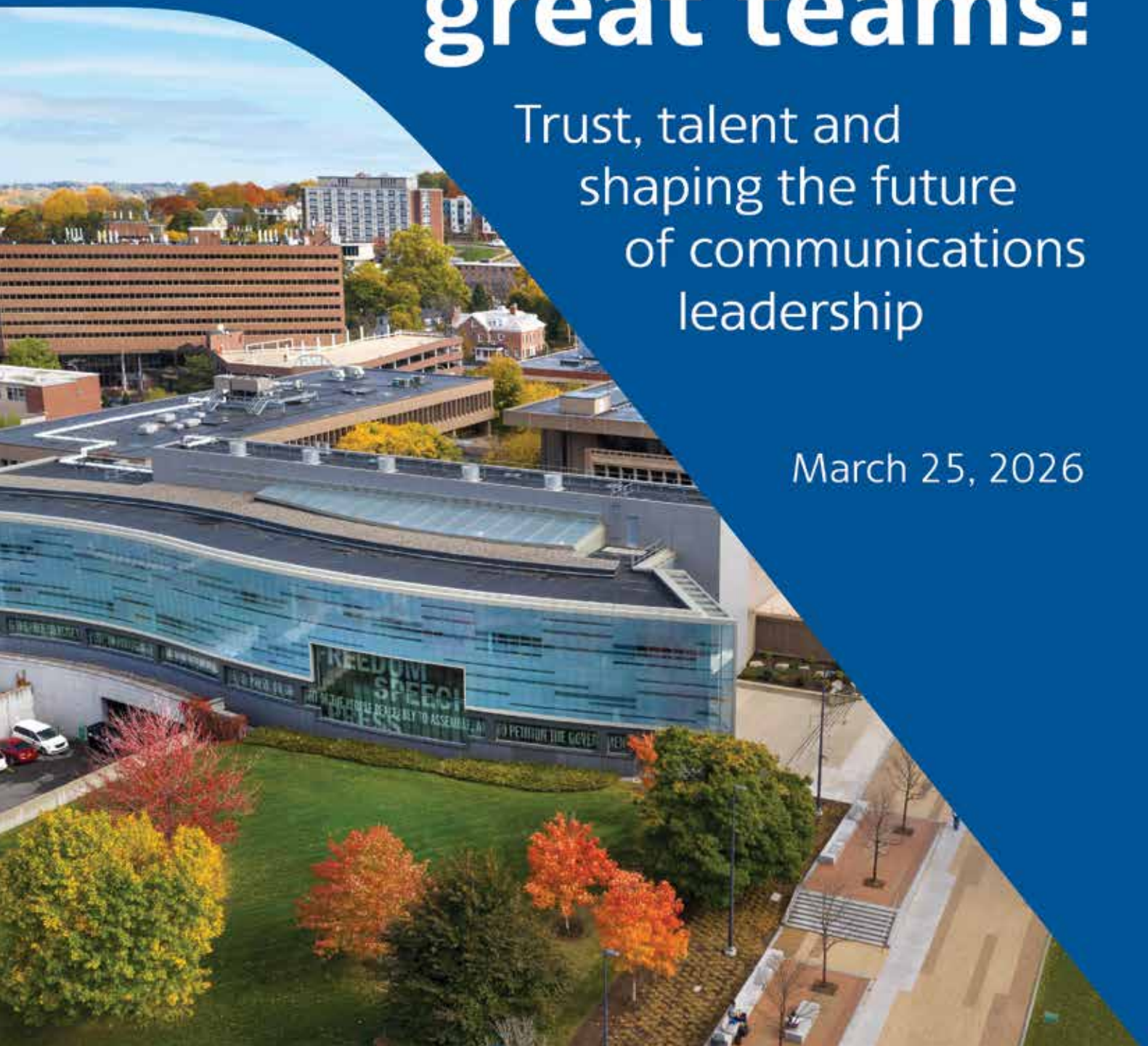


Building great teams:

Trust, talent and
shaping the future
of communications
leadership

March 25, 2026



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Leadership development in a changing profession: What must evolve – and what must endure

At a time when the communications function is under increasing pressure to demonstrate business impact and leadership relevance, the question of how leaders are developed – and how talent is advanced – has taken on new urgency.

Against this backdrop, *Building Great Teams: Trust, talent and shaping the future of communications leadership* was held on March 25, 2026, in New York City at Syracuse University's historic Lubin House. Hosted by American Airlines and the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, the forum convened 50 of the profession's most respected CCOs, CMOs and agency leaders alongside a select group of rising voices shaping its future – and the next generation of talent preparing to lead it.

This gathering centered on real conversations: how we build trust, develop talent and raise the bar for leadership in a profession being reshaped in real time.

Those conversations came to life across three focused panels, each addressing a critical dimension of leadership and talent development:

- What the next generation of leaders requires to grow and succeed
- Identifying effective recruitment strategies to fill the talent pipeline
- The missing generation. Who is advancing the next CCO?



Overall intent of the forum

The forum was designed to examine how leadership is actually developed today – particularly in a post-COVID, hybrid and AI-accelerated environment.

Rather than focusing on trends or idealized models, the sessions were structured to surface a more grounded set of realities:

- Where leadership development breaks down
- How talent is identified, evaluated and retained
- Who is accountable for succession and bench strength
- The qualities organizations and their leaders value in practice – through hiring, sponsorship, development, visibility and advancement decisions.

Each session was intended to be instructive, candid and practical.

Together, the panels offered a clear view of how leadership is formed – not in theory, but through the day-to-day decisions that shape people, performance and culture.

What follows is an executive summary capturing the central themes, hard truths and leadership implications that emerged from the day's discussions.



Executive summary

Across the three panels, a consistent theme emerged: The fundamentals of leadership have not changed but the environment in which they must be applied has, requiring greater intentionality, adaptability and discipline from today's leaders.

Careers are still built on relationships, trust, visibility and judgment. What has shifted is how those qualities are recognized, developed and rewarded in a hybrid, AI-influenced workplace.

Organizations are not facing a shortage of talent. They're facing a gap in how talent is identified, evaluated and developed, particularly early in careers and at key transition points.

At the same time, expectations for future leaders have expanded. Communications expertise alone is no longer sufficient. Business acumen, judgment and active sponsorship are now essential.

Taken together, the panels point to a clear conclusion: Leadership development today requires greater intentionality – earlier, broader and more consistently applied – if organizations are to build strong, sustainable talent pipelines.



Leadership imperatives

The discussions point to a clear set of leadership responsibilities — none of them new, but all of them requiring far greater discipline and intent:

1. Take ownership of developing talent — early and consistently

Leadership development cannot be deferred until someone is “ready.” It must begin early, be reinforced often and be treated as a core leadership responsibility — not an HR process.

2. Shift from evaluating readiness to investing in potential

Organizations must move beyond overvaluing polish and experience. The real work is identifying trajectory, judgment and learning agility — and developing them over time.

3. Make visibility and sponsorship deliberate — not incidental

Performance alone is not enough. Leaders must create opportunities for exposure, advocate for high-potential talent and ensure that strong performers are seen, trusted and advanced.

4. Redefine what it means to be ready to lead

Communications expertise is no longer sufficient. Future leaders must demonstrate business acumen, sound judgment and the ability to operate in complex, fast-moving environments.

5. Rebuild the apprenticeship model in a hybrid world

Much of leadership development once happened informally through proximity, observation and access. In a hybrid environment, those experiences must now be created intentionally.

6. Raise the standard — and be explicit about it

High expectations drive performance, but only when they are clear. Leaders must define what “good” looks like, reinforce it consistently and hold people accountable to it.

7. Develop leaders by giving them real responsibility — before they feel ready

Growth does not come from observation alone. It comes from carrying weight, making decisions and being accountable for outcomes — often before individuals feel fully prepared.



Panel 1: What the next generation of leaders requires to grow and succeed

Brett Kleinberg (Moderator), Founder, Genevate

Eric Winkfield, VP and Group Manager, M Booth and M Booth Health

Chelsea Stern, Account Supervisor, Honeymoon

Chris Bonelli, Product Communications Manager, Waymo

Alex Lawrence, Senior Consultant, APCO Worldwide

Nia Shaw, Account Supervisor, HUNTER

The core observation

- Despite changes in technology, hybrid work and generational expectations, the fundamentals of career development remain unchanged.
- Careers are still built on relationships, trust, visibility and judgment.
- What has changed is the environment in which those fundamentals must be demonstrated.

What still matters most

- Relationships remain foundational
"Getting to know your coworkers in a way that doesn't involve the task at hand."
- Trust is built through transparency
"By explaining your process ... you can earn that trust really quickly."
- Differentiation comes from mindset, not just experience
 - Resourcefulness and adaptability:
"Understanding the power of pivoting... and being resourceful."
 - Coachability:
"Feedback truly is a gift."
 - Clear personal narrative:
"You have to have a story of who you are."

The reality of advancement

- Advancement is driven by value, not tenure
"It's not just the time, but it's the value of your time."
- Visibility is necessary – and must be intentional
"Visibility matters a lot."
"There's a difference between how you show up and how your work shows up."

A changing work context

- Work-life boundaries are shifting
"They might leave and not talk about or think about the company, and that's okay."
"We want interesting talent... people with interests outside of PR."
- Hybrid work introduces a developmental gap
"Our business ... everything is about relationships."

Implications

For early professionals:

- Build relationships deliberately
- Seek and apply feedback
- Make thinking visible
- Develop a clear personal narrative
- Pursue in-person opportunities when possible

For leaders:

- Create structured opportunities for visibility and mentorship
- Reinforce expectations consistently across teams
- Support early talent in navigating hybrid environments

Bottom line

Relationships, trust, visibility and judgment remain the defining factors in how careers develop – and how leaders are formed.

Panel 2: Identifying effective recruitment strategies to fill the talent pipeline

Barby Siegel, Global CEO, Zeno Group

Cory duBrowa, CEO, Burson

Jessamyn Katz, CEO, Heyman Associates

The core observation

- The discussion began with a focus on strengthening the talent pipeline.
- What emerged was more fundamental:
“There’s not a shortage of talent. There is a gap in how talent is recognized, evaluated and developed.”

Where we’re falling short

- We default to familiarity
“We make the mistake of looking for people like us...”
“Don’t wait till somebody is 120 percent ready...”
- We overvalue what’s easy to measure
“It’s not so much that we care what you know. We actually want to know that you care.”
- We’re misdiagnosing the problem
“I don’t think it’s a talent gap. I think it’s an evaluation gap.”

The reality of recruitment

- Recruiting is a leadership discipline — not a transaction
“Recruiting is a skill... developing and maintaining a network is a skill.”
- We are in the people business
“What are we selling?... We’re selling people.”
- A changing talent environment
 - AI-driven screening
 - Limited early-stage interaction
 - Reduced visibility in hybrid environments

Implications

For leaders:

- Hire for trajectory, not perfection
- Reevaluate how early talent is assessed
- Invest in interviewer quality and consistency
- Build and maintain networks proactively

For emerging talent:

- Make thinking visible, not just outcomes
- Seek and apply feedback consistently
- Build relationships with intention
- Take ownership of development early

Bottom line

The challenge is not access to talent — it is the ability to recognize and develop it

Panel 3: The missing generation. Who is advancing the next CCO?

Cheryl Sanclemente, Chief Marketing & Communications Officer, Lattice

Dana Bolden, Chief Communications Officer, Colgate-Palmolive

Jen Lowney, Global Head of Communications, Citi

The core observation

- Developing the next generation of CCOs now requires more than communications expertise.
- It requires business leadership, judgment and active sponsorship in a more complex, AI-influenced environment.

What is changing

- The entry point is narrowing
“AI may write the first draft — but it can’t teach judgment.”

- Business acumen is now essential
"You don't earn a seat at the table by writing well. You earn it by understanding how the business actually works."

The reality of leadership development

- Mentorship is not enough — sponsorship is required
"It's not enough to coach talent — you have to carry them into the room when it matters."
- Rotational experience builds credibility
"You don't understand a business until you've sat in someone else's seat."
- Clarity and candor accelerate growth
"The best feedback is immediate, specific and about the work — not the person."

The leadership standard

- Great leaders develop both ideas and execution
"Ideas without execution are noise. Execution without ideas is maintenance."
- The role demands commitment
"This isn't about work/life balance — it's about integration. You're choosing a standard."
- Meaning drives performance
"People don't give their best effort to assignments. They give it to 'meaning.'"

Implications

For leaders:

- Take ownership of developing future leaders
- Sponsor — not just mentor — high-potential talent
- Create cross-functional exposure
- Provide clear expectations and consistent feedback

For emerging leaders:

- Build business understanding beyond communications
- Seek exposure to decision-making environments
- Take ownership of growth and readiness

Bottom line

Leadership development requires intention, exposure and high standards — especially in a more complex and demanding environment.

"You develop leaders by letting them carry weight — before they feel ready."



What leaders must do next

The implications of these discussions are not theoretical. They require action — now.

Leadership development will not improve through intention alone. It will change only when leaders take direct responsibility for how talent is identified, developed and advanced within their organizations.

That means asking — and answering — a different set of questions:

- Who are we actively developing — not just evaluating?
- Where are we creating real exposure and visibility for high-potential talent?
- Who is sponsoring the next generation — and how deliberately?
- Are we rewarding judgment, growth and contribution or defaulting to familiarity and tenure?
- What experiences are we intentionally creating that no longer happen organically in a hybrid environment?

The answers to these questions are already shaping the next generation of leaders — whether by design or by default.

The responsibility now is not to understand these challenges, but to act on them.

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