

How to lead with

impact
in **extreme**
times.



We don't get
to choose the
pressure, but we
do get to choose
our priorities.

Dr Ferron Gray, President and Founder, Grae Matta Foundation

INTRODUCTION: LEADING THROUGH THE NOISE

Doing business during times of global disruption such as we're experiencing in 2025, calls for a certain type of steady-handed leadership.

Holly Ransom, Author of The Leading Edge and CEO of Emergent Global, who's led conversations with iconic leaders including **Condoleezza Rice**, who steered US foreign policy after 9/11; **Jacinda Ardern**, who led New Zealand through the Christchurch terror attack and a global pandemic; **Dan Hesse**, who turned Sprint around during a market shake-up and **Charles Lowry**, who guided Prudential through the financial crisis, describes it as: "Disruption doesn't just shake things up. It sharpens focus".

"Disruption doesn't just shake things up. It sharpens focus."

At a time of enormous change fueled by a combination of geopolitical and economic factors, our industry is under pressure, again! Whether it's national or international policy changes, border disputes, wars, tariffs, meetings volumes or travel restrictions, the events industry is facing a wealth of unknowns and, currently, uncontrollables.

And no market thrives on uncertainty.

Holly's assessment? "It's undeniable—"business as usual" left the building a while ago. We're leading through times that feel like a group project between chaos, uncertainty and rapid change... and none of them read the brief. Whether it's a global crisis, an economic shake-up, or just another Tuesday in the news cycle, the one thing we can count on is that the usual playbook doesn't apply."

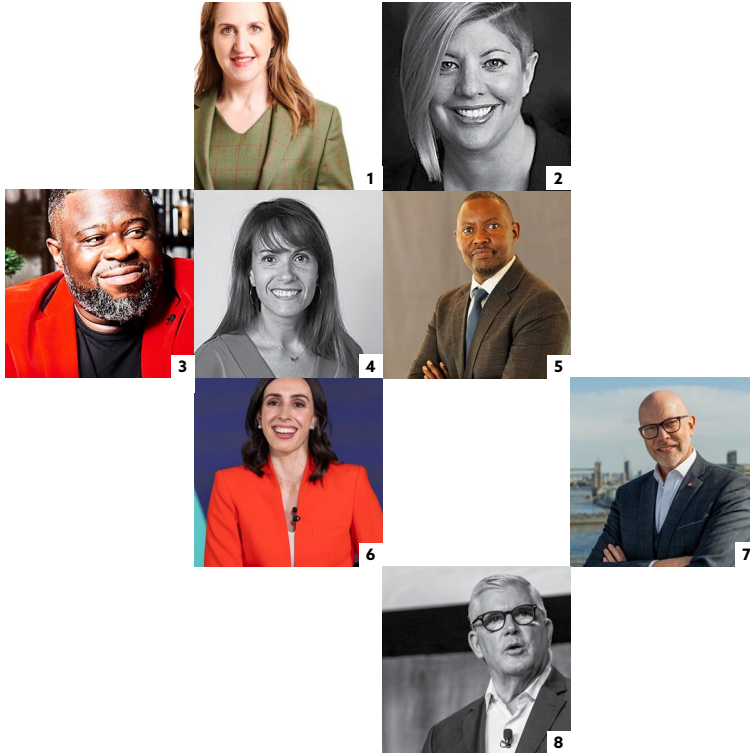
So, what does apply? And how should we be responding?

This report brings together insights from eight exceptional leaders in the global business and events space—people who have not only weathered disruption, but also emerged with keener focus, deeper compassion and stronger leadership muscles.

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CONTRIBUTORS

We thank the following contributors for their insight, time and honesty in shaping this report:



1. CARINA BAUER,
CEO, IMEX Group

2. CAMERON CURTIS,
Founder and Chief
Innovator, C2 Association
Strategies; CEO, LGBT
Meeting Professionals
Association

3. DR FERRON GRAY,
President and Founder,
Grae Matta Foundation

4. ANGELES MORENO,
Country Manager Spain,
AIM Group International

5. FRANK MURANGWA,
Regional Director, ICCA Africa

6. HOLLY RANSOM,
CEO, Emergent Global;
author of *The Leading Edge*
and renowned interviewer
and moderator

7. CHRIS SKEITH OBE,
Managing Director and CEO,
UFI (The Global Association
of the Exhibition Industry)

8. DON WELSH, President
and CEO, Destinations
International

WE ASKED THEM:

- ➔ How do you lead with impact when everything is in flux?
- ➔ What skills, mindsets and practices matter most now?
- ➔ What blind spots hold aspiring leaders back – and what truths must they learn fast?

The answers are as varied as the leaders themselves. But one pattern is unmistakable: the most effective leaders today don't seek control—they cultivate clarity. They don't chase perfection – they model presence. And they don't command from the front—they serve from within, and consistently so. This is a new era of leadership. And the best of it? You don't need a title to begin.



As Angeles Moreno, Country Manager Spain at AIM Group International, puts it:

“Extreme times challenge our default models of doing business, but they also open the door to bold, necessary transformation. The opportunity lies in shifting from short-term fixes to long-term thinking—placing people, planet and purpose at the heart of our decisions.”



Topic 01

From control to clarity

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR LEADERS:

- Letting go of needing all the answers—focusing on purpose and presence
- Anchoring decisions in values, not fear
- Using disruption to clarify direction, not derail it

CARINA BAUER, CEO of IMEX Group, sees this clearly: “The opportunity in extreme times is to show what you’re really made of as a leader... it’s a chance to show up for your team, to model kindness, to build team spirit and to show them a clear direction in a world of uncertainty.”

CAMERON CURTIS, Founder and Chief Innovator at C2 Association Strategies and CEO of the LGBT Meeting Professionals Association, agrees: “Extreme times test our resilience, but they also clarify our values and strengthen our purpose...In moments of volatility, authenticity becomes our anchor.”

And **HOLLY RANSOM, CEO of Emergent Global**, reminds us: “Disruption doesn’t just shake things up. It sharpens focus...Suddenly, it’s clear what actually deserves your energy. What business you’re really in. Why you exist. What matters most right now—to your people, your customers and your mission. When you know what truly matters, you stop trying to do everything—and start doing the right things, with purpose and intention. The strongest leaders I know use that clarity to reset—not just survive.”

DON WELSH, President and CEO of Destinations International, adds: “Before you manage people, be clear on your values, build emotional intelligence and stay grounded when things get difficult. These moments demand courage and resilience, but they also offer a chance to lead with purpose and create lasting, meaningful change. Turbulent times will test your patience, your plans and sometimes your confidence. But they also sharpen focus, deepen resilience and reveal what truly matters.”

While **CHRIS SKEITH, UFI Managing Director and CEO** reassures: “Equally important is identifying those things that are outside your control, the things that you cannot do anything about, in time there will be clarity around these, but you must be patient. Things will improve eventually, hold your nerve, seek support from those around you, and times will come good again just when you least expect it—I promise!”

And from **DR FERRON GRAY, President and Founder, Grae Matta Foundation**: “Turbulence strips away the non-essential and forces us to focus on what truly matters – people.”

INSIGHT 01:

In a noisy world, the clearest leaders don’t raise their voices. They prioritize clarity.





Topic 02

Leadership is service, not status

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR LEADERS:

- Empathy and listening are power tools, not soft skills
- Building psychological safety is the bedrock of resilience
- Leadership is not about the spotlight; it's about stewardship

C2 Association Strategies' CAMERON CURTIS says it best: "Leadership is about service, not titles... One of the biggest blind spots I've seen is underestimating how much of leadership is about listening, not directing. Great leaders don't have all the answers, they ask better questions, create space for others to shine, and stay open to learning."

DON WELSH of Destinations International emphasizes: "Leadership is not about power over others but being in service to something bigger than yourself... Those who are unprepared to lead often seek the spotlight but avoid the discomfort, vulnerability and responsibility that true leadership requires. Today, more than ever, navigating turbulent times calls for radical collaboration and communication."

Grae Matta Foundation's DR FERRON GRAY adds: "When the ground shifts, impact isn't found in control; it's found in care... These moments challenge leaders to stop treating well-being as a side note and start embedding it into the core of how we lead, hire, design events and build culture."

ANGELES MORENO, Country Manager, AIM Group, Spain notes: "First: Resilience is not about bouncing back, it's about bouncing forward—using adversity as fuel for reinvention. Second: Uncertainty isn't a threat; it's a creative space. The most powerful transformations are born in the most uncomfortable moments. Embrace discomfort, listen deeply, and lead with courage and clarity."

While **Emergent Global's HOLLY RANSOM** cautions: "It's not being wrong that's dangerous—it's being sure you're right... Curiosity is leadership currency right now."

INSIGHT 02:

Impactful leaders are great listeners. They leave their egos at the door.



Topic 03

Reinvention starts with a mindset shift

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR LEADERS:

- Don't wait for stability—design for change
- Mindset shift precedes innovation
- See AI, foresight and systems thinking as core skills

HOLLY RANSOM of Emergent Global on transformation: “When the ground’s shifting, it’s tempting to go into protection mode. Our brains are wired to avoid threats and preserve the status quo, even when that status quo isn’t working. But these moments demand a different kind of leadership that sees disruption not as a threat but as a lever for meaningful change.

As MARSHALL GANZ—renowned civil rights organizer—taught me at Harvard, “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” And he’s right. Standing still while everything changes around you isn’t stability—it’s irrelevance.”

FRANK MURANGWA: “AI has already begun to revolutionize how events are planned, marketed and executed...My focus is on learning how to use AI-powered tools—especially in analytics and ethical decision-making.”

While CHRIS SKEITH, Managing Director and CEO of UFI, reminds us: “Act too fast, or without thinking things through, and you become part of the problem...These moments are an invitation to stop doing some things, reframe others and find new ways forward.”

C2 Association Strategies’ CAMERON CURTIS shares: “What matters most is showing up with clarity, consistency and authenticity... People remember how you made them feel far more than any single decision you made.”

AIM Group’s ANGELES MORENO explains: “I’m leaning into systems thinking, behavioral science and cross-sector collaboration. The complexity of our current environment requires leaders who can zoom out to see the bigger picture and zoom in to act with intention. I’m also deepening my practice in strategic foresight and human-centric innovation to anticipate what’s next—not to predict the future, but to design for it.”

INSIGHT 3:

Face rapid change by slowing down to see the possibilities.



Topic 04

Lead yourself first

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR LEADERS:

- Self-awareness is non-negotiable
- Integrity builds trust—and trust builds confident employees and followers
- Emotional labor is part of the job, not a side effect

HOLLY RANSOM of Emergent Global makes it clear: “Leadership starts long before the business card...If you can’t lead your own energy, values and direction—why should anyone trust you to lead theirs? In the leadership rooms I’m in right now—whether it’s CEOs, founders, or frontline team leaders—there’s a shared understanding that we’re not leading through disruption anymore. Disruption is the environment. That’s why the leadership practices I’m leaning into are less about having answers and more about deepening the quality of questions, connection and adaptability.

“First, I’m building deliberate friction into my thinking. For example, using AI as a kind of mental “Red Team” to challenge my ideas and expose the gaps. It’s a tool to widen my lens, pressure-test my decisions, and make my thinking more robust.

“I’m also holding a “both/and” mindset. We can’t afford the simplicity of old binaries: decisive or empathetic, fast or thoughtful, speed or stability. I’ve come to believe modern leadership is the ability to hold creative tension without collapsing it. That means asking, how do I communicate

clearly and leave space for complexity? How do I push for results and protect well-being? How do I set high standards and make room for learning and failure?

“Finally, I’m making mattering a leadership priority. I’ve been leaning into the practice of “making mattering visible.” Because when people feel like they matter—like their presence, their input and their humanity count—they don’t just feel better. They perform better.”

While the Grae Matta Foundation’s DR FERRON GRAY offers: “We’re leaning into trauma-informed leadership, active listening and systems thinking. Leaders need to understand how stress affects performance and behavior—not just in theory, but in how they run meetings, design workflows and make decisions. We’re also investing in boundary-setting as a leadership skill, not a luxury.”

FRANK MURANGWA, Regional Director for ICCA Africa, reflects: “Leading with impact means not just adapting—but reimagining. It isn’t just about holding a title—it’s a mindset and a commitment.”

INSIGHT 4:

Great leadership is an inside job. “Be the change you want to see in the world” **Mahatma Gandhi**



Leadership starts long before the business card... If you can't lead your own energy, values and direction—why should anyone trust you to lead theirs?

HOLLY RANSOM CEO, Emergent Global





Topic 05

The next generation is already watching

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR LEADERS:

- Teaching through behavior, not just strategy
- Sharing what you've learned—not just what you've achieved
- Making room for future leaders to lead now

DON WELSH of **Destinations International** reminds us: "If you're showing up for the work rather than just the recognition, you're already on the right path."

C2 Association Strategies' **CAMERON CURTIS** is emphatic: "Leadership takes courage. You'll face hard decisions, conflicting opinions and moments of doubt. Great leadership is about staying grounded in your values and clear on your purpose so every step you take drives meaningful impact."

While **FRANK MURANGWA**, **ICCA Africa**, offers: "Leadership begins with small, consistent actions: taking initiative, being accountable and creating a positive impact within your environment."

HOLLY RANSOM of **Emergent Global**

says: "Start by leading yourself. It begins with clarity: What are your values? What drives you? What kind of impact do you want to have? Getting clear on those things is like setting your internal compass—and when the winds of pressure, uncertainty, or opportunity blow, that compass helps you stay grounded and make aligned decisions. Leadership isn't something you arrive at. It's something you practice every day from wherever you're at."

And the **Grae Matta Foundation's**

DR FERRON GRAY closes: "Resilience isn't built during calm times—it's shaped by how you respond when things go sideways. And communication beats perfection. Silence causes more harm than saying "I don't know, but I'm working on it". Especially for Nextgen leaders, understand that transparency builds trust faster than certainty ever will. Quiet strength is the new power."

INSIGHT 5:

Aspiring leaders are not looking for heroes but models of consistency, courage, vulnerability and clarity.



CASE
STUDY
ONE

PRIORITIZING MENTAL HEALTH DURING CRISIS RESPONSE.

President and Founder, Grae Matta Foundation, DR FERRON GRAY



In early 2021, a major international events agency approached the Grae Matta Foundation after a spike in staff burnout following three consecutive high-pressure event cycles. Tensions were high. Staff turnover was rising. Leadership admitted they didn't know how to respond beyond offering generic wellness webinars.

We stepped in—not with a plug-and-play solution, but with listening.

First, we ran a series of confidential listening sessions across departments. We didn't come in talking—we came in asking.

We gathered data, not just on workloads, but on how people felt. Trust was low, communication had broken down, and many staff felt punished for showing signs of stress.

Next, we worked with leadership to develop

a trauma-informed action plan. This wasn't about softening expectations—it was about recalibrating how they managed pressure. We trained managers to recognize signs of mental strain, offered them scripts for how to respond constructively, and reworked internal comms to normalize conversations around psychological safety.

The result? Within three months, absenteeism dropped. Exit interviews stopped centering on burnout. Managers reported a tangible shift in trust and engagement. Leadership learned to see well-being not as an HR box to tick—but as a core competency of impact-driven leadership.

This was leadership in action: listening before fixing, leading with empathy, and committing to real culture change—not just performative wellness.



LEADING THROUGH ADVERSITY: REINVENTING LGBT MPA

CAMERON CURTIS, CEO, LGBT Meeting Professionals Association



In September 2023, the LGBT Meeting Professionals Association (**LGBT MPA**) turned to C2 Association Strategies after the board made the difficult decision to part ways with its executive director and founder—a move that left the organization without critical files, resources and facing a brand reputation crisis.

The stakes were high.

Rather than reacting with quick fixes, we prioritized listening and rebuilding trust. We asked members what they needed, how they felt and what they wanted LGBT MPA to stand for. **The message was clear:** they wanted clarity, transparency, and a renewed sense of purpose.

Armed with that feedback, we got to work. Strategic planning became the cornerstone of our approach. We partnered with the board to redefine the mission and vision, aligning them with a more inclusive, community-driven

focus. This foundation led to a comprehensive plan centered on expanding educational programming, strengthening member and partner engagement, and advocating for LGBTQ+ professionals in the global events industry.

But we didn't stop there.

We knew that rebuilding trust required more than internal restructuring. We leveraged our relationships to position LGBT MPA as the vocal advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusion, using targeted messaging to emphasize the organization's steadfast commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. In a time of heightened social and political division, our public statements reinforced LGBT MPA as a visible, unwavering voice for the community.

The impact? LGBT MPA didn't just reclaim its standing – it redefined it. Through intentional leadership, decisive action, and a clear focus on member needs, LGBT MPA emerged stronger, more focused and more impactful than ever.

COLLABORATION TRUST AND BELONGING:



**DON WELSH, President and
CEO, Destinations International**

CASE STUDY THREE

For almost a decade, I have had the privilege and honor of leading the largest destination tourism organization in the world, Destinations International. That our membership has grown dramatically over the last several years is the result of our focus on a defined, singular mission: supporting and serving our members.

For example, during the COVID global pandemic, we held over 50 webinars on a variety of topics to engage with members and provide the most up-to-date research and information from our valued partners to help navigate a very uncertain and challenging period.

Collaboration continues to be central to our approach.

With active board involvement and numerous volunteer committees, our staff is in constant communication with members. As a result, we have earned a reputation as a trusted and valued resource. Perhaps one of the most powerful indicators of success—one often overlooked—is the strength of our community. We view community as more than a result of engagement; it is a strategic pillar and a measure of effective leadership. The willingness of our members to collaborate, share insights, support one another and invest in the collective good for all, is testament to our carefully crafted culture.

Strong leadership is not just vision alone; it is about building trust, belonging and mutual accountability. That shared sense of purpose is what fuels our momentum and ensures we are not just reacting to change but leading through it—together with our members and partners.

Over recent years as the organization has continued to expand globally, we retained a laser focus on understanding the unique needs and nuances of our members and the destinations they represent. This has allowed us to continually adapt our products, services and research to best meet their needs and shifting market demands.

Final thoughts



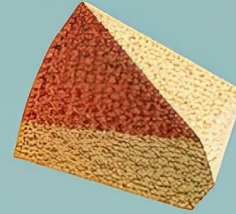
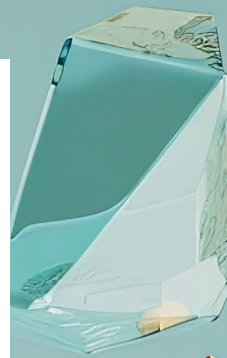
In extreme times, leadership is not about being the loudest voice or having the clearest plan. It's about presence. It's about values. It's about the kind of impact that lingers well after the meeting ends, the strategy shifts, or the budget changes.

This is not the moment to wait for calm.

This is the moment to lead differently.

And if there's one lesson echoed by every leader in this report, it's this: the true measure of leadership is not what you control – it's what you ignite and inspire in others.

WHAT IMPACTFUL LEADERS ARE DOING DIFFERENTLY NOW



- They prioritize **clarity over control**
- They **listen first**, then act
- They **see care as a business strategy**
- They treat disruption as a **catalyst for innovation**, not a detour
- They lead with **intention, not ego**
- They **build psychological safety** into the workplace culture
- They **design for uncertainty**, not stability
- They **invest in AI, foresight and human-centered innovation**
- They **practice self-leadership** before leading others
- They consistently **mentor and model, especially** for the next generation, with transparency and humility

How to lead with

impact *in* extreme times.

As Ed Catmull, Co-founder, Pixar Animation Studios and author of *Creativity, Inc.*, says:

"As leaders we should think of ourselves as teachers and try to create companies in which teaching is seen as a valued way to contribute to the success of the whole. Do we think of most activities as teaching opportunities and experiences as ways of learning? One of the most crucial responsibilities of leadership is creating a culture that rewards those who lift not just our stock prices but our aspirations as well."

