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LEADERSHIP TRENDS 2026

The Human Advantage:
Rediscover Leadership in a Disruptive Age

EXECUTIVE BREAKFAST EVENT 2026
6 March 2026
The Goodwood Park Hotel

About the Event

Erevna's 2026 Executive Breakfast gathered senior leaders to explore one defining question: in a world facing massive global disruption relentlessly, **what is the enduring human advantage in leadership**?

Over 40 senior leaders from 30 organisations — comprising global multinational corporations, government organisations, and leading social service agencies — attended this year's event, ***"The Human Advantage: Rediscover Leadership in a Disruptive Age"***.

The morning opened with a keynote address by Mr. Mickey Connolly, Chairman and Founder of Conversant Solutions LLC, who joined us virtually. This was followed by a panel discussion featuring three practitioners: Mr. Ian Wong, Managing Director and Group Head of International Management at United Overseas Bank Limited; Dr. Fermin Diez, C-Suite HR Leader, Board Director, and a widely recognised HR voice in Asia; and Ms. Audrey Joy Tan, Entrepreneur and CEO of The Moolah Group.

PART 1

EXPERT KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Mickey Connolly

Chairman & Founder, Conversant Solutions LLC

For over 25 years, Mickey Connolly and his colleagues have explored how communication impacts coordinated action and organisational culture. He has worked with over 100,000 managers, educators, and negotiators across 400 organisations in 90 countries to achieve mission-critical goals ahead of time and under budget. Mickey is the co-author of The Vitality Imperative and The Communication Catalyst. His work spans global commercial organisations, police departments, and military institutions.

Key Takeaways

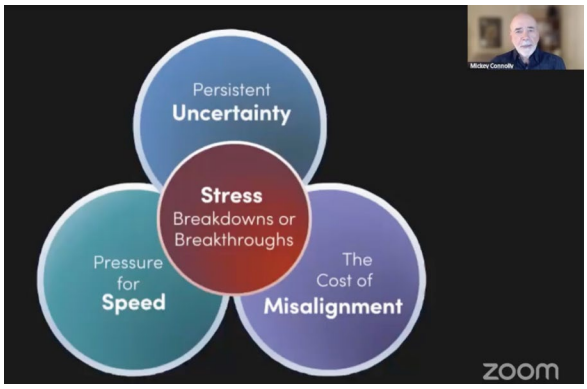
1 **The Triad of Disruption:** Leaders face the convergence of Persistent Uncertainty, Pressure for Speed, and the Cost of Misalignment — an intersection that produces unprecedented stress, leading to either Breakdowns or Breakthroughs.

2 **Trust is the New Currency:** With 58% of employees trusting a stranger over their manager, leaders must actively rebuild trust through presence, meaningful work, and a genuine span of attention.

3 **Humanity is the Advantage:** The uniquely human capacities of sense-making, asking great questions, and creating trust are becoming more important than ever.

KEY TAKEAWAY 1

The Triad of Disruption



Mickey Connolly opened by reframing today's leadership environment not as a series of isolated crises, but as a structural shift. Drawing on global research conducted with leaders across approximately 40 countries in 2025, he argued disruption has become the condition.

A McKinsey and World Economic Forum survey underscored the scale of the challenge: 84% of leaders report feeling unprepared for the speed and complexity of change facing them. As Mickey noted, “it only takes a modest amount of improvement in our ability to deal with the uncertainty in order to be great relative to most people in the world.”

He identified four interconnected patterns defining global leadership today:

Persistent Uncertainty: Stability is no longer the default. Leaders need to learn to lead and develop the capacity to act effectively without the promise of stability.

Pressure for Speed: The pressure for rapid responses has created a compulsion for speed, at the cost of sound judgement and strategic insight.

The Cost of Misalignment: Where clarity of purpose and priorities is absent, organisations experience significant friction, wasted effort, and disengagement.

The convergence of these three forces produces:

Unprecedented Stress across people working in complex organisations. How leaders respond to that stress determines whether it becomes a **Breakdown** or a **Breakthrough**.

KEY TAKEAWAY 2

Trust is the New Currency

Perhaps the most striking data point Mickey shared came from the Humanistic Management Journal – currently, 58% of people in large organisations trust a person they meet on the street more than their own manager. This signals a deep fracture between leaders and the people they lead.

> ***You cannot automate trust. Humans create trust. And I think we need to lean on our ability to do that more than ever before."***

He identified three levers that directly rebuild trust:

1. The 20% Love Rule: Trust declines unless employees spend at least 20% of their time on work they genuinely enjoy and on strengths they can draw on daily. When leaders help people do a greater percentage of work they love, trust ascends naturally.

Connolly drew on the research of Marcus Buckingham, the data scientist behind Gallup's Q12 and StrengthsFinder, whose work shows that if people do not have 20% or more of their work experience connected to something they love, their trust in the workplace and their manager declines.

2. Span of Attention over Span of Control: Mickey replaced the conventional preoccupation with span of control with the concept of span of attention, where the real question is not how many people report to a leader, but how many a leader can genuinely connect with.

Effective leadership requires a team size that allows the leader to know each person, understand their work, and show up meaningfully. A manageable span of attention is approximately 12. Spans of 1:60, as seen in some hospital settings, are a fantasy of efficiency that makes genuine presence structurally impossible.

3. Meaningful Work: Employees need to feel their work connects to something larger. Making work meaningful remains an exclusively human leadership responsibility that AI cannot replicate. As Mickey puts it: “You cannot automate trust. Humans create trust. And I think we need to lean on our ability to do that more than ever before.”

KEY TAKEAWAY 3

Humanity is the Advantage

The most resonant section of Mickey’s address explored the question at the heart of the event: what remains distinctly human in a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence? His answer: AI can organise information and organise work. Humans make it worth doing.

What AI cannot do is what matters most in leadership. He identified three uniquely human capacities that AI cannot replicate:

AI can organise information and organise work. Humans make it worth doing. "

1. Asking Great Questions: The quality of any AI output depends entirely on the quality of the question put to it. Leaders who develop the discipline of asking better questions and helping their teams do the same, hold a real and enduring advantage.

2. Sense-making & Storytelling: Humans are storytellers and meaning-makers. As leaders, we must separate facts from explanations, and then choose which explanations to lead with.

Too many leaders are stuck with their first story, and often one that depresses, disables, and depletes the people around them.

*"One of the jobs we are taking on right now, if we're going to take advantage of being human, is humans as storytellers. We are sense makers. **We need to help people make sense of things so the stories inspire rather than depress.**”*
– Mickey Connolly

3. Emotional leadership: The future belongs to leaders who combine AI capability with genuine human skills, that of empathy, presence, and the ability to create conversations where people feel seen and bold enough to offer ideas they would otherwise hold back.

Connolly stressed that the emotional quality of leadership has become more important than at any other point.

Actionable Ideas from Mickey Connolly

Throughout the session, Connolly offered practical applications for leaders to take back to their organisations immediately:

1. **Start with *"What do we know?"***
   When teams are overwhelmed by uncertainty, ask:
   "What do we know?" Clarifying shared values, organisational purpose, and what does endure gives people a place to stand when everything else feels unstable.

2. **Design short cycles of discovery**
   Instead of seeking long-term stability, design 30, 60, or 90-day cycles to answer questions that reduce risk and increase opportunity. Ask the people involved what question, if answered, would give everyone greater confidence. Then poll the group and identify which of those questions you can realistically work towards answering over the next 30, 60, or 90 days.

3. **Replace monthly formal performance reviews with weekly 15-minute conversations.**
   Ask them, what experiences did you love in the last week? Which ones did you definitely not love? What are your priorities this week? And how can I help you?" This simple routine interchange is creating a breakthrough in trust.

4. **Stop multitasking and run a 3-day presence experiment**
   In Mickey's words, priding yourself on being a great multitasker means you have multiple things you are doing in a mediocre way, and very little in a great way.

   For three business days, commit to being fully focused on whoever you are with. Find out what is truly important to them, what is on their mind, how they are feeling. At the end, audit the impact. Mickey predicts leaders will find they accomplished more in those three days than they typically do in the same period.

5. **Ask "*What is it time for now?*"**
   Use this question with direct reports, peers, and those you report to, to arrive together at the theme that shows something with very high leverage and a high return on attention — the one thing that, if taken care of, affects a hundred things.

6. **Practise skilful empathy**
   People will not enter your world until they feel you have entered theirs first. Give up trying to convince until they experience being understood in a profoundly different way. Ask:
   "What is it you go through every day that I don't go through, that if I understood, I might be a better asset to you?" and,
   "What do you think I have never understood about your experience that you wish I would?"

7. **Practise multi-story sense-making**
   For any situation someone brings to you, generate four or five different explanations. Notice which stories help and which ones hurt. If you are stuck only with stories that hurt, bring more people into the conversation to expand the range of meaning available.

PART 2

EXPERT PANEL DISCUSSION

Leading the Human Advantage

The panel brought together three experienced practitioners to share their personal leadership journeys and real organisational experiences, spanning banking, entrepreneurship, and HR leadership.

Ian Wong

Managing Director and Group Head, International Management at UOB

Key Takeaways from Mr Ian Wong

The New BAU — Business as Unusual. Three unstoppable phenomena demand a leader's attention: persistent uncertainty, a growing mental health challenge at work, and a super-aged workforce. The question is not whether these will affect your organisation, it is whether you are leading proactively enough to address them before they reach a point of no return.

Psychological Safety Unlocks Creativity. Ian shared a concrete example: A management associate, working across a multi-generational task force, redesigned a five-day process to take less than five minutes, saving 5,000 man-hours, reducing costs, and giving colleagues back time with their families. That one initiative inspired ten others across the organisation.

"What you say, how you act, how you treat people, how you pivot on challenges and translate them into opportunities — these are all ways of helping to improve psychological safety."

Purpose-driven leadership produces measurable outcomes. Ian argued that the human advantage is most powerfully expressed when leaders connect their teams to a purpose that is larger than any individual role or KPI. He illustrated this through his team's response to Bloomberg's pandemic-era projection that 9.3 million jobs would be lost across ASEAN. Rather than accepting that narrative, Ian gathered his team and posed a question: what can we do to solve this big problem in the marketplace?

The result? approximately 350,000 jobs facilitated, billions in investment into ASEAN, and commercial outcomes that followed naturally. As Ian puts it: *"it feels like we're doing CSR every single day."*

Fermin Diez

C-Suite HR Leader, Board Director & Adjunct Professor

Key Takeaways from Dr Fermin Diez

The multi-channel workforce. The future of work is already here: full-time, part-time, gig, and contract workers side by side. The challenge for HR is how to make someone who is not even an employee feel emotionally connected to the organisation and how to maintain connection whilst accepting that many people will form connections differently. Policies on pay equity, training access, and incentives must be rethought.

Culture is a business tool, not a feel-good metric. Fermin identified three ways organisations defeat themselves in the spirit of working for culture: 1. engagement for its own sake, 2. retaining under-performers, and 3. ineffective performance management repeated year after year. To counter this, he proposed shifting from individual KPIs to team-based incentives, because culture is not built individually, but collectively.

Preserve the apprenticeship pipeline. Fermin addressed the accelerating impact of AI on the talent pipeline, raising concerns about the effect on graduate employment opportunities in Singapore. His concern was not simply the immediate impact, but the longer-term consequence — without entry-level professionals gaining foundational experience, organisations will lack the domain expertise needed to use and direct AI effectively in the future. His recommendation is to continue investing in junior talent, not despite AI, but because of it.

Audrey Joy Tan

Entrepreneur, CEO of The Moolah Group

Key Takeaways from Ms Audrey Joy Tan

Learning and Humility as Leadership Imperatives. Leadership is a gift and a privilege, one that carries the responsibility of stewardship of the gifts and talents of the people in our charge. In the AI age, that means leading not from a position of certainty, but with the humility to learn alongside the team, model curiosity, and challenge people to push beyond what they think is possible. As Audrey puts it, "it requires learning, and I think humility to know that we don't know what we don't know" — and in a period of rapid change, this posture of learning is one of the most credible things a leader can model.

Reinvention is a Leadership Responsibility. Leaders have a responsibility to help their teams expand their capabilities and adapt to new possibilities, rather than confining them to the limits of their past expertise.

Audrey illustrated the importance of reinvention with an example from her own organisation: a team member with a finance background and no prior technical experience used AI tools to design and build a fully functional website in a single day. For her, the story was not about the threat of AI, but about what becomes possible when leaders create the conditions for people to learn, experiment, and stretch beyond their existing roles.

In an AI-enabled environment, reinvention is no longer optional.

Relationships as the Human Advantage. AI is transactional, but human beings are relational. The ability to build authentic, meaningful relationships becomes an increasingly critical leadership capability. Audrey shared how investing time in relationships with senior leaders and partners, without any immediate expectation of a business outcome, later became the foundation for significant collaborations. As she put it, “it’s not just a business deal. It’s actually about getting to know the person that you’re doing business with, because it’s about the relationship.”

A fitting metaphor: when people come into the room, each brings a different piece of the puzzle, and together those pieces form the vision. The leader's role is not to hold every piece but to invite others in to complete the picture.

Closing Reflections

Across both the keynote and the panel, a clear and consistent message emerged:

The leaders who will define the next decade are those who invest as deliberately in their human capabilities as they do in their technological ones — building trust, asking better questions, making meaning, and showing up fully for the people in their charge.

Erevna Leadership extends its deep appreciation to Mr Mickey Connolly, Mr Ian Wong, Dr. Fermin Diez, and Ms Audrey Tan for their generosity of insight and their contribution to what was a rich and thought-provoking morning.

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