face headwinds from geopolitical tensions, slowing global growth, cost pressures, and uncertain (if not persistent) capital constraints. But the CEOs poised to excel this year aren't waiting for clear skies. They're moving to seize opportunity in the storm.

What the Numbers Say

17.8%	1.7x	#1
The increase in mentions of "innovation" on fourth quarter earnings calls globally, versus the same period in 2024	Higher revenue growth for AI leaders, versus companies that have not yet scaled the technology	Where large investors rank "organic revenue growth" among their top priorities

Growing in 2026 will require equal parts ambition and pragmatism. CEOs can get started by setting a bold target supported by a sound growth equation and preparing to pursue their ambitions programmatically. They can use AI to reduce costs, accelerate innovation, and build an always-on M&A capability. They'll also need to instill a culture of cost discipline across the organization—dispelling notions that growth and resilience are at odds.

In a volatile world, resilience doesn't just protect organizations against shocks. It positions them to carve a competitive advantage from disruption.

Unlocking Growth

A successful growth transformation is built on the same core elements as one focused on any other strategic objective. It requires data-driven planning, stress testing, smart sequencing, and persistence.

Here's how CEOs can get growing in 2026.

Set a bold target and optimize your growth equation. Growth doesn't happen by accident, nor through an abundance of caution. It happens when CEOs mobilize their organizations around a bold, unambiguous target. Aiming for 10%, say, might sound ambitious, but the only way to guarantee not hitting this figure is aiming for less. That ambition must be grounded in a clear growth equation clarifying the path forward. Your equation should define how much growth will be driven by inorganic or organic expansion, stress test assumptions under different scenarios, and position the company to find advantage when conditions suddenly shift.

Finding the right equation is essential for driving deep, disciplined execution across the portfolio. AI is invaluable to this effort. In M&A, AI can uncover untapped or emerging opportunities to enter new markets, like the Global South, or acquire critical capabilities. On the organic side, it can help companies innovate new, differentiated products faster, more efficiently, and with a higher success rate. AI can also sharpen geographic strategy, identifying where the company can play to win and how best to deaverage investment decisions to back the right bets. Finally, it can unlock precision go-to-market moves, improving channel performance and making it easier to target customer segments with accuracy.

AI-powered scenario planning is a formidable tool for weighing strategic options, detecting early signals of change, and pivoting proactively as conditions shift. By stress-testing growth assumptions against a range of market and financial scenarios, leaders can zero in on the initiatives most likely to win in all weathers. Scenario planning also sharpens risk and cost management. When companies have clearer visibility into potential outcomes, they can proactively build buffers across supply chains, P&L, and inventory to guard against downside. They will move faster when opportunity strikes.

- **Potential First Step:** CEOs need to bring investors along on the growth journey, articulating a clear vision from day one to rapidly secure investor confidence. This early alignment eases pressure, giving management the support and space to make critical shifts in the business model. BCG analysis confirms it: companies that convincingly showcase their transformation's value-creation potential within the first year dramatically boost their odds of success.

Pursue growth programmatically. Too often, companies view growth as a matter of inspiration rather than disciplined management. While ambition is essential, the most effective CEOs approach growth with the same rigor they apply to managing costs or capital deployment.

CEOs can establish clear parameters around growth initiatives—ensuring effective governance, transparency, and accountability. At the same time, they can structure a formal program designed to boost the top line, breaking it into discrete projects. Each project is rigorously managed, with realistic timelines, clear milestones, and defined plans for managing interdependencies. Successful leaders monitor progress in real time, adjusting strategies by leveraging a ready suite of back-up initiatives.

While this programmatic approach is essential, a mindset shift is equally important. Strong leaders challenge the belief that growth simply happens to them. Winning organizations deliberately structure programs to achieve growth.

- **Potential First Step:** Assign a chief transformation officer to drive the growth agenda. This may be a net new role or someone who can work closely with and support the existing chief growth officer. Create a visible, interactive digital dashboard that tracks and displays key growth metrics in real time to enable the CEO and transformation teams to quickly spot progress and address challenges immediately.

Harness AI to reduce the cost of growth. Growth through innovation has traditionally involved big tradeoffs: high costs, high failure rates, and long timelines. AI can help companies conquer these tradeoffs.

At a fundamental level, AI tools can reduce the cost of failure, driving faster and higher impact innovation. BCG research underscores the opportunity. AI leaders not only outpace companies that have not yet scaled the technology when it comes to revenue growth, but they also produce 3.5 times more patents. This suggests that AI accelerates innovation and expands its frontier, allowing companies to outpace peers in both the volume and quality of new ideas.

The key is to leverage AI to enable faster decision making, better market responsiveness, and greater personalization. Companies can use AI, for example, to produce a relatively inexpensive product prototype and marketing campaign, improving speed to market and limiting the financial hit from setbacks.

- **Potential First Step:** With the right growth opportunities identified, CEOs can create cross-functional teams—composed of marketers, innovators, and other specialists—to execute their ambitions. These teams will be laser-focused on specific AI-driven growth initiatives, gaining share in a customer segment or a certain market, for example. Team members will have the tacit knowledge of what makes the company's offerings distinctive and compelling and can ensure the right guardrails related to standards and quality are embedded into AI tools. Creating a common set of KPIs can further enhance alignment and speed.

Build an always-on M&A capability. CEOs are sharpening their focus on M&A as inflation, interest rates, and valuation expectations stabilize. After nearly two years of stagnation, deal activity is rising across sectors, and 2025 saw more megadeals—transactions over $10 billion—than the year before. The renewed momentum, however, will usher in an era of increased competition. After several quarters of holding the advantage in a buyers' market, companies will face increased activity from private equity and corporate buyers that have built a war chest for deals. As of October of 2025, private equity firms alone were sitting on $2 trillion in undeployed capital.

In this environment, the most successful dealmakers will be those companies that have developed a standing M&A capability. BCG research consistently shows that serial acquirers outperform less-frequent dealmakers because they operate with an "always-on" mindset: persistently screening a broad funnel of potential targets, maintaining relationships, and being ready to move when opportunity strikes. Successful companies also ensure they have effective post-merger integration (PMI) capabilities to deliver a strong, agile and disciplined integration program. This readiness is what separates those who shape their industries from those who react to them.

Companies are using M&A to enter sectors related to the energy transition, defense, and data infrastructure, where incremental moves aren't enough to stay relevant. Cost synergies remain critical to value creation, but the purpose of M&A is shifting toward capability building and competitive positioning. Effective CEOs understand that growth through acquisition must go hand in hand with disciplined integration, clear logic, and the willingness to walk away when deals don't align with strategy.

- **Potential First Step:** CEOs, in partnership with corporate development leaders and business unit heads, should have their M&A target short list ready. And they should adopt an "always-on radar" approach that prepares them to go after not just their first, but also their second- and third-choice targets if the opportunity arises. Some of the best deals will be those within your core, close adjacencies, or regional strongholds where integration discipline can be maintained. (Large deals can also make sense, of course, but they must be based on a rock-solid value creation business case.) Monitor those companies closely—including trends in their business and potential leadership changes—to identify the right time to engage.

A Parting Thought

Too often, leaders focused on a growth agenda take their eye off efficiency and cost only to find that the new revenue they generate is dilutive in the face of ballooning expenses. Generating significant cost savings frees up critical funds for investments in topline growth. When those savings are invested in the right capabilities (AI, in particular) it can yield a virtuous cycle, driving additional efficiency gains that can power revenue growth.

To achieve this balance, leaders must build a culture of cost excellence. This means equipping teams with the right tools to identify and implement cost-saving initiatives, fostering accountability around efficiency and spending, aligning the organization around clear cost objectives, and establishing effective governance and tracking systems. With that foundation, CEOs can unlock cost savings to fuel their expanding growth ambitions.