



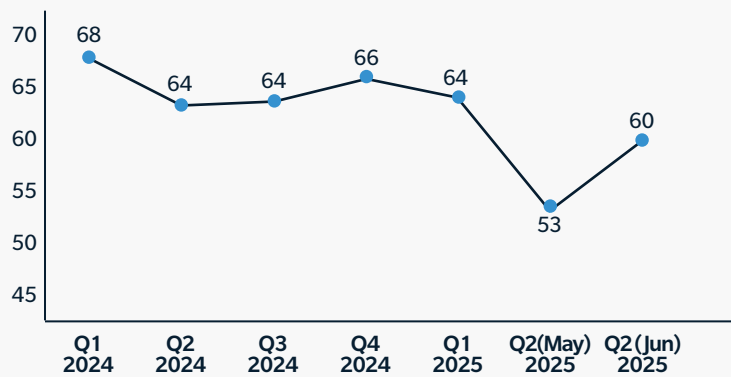
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# CEO Value Creation Pulse: **Correcting and Avoiding Future Planning Miscues**

AUGUST 2025

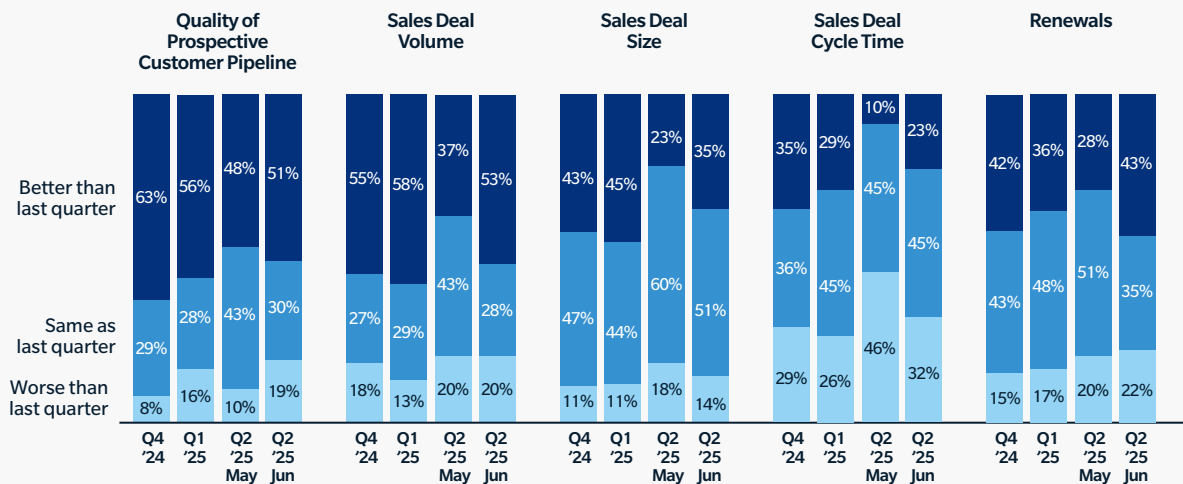
2025 has proven to be another in a sequence of years where the plans laid out by leadership teams were hit hard against unforeseen external developments. Our tracking of CEO commercial sentiment has reflected that. In particular, SBI's B2B CEO Commercial Sentiment Index (a combination of five markers of commercial performance) showed a sharp decline in May, dropping nine points, from 64 to 53. And while it rebounded somewhat in June to near a score of 60, sentiment has not returned to levels seen at any point in 2024. In short, CEO views of commercial performance remain well below where they stood even as this calendar year began.

### B2B CEO Commercial Sentiment Index



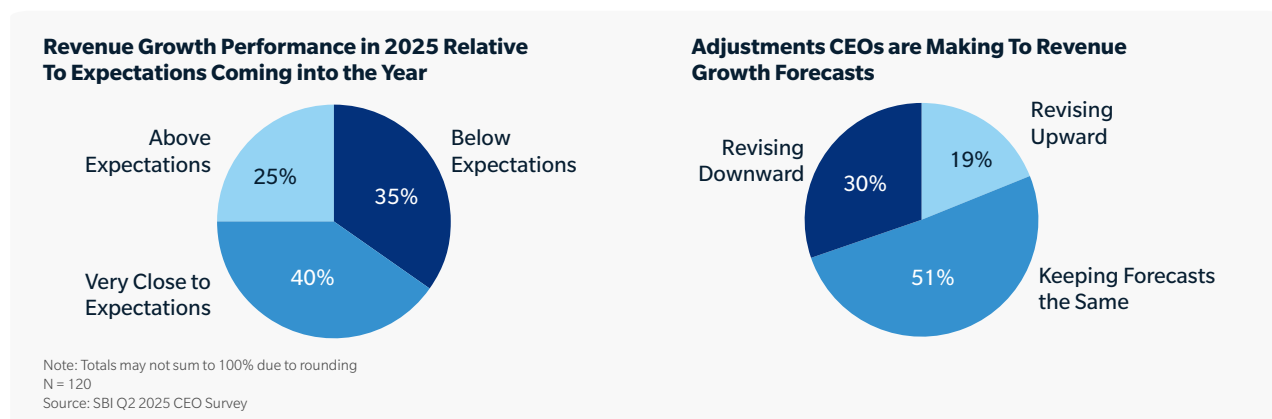
Note: The B2B CEO Commercial Sentiment Index is an average of CEO reporting across five indicators – pipeline, deal volume, deal speed, deal size, and renewal rates.  
Q1 2024 N = 87; Q2 2024 N = 102; Q3 2024 N = 140; Q4 2024 N = 120; March 2025 N = 127; May 2025 N = 40; June 2025 N = 120  
Source: SBI Q1 2024 CEO Survey; SBI Q2 2024 CEO Survey; SBI Q3 2024 CEO Survey; SBI Q4 2024 CEO Survey; SBI Q1 2025 CEO Survey; SBI May 2025 CEO Pulse Survey; SBI Q2 2025 CEO Survey.

This decline in sentiment is most strongly driven by deal volumes and cycle times. These critical indicators of commercial performance have seen both significant declines in the portion who report them as better than the previous quarter, and notable increases in the portion who report them as worse than the previous quarter. The portion reporting renewals as worse than the previous quarter has also been steadily growing across 2025.



Note: Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.  
Q4 2024 N = 120; March 2025 N = 127; May 2025 N = 40; June 2025 N = 120  
Source: SBI Q4 2024 CEO Survey; SBI Q1 2025 CEO Survey; SBI May 2025 CEO Pulse Survey; SBI Q2 2025 CEO Survey

For many, this challenging selling environment has been a weight on growth plans for the year. While 40% of CEOs have managed to keep growth in line with expectations, 35% report that growth for the year to date has been below expectations coming into the year, and 30% are revising their forecasts downward.



All together, these indicators put numbers behind what many CEOs and commercial leadership teams have been feeling since at least April of 2025 – the market environment is more than a little bit challenging.

Now, as executives cross the mid-year mark, they begin the annual effort to operate on two horizons – closing the current year strong while undertaking planning for the coming year. Our pulsing of CEOs reveals three big imperatives that should guide them through these dual horizons:

- Correct planning miscues to find new sources of growth across 2025.
- Intensify forward planning due to significant and lasting market changes.
- Establish a significantly more quantitative and fact-based planning process.

## Correct past planning miscues to find new sources of growth across 2025



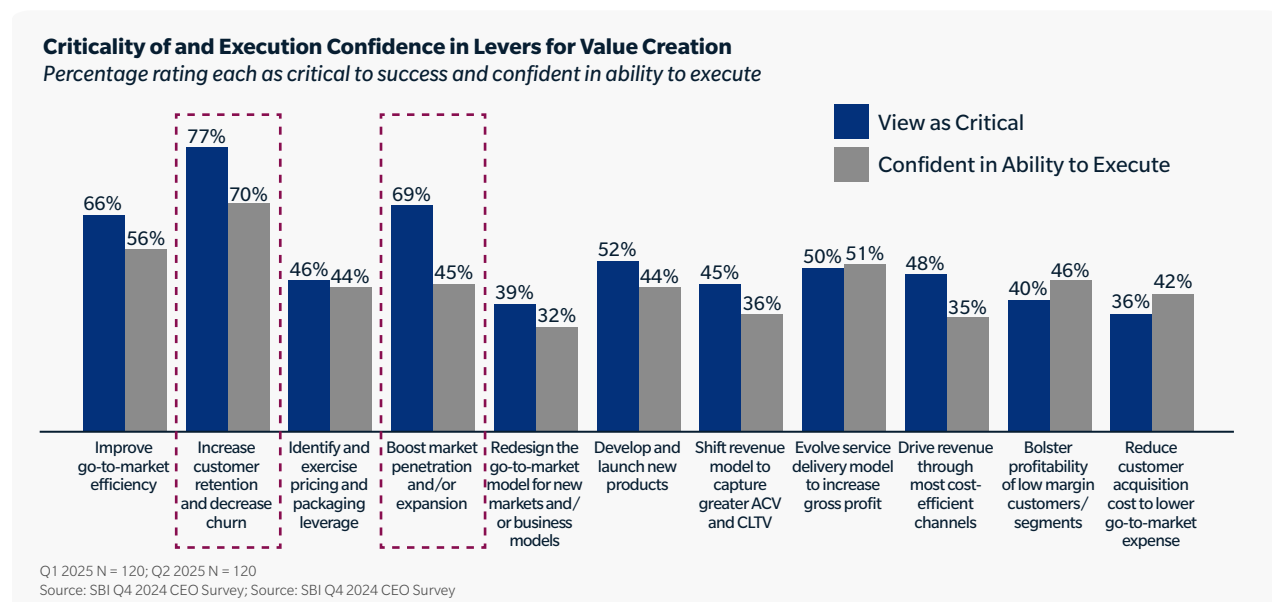
CEOs don't necessarily see execution of the plan as a problem. Nearly 60% express that they are confident in their abilities there. But only 50% are confident in the plan itself. In other words, they find themselves working with the wrong plan.

What are they doing about this disconnect? First, they are looking for new sources of growth. We regularly ask CEOs about the criticality of eleven growth levers to their overall value creation strategies. In this most recent pulse, "Increase customer retention and decrease churn" saw the most significant increase in the portion emphasizing its criticality, and for the first time became the most commonly cited as critical. In addition, "Boost market penetration and/ or expansion" jumped to a clear second in overall prioritization.

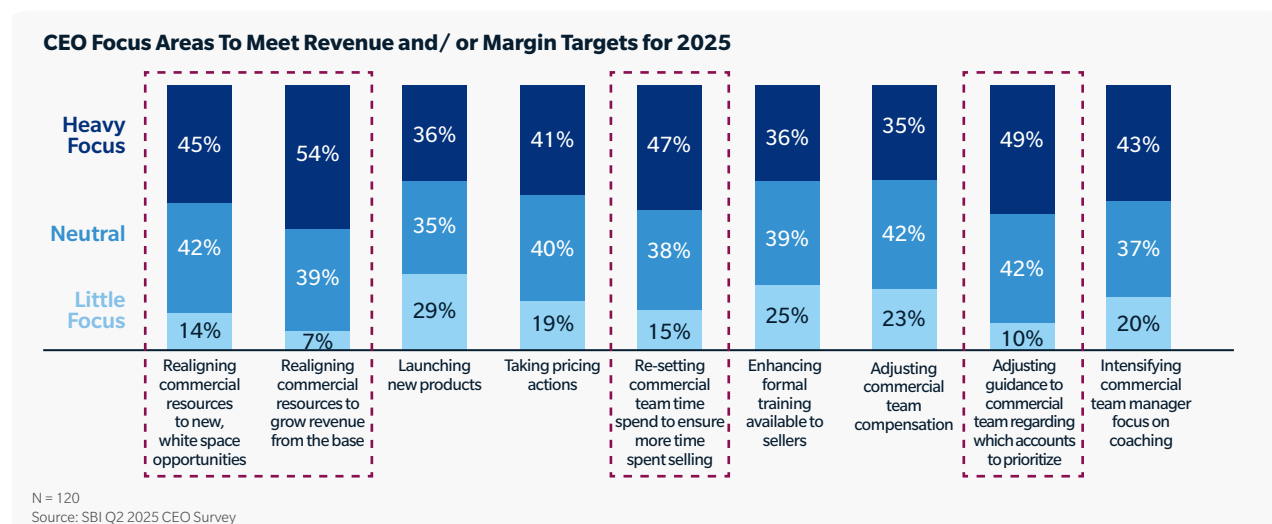
CEOs expect on average 67% of their net new revenues to come from existing companies, a slight increase over past assumptions. Growth from the base is critical in softer markets, as the cost to acquire and the likelihood to convert that growth are typically better. But this comes at a time when average Net Revenue Retention is on a steady decline. As a result, CEOs are right to be driving their teams to find growth opportunities wherever they lie.

The challenge lies with their overall confidence. In both areas (customer retention and market penetration), we find significant confidence gaps. Specifically, there is a 7-percentage point gap for customer retention, and a 24-percentage point gap for boosting market penetration. In other words, a significant portion of the group who view pursuing new sources of growth as critical lack confidence that their teams can do it.

It seems, however, that many are not taking this low confidence lightly. Among a selection of items to pursue for ensuring they meet their revenue and/or margin targets in 2025, the most-commonly selected for heavy focus included realigning commercial resources to the base and (less so) to new white space opportunities.



More importantly, CEOs are backing this up with reset expectations. Nearly half report re-setting team expectations on how to spend their time (not surprisingly – more time selling), and even more are re-setting their guidance on which accounts to prioritize. In short, CEOs see the challenge as one of focus and are ensuring that their emphasis both from a resourcing and from a messaging perspective remains on finding and closing deals in this slow-moving market.



# Intensify forward planning due to significant and lasting market changes

In addition to the year-end horizon, CEOs and their leadership teams are (or if they are not, they very well should be) looking toward the longer horizon of 2026. Mid-year, for those on a calendar or early-month fiscal year, is the time to begin setting big bets and the resourcing and broader go-to-market plans for pursuing them. In other words, now is the moment to ensure there is not a repeat of half or more of CEOs not having confidence in their growth plans.

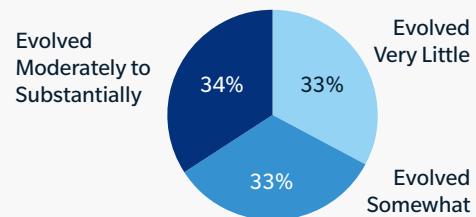
Getting started early, and taking a disciplined approach, is critically important given how significantly the core underlying details are evolving. In particular, we found three trends that are re-shaping the underlying assumptions that go-to-market plans are often built on:

- **Ideal customer profiles are evolving.** Nearly 70% of CEOs report that their ICP has evolved at least somewhat in the past 12 – 18 months. In some cases, this is a result of companies using data enrichment to get tighter on what their true ICP is. In others it's an unprincipled expansion in an attempt to expand TAM. And still in others it's a direct result of business transformation. Regardless of the driver, an evolved ICP should result in evolved assumptions about who to sell to, revamped account potential scoring, and more substantial territory redesigns.
- **The offering is evolving.** More than 70% of CEOs report that their offering has evolved at least somewhat in the past 12 – 18 months. This requires leadership teams to revisit their assumptions about market reception, pricing, penetration, usage, renewal likelihood, and a host of other issues. It makes planning even less of a “run the play” exercise.
- **The customer buying journey is evolving.** More than 70% of CEOs also report that their customers' buying journey has evolved at least somewhat in the past 12 – 18 months, with more than half reporting that it has evolved moderately to substantially. SBI research consistently finds that it's increasingly difficult to predict deal sizes and cycle times when deals are active. This only gets compounded as leadership teams seek to project and model them on a rolled-up basis as part of their growth planning for the year.

A good portion of CEOs seems to recognize the magnitude of this moment and the criticality of dedicating sufficient time to the longer horizon. Nearly 60% say they will dedicate higher levels of intensity to planning than they have in the past couple of years. The remaining 44% who will dedicate the same or lower intensity are likely to regret it, unless their businesses are extremely simple and unchanging, which in itself is likely problematic.

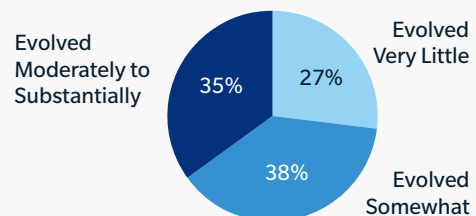
## Extent To Which the Ideal Customer Profile Evolved in Past 12 – 18 Months

Percentage of CEOs reporting



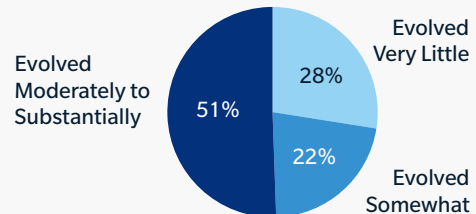
## Extent To Which the Offering Evolved in Past 12 – 18 Months

Percentage of CEOs reporting



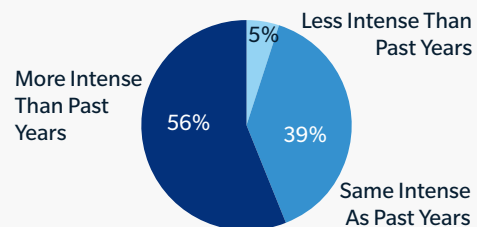
## Extent To Which the Customer Buying Journey Evolved in Past 12 – 18 Months

Percentage of CEOs reporting



## CEO Expectations for the Intensity of Planning Efforts This Year Compared with Previous Years

Percentage of CEOs reporting



Note: Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding  
N = 120, Source: SBI Q2 2025 CEO Survey



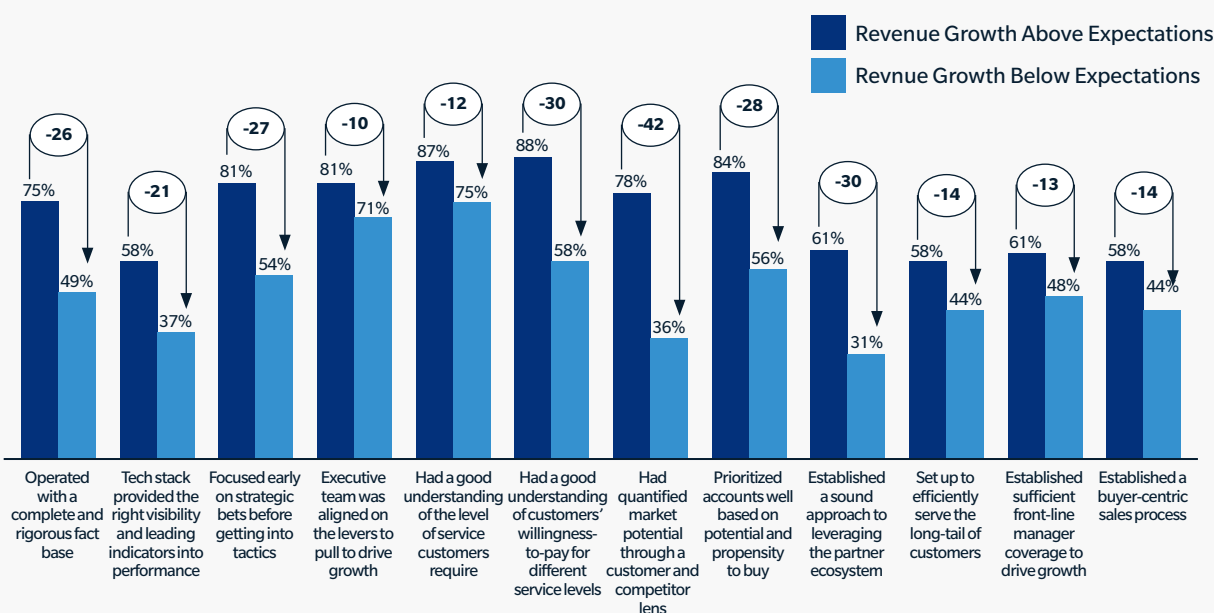
# Establish a significantly more quantitative and fact-based planning process

More intensity in planning efforts, however, doesn't necessarily mean better planning. We looked for guidance from companies that are beating their expectations so far in 2025 to understand the keys to success in today's market environment. What did they do differently in planning last year, compared with those who are missing expectations? We found several things worth noting that serve as guideposts for this year's planning process.

## Companies that are beating growth targets were more likely to have executed every aspect of planning that we tested.

Of the twelve items we tested, companies that are beating growth targets were more likely to have executed all of them. And it's not even close. The smallest gap was on building executive team alignment on growth levers, at a 10 percentage point difference in portion of companies that executed. On average, the difference was 22 percentage points. There's no simpler way to put it: good outcomes followed from good planning, and many of those companies that are now growing below expectations fell woefully short.

Portion of CEOs Reporting They Executed Each Aspect of Planning for 2025



Q1 2025 N = 120; Q2 2025 N = 120  
Source: SBI Q4 2024 CEO Survey; Source: SBI Q4 2024 CEO Survey

## They started with strategic bets.

More than 80% of companies that are beating their growth targets began their growth planning process last year by focusing on strategic bets before getting into tactics. They did not view their process as simply a "refresh" of their existing model. Instead, it was, correctly, a top-down exercise that began with deciding their strategic priorities, their growth plan, and the resulting growth levers they would pull to achieve it. Only with consensus on that set of critical decisions did they begin the work of building the structural underpinnings of that plan.

### **They were far more likely to have prioritized accounts early, using a quantitative lens.**

Recall that one of the most common areas of focus for closing out 2025 strong is adjusting guidance to the team regarding which accounts to prioritize. For companies that are beating their growth targets, this is far less likely to be a problem because they were substantially more likely to have prioritized accounts on the right factors (potential and propensity to buy) during planning. Further, they were 42 percentage points more likely to have quantified that market potential. These companies were not taking customer conversion for granted, particularly given changes occurring to ICPs and to buying journeys. Instead, they conducted a fresh and objective evaluation of their target customers, and they are now reaping the benefits even in a challenging year.

### **Almost all of them had a deep understanding of customer service requirements and willingness to pay.**

Nearly 90% of companies that are beating their growth targets in 2025 ensured they had a good understanding of the level of service customers require, and customer willingness-to-pay. While the former was also quite common among those with revenue below expectations (75%), the latter was not at all (only 58% did so). Understanding willingness-to-pay is particularly critical in a market with high uncertainty, where pricing and packaging leverage becomes a very useful tool for driving growth and customer retention and expansion. These leading companies knew in advance how far they could, and could not, stretch their customers.

### **They were far more likely to be operating from a complete and rigorous fact base.**

Part of the reason leading companies were able to execute effectively on all of the above is that they had the fact base to support it. Three-quarters of their CEOs report that they were operating with a complete and rigorous fact base as they conducted last year's planning, compared with only 49% of those whose companies are now growing below expectations. A porous fact base yields a porous plan. By ensuring they have strong data foundations, leading companies were able to incorporate robust, high-confidence inputs into their models and build everything from customer ICPs to territory and quota plans that could withstand a difficult environment.

These four differences form the critical elements of the road map for this year's planning process:

- Start with strategic bets.
- Prioritize accounts, using a quantitative lens.
- Understand customer requirements and willingness to pay.
- Conduct all planning activities from the foundation of a complete and rigorous fact base.

# Getting planning right for 2026

While it can be tempting to do so, particularly in a time when it will take substantial focus to make targets for the year, planning is not a casual exercise to be rushed, under-resourced, or even worse skipped altogether. Our experience partnering with clients to build robust plans is that those who start early are most successful. Now is the time to be identifying and prioritizing strategic bets, followed by a disciplined, data-driven process from account segmentation to coverage, org design, talent planning, and territory, quota, and compensation plans.

## Planning Timeline To Be Ready for a Fast Start at or Before Kickoff



**4 Months Before**

**1. Account Segmentation:** Understand which customers and prospects are most likely to generate the most 2026 revenue.



**3 Months Before**

**2. Routes to Market:** Use the output of Account Segmentation to ensure your routes to market are the most effective to reach the highest value customers and the most efficient to reach lower value customers.

**3. Coverage Plan:** Use the output of Account Segmentation to determine the number of people you will need for each type of role in the coming year.



**2 Months Before**

**4. Org Structure & Design:** Given the understanding of where next year's revenue will be generated, validate that you still have the right org design model. Refresh your headcount and productivity model to ensure you have the right number of people.

**5. Talent Assessment:** Determine if you have the next wave of leaders internally, or if you need to source them externally. Identify the A-player reps that you need to retain, and build a plan to transition C-player reps' accounts to A-players.



**1 Month Before**

**6. Territories, Quotas, and Compensation Plans:** Market leaders ensure that at the beginning of the SKO, every rep has his/her territory, quota, and comp plan.

**7. Accelerate the Employee Lifecycle:** Develop an Employee Life Cycle Management Plan which improves bookings per seller through key inflection points in seller tenure.

Our analysis in this pulse report shows quite clearly that good planning makes the difference between beating expectations and missing them. As CEOs and their leadership teams conduct annual planning this year, the strategies shared here will ensure that effort leads to resilience and success regardless of external market surprises.



## Next Steps

1. Talk with SBI about how [Wayforge can turn the strategy, data, and operational decisions necessary for planning into an always-on capability.](#)
2. Read more about the [five realities driving the need for deeper attention to planning for 2026](#)
3. Watch SBI's webinar on the [things to know to avoid getting planning wrong.](#)

### About This Research

SBI surveyed 120 CEOs and senior go-to-market leaders across industries, with a particular emphasis on software, business services, and healthcare. Roughly 65% of respondents came from private equity-sponsored companies.

The survey was fielded in late June 2025. It covered several aspects of their 2025 performance, trends in customer demand, go-to-market team productivity, go-to-market strategies, and approaches to annual planning.

### Why SBI?

Driven by insights and delivered from experience, SBI continues to help clients grow their revenue, margin, and enterprise value in ways never before possible.

Working with us, go-to-market leaders can expect confidence and trust with experienced partners every step of the way. We engage and support our clients as an extension of their team, both guiding and working side-by-side to deliver relatable, practical strategies that work for today and tomorrow.

Connect with SBI today and talk to us about how we can help you on your growth journey.



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