



UNICON DIRECTORS' CONFERENCE 2026

Leading in the Age of Intelligence: Executive Learning in a Fragmented World

Impressions, insights, and takeaways from UNICON's Directors' Conference 2026 hosted by IMD, Lausanne, Switzerland

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10 Strategies for Executive Education

UNICON's 2026 Directors' Conference in Lausanne explored how executive education can lead through AI disruption, geopolitical fragmentation, changing client expectations, and rising pressure on teams. These are the core strategic takeaways that emerged.

1. Make AI a Strategic Capability

AI is reshaping every part of executive education - from content creation and research to diagnostics, personalization, delivery, operations, and learner support. Schools need to move beyond experimentation and build AI into their operating models, while keeping human expertise, verification, and critical thinking firmly in the loop.

2. Compete on Impact and Personalization

As AI makes customized learning easier to produce, differentiation will depend less on content and more on measurable impact. Providers must diagnose needs more precisely, personalize journeys at scale, and show clear evidence of their impact.

3. Shift from Knowledge Transfer to Activation

Corporate learning leaders are no longer looking for fact-based content alone. They want partners who can help leaders apply insight, change behavior, make better decisions, and lead transformation. The value is increasingly in activation, experience, and application.

4. Design for Speed, Agility, and Continuous Renewal

Clients expect faster responses, shorter design cycles, and programs that evolve constantly. Executive education teams need operating models that can update content quickly, respond to emerging needs, and deliver relevant interventions without months of delay.

5. Embed Geopolitics into Leadership Development

Geopolitical uncertainty is becoming a core business capability, not merely an academic pursuit. Schools should integrate scenario thinking, geopolitical risk, fragmentation, supply chain shifts, and strategic preparedness into leadership and strategy programs.

6. Use Future-Back Thinking to Reframe Growth

The future cannot be predicted, but it can be prepared for. Future-back methods help teams imagine both success and failure scenarios, uncover hidden assumptions, and identify the moves needed now to remain relevant in 2035 and beyond.

7. Pursue Growth with Local Trust and Clear Right to Win

Global growth opportunities remain strong across Asia, India, Southeast Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa — but there are no empty blue oceans. Success requires market focus, local partnerships, contextual intelligence, and a clear reason why the school has permission to win.

8. Build Partnerships That Extend Capability

Strategic partnerships — with other schools, associations, corporates, technology providers, and regional experts — can expand reach and capability. But they require clarity on roles, commercials, ownership, brand, customer experience, and exit routes from the start.

9. Develop Ambidextrous Leaders

Organizations need leaders who can both perform and transform. Executive education should help leaders navigate tensions: operating today while reinventing for tomorrow, implementing while experimenting, directing while coaching, and sustaining themselves while exploring new possibilities.

10. Strengthen Personal and Team Resilience

The pressures on executive education teams are intensifying. Resilience is now an operational capability. Leaders must manage energy, create space for recovery, surface what is unsaid, build psychological safety, and help teams absorb chaos while transmitting clarity.

Introduction

Set against the backdrop of Lake Geneva — with alpine air, clear skies, and mountains framing the horizon — UNICON’s 2026 Directors’ Conference brought together executive education leaders at a consequential moment.

“Has there ever been a more important time for us to be together?”

With that question, UNICON Executive Director Melanie Weaver Barnett opened the conference, describing the current moment as one of “poly-crisis.”

“Uncertainty leads us to seek out learning — and that’s what we try to provide our member schools with here at UNICON. Volatility leads us to seek out our tribes — and this is our tribe.”

Melanie Weaver Barnett, UNICON Executive Director

That sense of community was echoed by UNICON Board Chair Shalini Bhatia, who reminded participants: *“There is only one UNICON — and it’s an amazing community. Take the time to get to know one another.”*



Hosted by IMD in Lausanne, the conference benefited from a setting that encouraged both reflection and connection — from conversations on the terrace overlooking the lake, to shared experiences beyond the classroom, including visits to the Olympic Museum and excursions into the surrounding region.

IMD itself proved a fitting host. As one of the world’s leading executive education providers — and one of the few institutions focused almost entirely on executive education — the school brings a clear and consistent emphasis on impact. With around 85% of its activity dedicated to executive learning, and a long-standing presence near the top of global rankings for both open and custom programs, IMD embodies many of the themes explored throughout the conference.

Under the theme “*Leading in the Age of Intelligence: Executive Learning in a Fragmented World*,” the three days followed a deliberate arc.

- **Day One** focused on the current operating environment — AI, geopolitics, and the evolving needs of clients.
- **Day Two** shifted to the future — growth markets, strategic foresight, and where demand is heading.
- **Day Three** looked inward — to the enterprise itself: partnerships, talent, culture, and the capabilities required to deliver.



Across the three days, a clear pattern emerged. The executive education industry is being reshaped from both sides at once. AI is transforming what is taught and how it is delivered. At the same time, geopolitical fragmentation is reshaping who is being served, and in which markets. Against this backdrop, 2026 Directors’ conference set out to explore how executive education is evolving — and what that means for those leading it.

SESSION 1

AI Meets Executive Education

AI Meets Executive Education

The conference opened, as it almost had to, with a session focused on the force now reshaping executive education more than any other: artificial intelligence. Framed as both a rapid catch-up on the latest developments in AI and a practical look at what those developments mean for executive education, the session moved quickly from context to application.

Misiek Piskorski, IMD's Dean of Executive Education, opened with a simple show of hands. How many people in the room were using AI in their daily work? Everyone. How many considered themselves experts? No one.

From there, Piskorski offered a whistle-stop contextual catch-up on how the field arrived at this moment.

“The last 3.5 years have been a revolution. After about 80 years of research, in November 2022 ChatGPT made it out of the lab and into the hands of consumers.”

Misiek Piskorski, IMD's Dean of Executive Education

The speed of what followed, he noted, has been remarkable, with new companies and tools rapidly emerging, among them Perplexity, Claude, DeepSeek, and MistralAI.

Piskorski grounded the discussion in the underlying logic of large language models. It all starts, he said, with a simple autocomplete idea and Claude Shannon's mathematical theories on language modelling. Demonstrating how LLMs generate outputs through the processing and incremental addition of each next word, he pointed to a distinction between machine and human cognition.

“We can see that this is very different to how humans think. Humans have forethought, and to express that thought, we ‘fill in the blanks’ to get there.”

And yet, through this process of estimating what word should come next, these systems end up understanding what we mean by understanding the context of what is being said.

One of the clearest signs of AI's mounting relevance to education more broadly, and therefore to executive education, came in the usage data Piskorski shared. ‘Practical guidance’ has quickly become the top use case for AI globally. In 2024 already, 10% of AI use was on tutoring or teaching, and a further 8.5% was on how-to guides and advice. Not all of that is directly relevant to the executive market, or even to business education, but as a sign of exponential growth it is still remarkable.

Executive education teams are already experiencing the effects of this shift, seeing, *“Fewer and fewer direct visits to web pages, and lots of traffic coming via tools like Claude.”*

Piskorski also addressed some of the criticisms and scepticisms surrounding AI. Some argue AI is not ‘super creative’ yet, and that AI simply aggregates what already exists. But, he asked, is that not also what much innovation is? He pointed to pharmaceutical research, where research strategies are already being completely changed by these technologies, with potentially hugely beneficial effects on our lives and wellbeing.

Another common view is that AI cannot truly think, at least not in the sense of human reasoning. But if we watch how an AI works methodically through puzzles and problems via trial and error, Piskorski argues this resembles quite closely how we often think about our own capacity to reason.

For Piskorski, one of the most practical and potentially disruptive frontier developments in AI is personalization: in particular the ability for companies to integrate their own unstructured data to power these tools and personalize them in the culture and ways of working of the firm.

A second frontier is agentic AI, which he described as giving AI “eyes and arms,” allowing agents to work through tasks and workflows independently to reach a given high-level goal. And then there are coding agents. Coding agents, he noted, will write an entire app for you based on a single prompt.

From there, the discussion turned to what all this means for universities and business schools on the cusp of such large-scale disruption. Piskorski offered three predictions: 1. Disrupted universities will ask for more from its executive education function. 2. As AI powers learner personalization, it will become harder for providers to differentiate, with offerings becoming “similarly customized.”3. The cost of creating an amazing internal corporate university is falling massively.

He then mapped some of the implications for universities more broadly, arguing that higher education is now on the cusp of massive disruption - in four key domains:

- **In research**, AI already writes up research papers, conducts literature reviews, carries out analysis, collects data, and runs experiments. Soon, he suggested, AI may orchestrate a multi-agent research team, generate and test hypotheses, and publish them.
- **In assessments**, AI already continuously assesses competencies, recommends paths, and issues credentials based on capability. Soon, AI might displace universities as a mechanism for verifying skill and willingness to work hard.
- **In teaching**, AI-powered tutors already monitor each student, adapt content, trigger interventions, and coordinate with faculty. Soon, AI may orchestrate a multi-agent team to manage whole degrees, courses, and curricula.

- **In operations**, AI agents already guide students through enrolment, advising, and scheduling autonomously. Soon, AI will likely displace many administrators engaged in repetitive tasks.

Within this context, Piskorski posed the obvious question: what do we do in the face of these sometimes overwhelming and daunting challenges?

“Do we turn and run for the hills? No, we stay and fight.”

Misiek Piskorski, IMD's Dean of Executive Education

One answer, he said, and one that IMD is focusing on, is a relentless focus on impact at the level of the individual executive. Piskorski acknowledged that this level of impact is the hardest part of learning to scale. But he also suggested that AI may help here too. Diagnostics are key to providing personalization at scale, while generative AI can support interactivity and application, helping people put learning into action quickly and with visible results, for example through prototyping.

The session then shifted from presentation to application. Working in groups, participants used some of the tools Piskorski had covered to create a simulation of the impact of AI on executive education, gauging executive education's readiness for that impact across four dimensions: program design, delivery, operations, and research/content.

They were invited to reason with AI to understand how AI might change the field of executive education, given what is already happening in business undergraduate and graduate education. They were also asked to build a simulation to help understand potential futures of executive education, and the implications for existing business schools, non-school competitors, and new entrants.





In the subsequent debrief, participants described the exercise and the outputs they had created in such a short time as “*amazing*,” “*eye-opening*,” “*useful*,” and “*insightful*.” Several noted in particular the speed of the refinement they were able to achieve. Others reflected on how different it felt to use AI in a group setting. Usually, it is something used solo. Here, there was a sense that such exercises can collapse hierarchies, with junior and senior team members dialoguing with the machine on a more even keel.

At the same time, the exercise raised important questions of trust. How solid and robust was the data coming out? That in turn reinforced the importance of a human-in-the-loop approach: qualifying sources and verifying data.

The issue of confirmation bias also surfaced. Two teams had arrived at diametrically opposed simulation outcomes based on the inputs they had given. This brought critical thinking sharply back into focus: questioning the assumptions AI is making, including assumptions that a true domain expert might not make. In that sense, the session also underscored a deeper point about human expertise in an AI age — that sometimes the value of the input is greater than the value of the output.

Across the session, the message was both sobering and energizing. AI is of course moving incredibly fast, and its implications for executive education are immediate. The session suggested that the real opportunity lies in applying AI to the already strong role executive education plays in delivering impact and personalization, particularly as the wider university model comes under pressure.

SESSION 2

What the Learning Function Needs Today

What the Learning Function needs today

This panel brought together four senior learning leaders from global organizations to speak directly about how the learning function is evolving — and what that means for executive education partners.

Moderated by Anna Dunand, IMD's Chief Business Development Officer, the conversation focused on the current state of play inside corporate learning: how AI is reshaping priorities, what capability gaps remain, and what learning leaders now expect from external providers.

The discussion zeroed in from how learning functions are structured and experienced internally, to a more pointed and practical question: what do organizations now need from their learning partners?

Inside the Learning Function Today

Across the panel, there was a shared sense that the purpose of the learning function is expanding — beyond skills, into trust-building, working closer to the central strategy of the firm, and enabling future-readiness.

For Guillaume Delacour, Global Head of People Development at ABB, the role is clear: *“Equipping leaders and teams to help them grow for the future, and deliver results today.”*

For Mohini Ghai Kramer, Global Head of Learning and Development, ICRC (Redcross), the emphasis is different: *“For us it is about building trust throughout the organization more so than it is about building skills.”*

At Nestlé, Head of Corporate Learning, Development & Leadership, Mikala Larsen framed it in terms of execution and ownership: *“Ultimately we are here to enable our colleagues to make Nestlé’s strategy come true... we have a learner-centric view whereby individuals should decide how they will grow.”*

And for Filipe Dahlin, VP Global Talent, Philip Morris International, there is already a clear segmentation in how learning is delivered: *“Upskilling at scale is mostly done asynchronously and digitally, while ‘white glove’ support is provided for the small number of people who will go on to lead the company — and this is the piece where business schools can help.”*

Where the learning function sits within the wider organizational structure varies, and impacts how the work of L&D gets done:

At Nestlé and ABB, learning sits within HR, though Larsen noted that,

“It would be an interesting experiment to move learning closer to the central strategy of the company, and that is in fact the direction of travel for us.”

Dahlin took a more direct view: *“Learning needs to sit where the action happens, separate from HR. This means we own all the elements – talent pipelines; catalogues; platforms; data banks.”*

In decentralized organizations like ABB, there is some added nuance: *“We have the core learning – and this everyone goes through. Then we have distinct, specific regional programs... designed and delivered division by division,”* said Delacour.

Which leads to a broader challenge, as Kramer noted: *“The big challenge is making sure it’s aligned and co-ordinated across all these different parts of the organization.”*

This complexity is compounded by the pace of change. Dahlin pointed to a near future where learning becomes far more dynamic: *“We will soon have enough data to be much more dynamic... anticipating the needs of the learner, and reimagining interventions with a leadership outcome we have identified in mind.”*

At the same time, the nature of leadership itself is shifting. *“Leading humans, leading agents, orchestrating ecosystems and stakeholders,”* as Delacour put it.

And as AI is accelerating this shift, there is a feeling L&D teams are still faced with more questions than answers, in terms of what leaders need to thrive today. *“We talk about ‘critical thinking’ but critical thinking is not new,” said Dahlin. “Leaders have always needed to be critical thinkers... Ultimately critical thinking means leaders need to know a lot about AI to make better decisions.”*

From Internal Reality to External Expectations

From this starting point, the conversation moved to what learning leaders now expect, and increasingly demand, from external partners such as those represented in this very audience.

One message came through very clearly: the baseline has shifted.

“Everything that is ‘fact-based’ is no longer interesting to us. AI has taken that piece. What is interesting is how do we activate those facts?”

Mikala Larsen, Head of Corporate Learning, Development & Leadership, Nestlé

Speed is another defining expectation: *“We are looking for speed. We cannot wait for months. As soon as we have the idea, it has to be next Monday.”*

Alongside speed, there is a need for constant evolution: *“From learning partners the capability we need is agility: to constantly update your programs,”* said Delacour. *“Are you operating at the next frontier of what needs to be learned in leadership?”*

There is also a growing expectation that partners stay ahead of the curve.

“The fundamental disruption of everything in work hasn’t happened yet, but it will,” said Dahlin. “We are looking for partners that can stay with us and ahead of us.”

Filipe Dahlin, VP Global Talent, Philip Morris International

In terms of where within the organization learning around AI is needed most, at ABB, Delacour described three layers: “We have ‘AI for people’, ‘AI for function’, ‘AI for products’ — and there are different skills needed for each.”

But when it comes to where executive education is a best fit, the expectation is clear: “It’s the leadership side, the mindset shifts needed for leading transformations — not the technical skills.”

Tensions, Trade-offs, and Open Questions

The panel surfaced a number of tensions shaping the learning agenda, as L&D functions are operating amidst so much momentum and change.

One is the balance between speed and responsibility. “We are balancing the need for speed with the need to move ethically, and with data compliance and confidentiality,” said Kramer.

Another is the risk of over-reliance on AI. “‘AI slop’ in the workplace is a challenge,” said Delacour. “Over-reliance on AI leads to atrophy of your critical thinking.”

There are also practical challenges around governance. “We are having to become more centralized and guarded about all the many tools and services people are using,” said Larsen.

And a persistent gap between what is possible and what is permitted. “There’s a tension between the pace of evolution of these tools, and that vetting process,” said Dahlin. “We can’t yet use the full functionality of many of them.” He notes this as an area where learning partners could play a role: “To help leaders think and experiment outside of their own tech stack... because we have to stay good corporate citizens.”

The Shift Toward Experience, Personalization, and Impact

Looking ahead, the panel described a clear shift in what learning increasingly looks like, and what will be valued most highly.

Firstly, what is on its way out: generic programs are already disappearing. *“Generic programs... where it’s the same for everyone — that is over. We won’t do any more of those,”* said Dahlin.

In their place, highly tailored, high-touch experiences are emerging. *“White glove experiences for high-potentials... highly experienced and in-person,”* Dahlin continued. *“The future lies in this bigger scope of what experience can mean, built around a learning intervention.”*

Larsen sees learner-centricity combined with learning analytics as pivotal piece: *“Learning should know and understand the learner. Who they are, what prior learning they have, what are the specific needs of their role and market... and their preferences on how and when they like to learn.”*

At the same time, there was a strong belief that in-person learning still matters.

“We believe there is still space for in-person human interaction in learning. This is what we are betting on.”

Mohini Ghai Kramer, Global Head of Learning and Development, ICRC (Redcross)

AI is expected to play a major role in enabling this shift — particularly in personalization and scale. *“We know what people want — for example hyper-personalization in learning. It’s figuring out how to deliver it,”* said Delacour.



The Measurement Challenge

One key issue cut across the entire discussion: measurement - a topic that has forever been at the heart of executive education dialogue, but that can now be looked at afresh, with AI brings a new set of possibilities - and challenges - to the table.

“One challenge we have is laying more and more [tools etc.] on top of each other. How do we prove and measure their impact? It’s hard to capture, the ROI is elusive,”

Mikala Larsen, Head of Corporate Learning, Development & Leadership, Nestlé

There is also a growing recognition that more is not always better: *“We have to think in terms of addition by subtraction too... rather than layering on more and more tools.”*

Importantly, AI seems to promise an exciting way forward in this area: *“AI-powered personalization may well help capture impact... can AI help us prove and showcase the impact we know and feel we have in L&D?”*

Dahlin pointed to a more data-driven future: *“Corpus-correlated analysis will allow you to see which bets worked in learning, and what didn’t.”*

And with that, a clear warning: *“If we can’t crack the measurement of learning impact, given that we will be able to measure everything else... that’s when we would be out of the game.”*



How Will Learning Partners Differentiate

As the discussion drew to a close, the panel distilled what they are ultimately looking for in a partner.

For Dahlin, it is a combination of roles: “A triumvirate of: the events organizer; the psychologist; and someone who just understands me — an expert in my needs.”

It is also about originality and perspective: “People who will win are going to be the ones who think very originally and far out there, away from the current state.”

There was also a sense that executive education still has a strong foundation to build on: “Traditionally you [executive education] have been the intelligence — building the models that drive business,” said Larsen. “Don’t give up — believe in that legacy.”

At the same time, the horizon is shifting fast. “In the future we will be talking to an agentic IMD professor, built on the combined expertise of all the IMD faculty... all accessible in your pocket,” mused Delacour.

And organizations are already preparing for more extreme scenarios:

“We are working with our partners... to help predict any ‘nuclear’ moments of disruption,” he added.



SESSION 3

The Geopolitical Chessboard and the New Economic Order

The Geopolitical Chessboard and the New Economic Order

This session stepped back from the immediacy of AI and learning design to explore a different, but equally powerful force shaping executive education, and equally front of mind for all in attendance: geopolitics.

Led by Karl Schmedders, Professor of Finance, and Richard Baldwin, Professor of International Economics, the session examined the structural shifts in the global economy already affecting clients — and, by extension, the role executive education plays in helping leaders navigate them. While many in the room are already immersed in geopolitical news and analysis, the conversation pushed further, asking a more specific question: what does all of this mean for our industry?

Schmedders opened with a reminder for us to maintain perspective. “A lot of what we will cover today are the cold-hearted business implications of geopolitics — but it’s important to remember... people are dying in these various conflicts around the world, and that is more important.”

The session moved into the evolving landscape of global risk. Drawing on data from the World Economic Forum and Allianz risk management, Schmedders highlighted a convergence of concerns at the top of global risk agendas: AI and cyber risk and the economic impact of AI; climate change; and geoeconomic and geopolitical conflict.

The central question for participants in the room to wrestle with was: how does geopolitics affect executive education?

From Checkers to 3D Chess

To answer that, the discussion first unpacked why today’s geopolitical environment feels so complex.

“Trade and investment was safe when we were growing up. What changed?” Schmedders asked, noting that only a few years ago, highly interconnected global supply chains were seen as an unquestioned good.

Baldwin described the evolution of geopolitics through the analogy of games. The Cold War, he suggested, was like checkers: relatively simple, two clear sides, limited interaction, and many draws. There was little trade between the blocs, and the structure was easy to understand.

That world is gone, Baldwin cautioned — and cannot be recreated. The two ‘sides’ are now deeply intertwined through trade and economic dependency.

The next phase, dominated by the United States as a global superpower, was likened to bingo. The US was dominant across multiple dimensions — economic, military, cultural, and technological.

But that phase has also shifted. Around 2017, Baldwin argued, the US “decided to stop leading economically,” pointing to events such as the Trump presidency and Brexit in the UK as markers of that change.

Today’s world, by contrast, resembles 3D chess. A “G-zero world” — where no single nation or group is in charge, and different players dominate in different domains. The US remains hegemonic in the financial system, the dollar, and military power, but has stepped back from leadership in economic affairs. No overarching system has replaced it. The result? A new reality, where uncertainty is here to stay.

What Changed — and Why It Matters

Two major structural shifts underpin this new complexity. First, the changing balance of economic power. The relative economic weight of the US and G7 has declined as China has risen.

“In 35 years China went from quite a poor country, to the number one manufacturer in the world.”

China’s industrial strength has become a defining feature of the global system — even as its own growth rate has slowed from the double-digit levels seen between 1980 and 2012.

Second, the internal dynamics within the United States itself. Baldwin pointed to the declining life expectancy of certain segments of the US population — particularly those without a college degree — as an indicator of deeper social and economic fractures. “This is where the American dream ended,” he lamented, pointing to a particularly stark graph.

In this context, political narratives around globalization and trade take on a different meaning. “Trump blames foreigners and foreign powers for this,” Baldwin noted, adding that this in turn shapes what is politically possible in terms of trade agreements and global cooperation.

Three Possible Futures

Looking ahead, Schmedders outlined three plausible geopolitical scenarios — not as predictions, but as ways of thinking about an uncertain future.

The first is managed fragmentation, where US leadership continues to retreat, regional trade blocs deepen, and China competes within certain constraints.

The second is hard fragmentation, where US–China decoupling intensifies, and the world splits more clearly into competing blocs across technology, finance, and supply chains. In this scenario, organizations may be forced to “pick a lane,” with security considerations overriding economic ones.

The third is chaotic volatility, marked by policy unpredictability and frequent shocks, from conflict to financial instability.

“The future is unknowable but inevitable. All of you will have to decide...what is going to happen.”

Karl Schmedders, Professor of Finance,

Studying geopolitics, in this sense, is less about prediction and more about preparedness. It is about developing the “sonar, radar and muscle,” as Baldwin said, to sense what is happening and respond.

Implications for Executive Education

For many in the room, the most striking part of the session was how directly these dynamics connect to executive education. Despite the scale and importance of geopolitical shifts, only a little over half of participants indicated that they currently offer programs on geopolitics, while very few offer week-long programs on the topic.

Schmedders drew an interesting parallel. “15 years ago the same could be said about sustainability programs.”

The implication was clear: geopolitics may follow a similar trajectory, moving from a niche topic to a core component of leadership development. He challenged:

“Are you embedding geopolitics into the strategy components of your exec-ed programs yet? Perhaps you should...”

Karl Schmedders, Professor of Finance

This is not just about adding new content, but about changing how organizations think and plan. Many firms, Schmedders noted, are moving away from traditional forecasting, having been repeatedly let down by it, and toward scenario analysis and managing against worst-case outcomes.

Past IMD dean, Jean-François Manzoni, once remarked: “Too many firms think of us as vitamin C, and not as aspirin.” In a world shaped by geopolitical uncertainty, that distinction becomes more urgent. If executive education is seen as something that is “nice to have,” it risks being sidelined. But if it can position itself as something organizations turn to in moments of real need — to make sense of complexity, to prepare for disruption, to support critical decisions — its role becomes far more central.

SESSION 4

Peer Exchange

Speed Consulting

The final session of Day One at the conference, shifted focus from expert input to peer-to-peer exchange, giving participants the opportunity to work directly on the challenges they are currently facing in their own institutions.

Facilitated by Anna Dunand, the ‘speed consulting’ format was simple but effective. Participants submitted a pressing challenge in advance, which were then clustered into themes and assigned to tables. Over three 15-minute rounds, participants rotated between groups, each time engaging with a new set of peers who brought different perspectives, experiences, and ideas.

The structure created a fast-paced, highly practical environment, allowing participants to test assumptions, gather input, and see how others are approaching similar issues across different contexts.

In the debrief, a number of shared concerns and observations surfaced, reflecting the current pressures facing executive education. Some pointed to the impact of wider economic conditions: “If firms are laying people off, it’s hard to justify sending leaders on exec-ed programs.” Others noted signals from adjacent parts of the market: “The MBA intake suffering could be a canary in the coalmine for business education more broadly.”

There was also a sense that the market itself may be fragmenting further:

“Further segmentation of the market into in-person vs. online.” While operational pressures were another recurring theme. “Everyone’s working on efficiency now, but that means little space to be innovative.” And alongside this, a shift in commercial focus: “The rising cost of client acquisition means more focus on repeat business and community building.”

The session did not aim to produce solutions that would apply to everyone, rather its value lay in the exchange itself — surfacing shared challenges, testing ideas quickly, and reinforcing the role of the UNICON community as a space for open, practical dialogue.

SESSION 5

Future-Back Exercise

Future-Back Exercise

Day Two opened with a highly interactive session led by Knut Haanaes, Professor of Strategy, Lundin Chair of Sustainability at IMD, inviting participants to step out of the present moment and think more deliberately about the future, and how to prepare for it.

Haanaes began with a simple question: “Who here is good at living in the present?” Not many hands went up.

“To talk about the future, we need to be in the present. But it’s human to be distracted by the past and the future. Being present is an amazing skill.”

Knut Haanaes, Professor of Strategy, Lundin Chair of Sustainability at IMD

He connected this to a common challenge he hears from executives: “We have great processes and tools for short-term improvement, but we lack tools and processes for the longer term.”

In a world where navigating the future often means having zero visibility, long-term thinking requires a different kind of preparedness, and a different way of framing problems.

The Power of “Future-Back” Thinking

Haanaes introduced the concept of “future-back” thinking through a series of examples.

He told the story of Alfred Nobel, who made his fortune through dynamite production. When a newspaper mistakenly published his obituary — describing him as the “Merchant of Death” — it prompted something of a moral epiphany. Nobel went on to bequeath the bulk of his estate to establish the Nobel Prizes.

This, Haanaes suggested, encapsulates the power of looking at the future and asking: “How do we get to the future we want?”

He drew parallels with elite athletes, who often envision success — a medal, a title — and then work backwards with their coaches and teams to determine how to get there. The key lies in framing.

In one example, a champagne company Haanaes was consulting with at the time, was struggling through a brand purpose exercise, producing only very ‘vanilla’ ideation results. Then someone hit on a powerful reframe for the business: “We’re about better celebrations.” That shift unlocked a wave of new ideas — across branding, marketing, and product development.

A similar shift transformed a pet food business. Moving from “pet food” to “pet care” opened up entirely new areas of growth — from insurance to veterinary services — turning it into one of the largest brands in the P&G portfolio.

Amazon, he noted, uses future-back thinking in its product development, while NASA famously did something similar with the moon landing — announcing the goal before knowing how it would be achieved: “How to do it was never addressed before the announcement was made.”

Reframing the Question

Before moving into the main exercise, Haanaes led a short warm-up to demonstrate the power of reframing.

“Do you think Swiss Rail is owned by China in 2037?”

Aware of how proud the Swiss are of their railways, no one said yes. Haanaes then reframed the question:

“It’s the year 2037 and Swiss Rail is owned by China — how did we get here?”

The shift removes the instinct to judge probability (“how likely is this?”) — and instead opens up space to imagine plausible pathways.

The same pattern emerged with other examples, including one particularly powerful one:

“In 2030, will we be recycling 99% of our plastics globally?”

versus

“We are in 2030 and we are recycling 99% of our plastics globally — how did that happen?”

The first question tends to shut down thinking and the recycling goal feels close to impossible. The second generates ideas. Even if the outcome still feels extremely hard - a set of plausible ideas emerged, unlocked by framing alone.

Two Futures for Executive Education

Participants were split into groups and asked to work through two parallel scenarios.

In one: "It is 2035, and executive education has had its best year ever. How did it happen?"

In the other: "It is 2035, and executive education no longer exists. What happened?"

Working backwards, groups were asked to map the timelines, decisions, and shifts that would have led to these outcomes, and to do so as observers: "You are journalists describing what happened... not a character in the story." This framing removed individual bias and encouraged a more detached, systemic view.



What Emerged

In the “best year ever” scenario, most groups - interestingly - focused on supply-side innovation rather than demand-side change.

Several recurring ideas emerged:

“100 business schools group together to offer learning anytime, anywhere — enabled with AI — an exec-ed robot in your pocket.”

“Government provided incentives toward lifelong learning.”

“Executive education partners with tech firms, delivering a successful new product range of AI-powered personal learning coaches.”

“Executive education pivots to helping people lead a more purposeful life, broadening their market.”

And, in one case:

“A Taylor Swift tour wrapped around business education.”

In the “no longer exists” scenario, the themes were equally revealing.

“Big tech takes over their market share. Institutions are too slow to adapt, not agile enough.”

“We doubled down on human skills, but 80% of the workforce are now agents and it kills demand.”

“There is backlash against ‘executives’ and traditional managerial hierarchies from Gen Z... and anything related to that old system, including exec-ed, dies off.”

“The collapse of work: ‘workforce’ as a concept disappears. Should have focused on the individual rather than organizations.”

“There is a slow shift away from evidence-based learning. It lacked measurable impact and failed to stay relevant.”

During the debrief, one participant reflected on how the exercise evolved:

“We spent the first part in a dark space, but we ended up thinking about what is the phoenix that rises from the ashes... executive education may not be there, but perhaps, for example, lifelong learning is.”

Haanaes closed with a simple sum-up: “Re-framing doesn’t give us all the answers, but it helps us prepare for the future and surfaces opportunities that may be hidden.”

SESSION 6

Global Growth - Where Are the Blue Oceans?

Where Are the Blue Oceans?

This session shifted the lens from disruption and strategy to growth, asking a practical question for executive education providers: where are the real opportunities in the global market today?

Led by Mark Greeven, Dean of Asia and Professor of Management Innovation at IMD, the session combined data, experience, and examples from the field to map where demand is growing fastest, and which approaches are working in different markets.

A Fragmented but Growing Market

One of the clearest signals of growth comes from Asia. The corporate e-learning market alone has expanded rapidly, from \$27 billion in 2024 to a forecast \$100 billion by 2030. While not identical to executive education, this is a strong indicator of demand for learning at scale.

Mainland China, in particular, stands out as a “red hot” market, with growth rates between 13–17%. The dominant areas of demand are leadership and digital transformation, though the competitive landscape is shifting fast. AI-powered learning from domestic providers is now dominant, and the market share of foreign providers is declining, with increasing competition from non-business school players.

Across other regions, the picture is similarly dynamic:

- **India (CAGR ~15%)** — driven by digital cohorts, national skilling policies, and a shortage of global-quality programs in Tier-1 cities
- **Southeast Asia (CAGR >10%)** — with ASEAN corporate expansion, Indonesia’s growth, and Singapore as a gateway
- **Latin America (CAGR ~10%)** — led by Brazil and Mexico, with strong adoption of hybrid formats and demand for ESG and sustainability
- **Middle East (CAGR ~9%)** — fuelled by GCC investment, Saudi Vision 2030, and government-sponsored leadership pipelines
- **Africa (CAGR ~9%)** — still the most underserved continent, but with a young workforce, growing corporate sector, and rising demand in tech and fintech leadership

Despite these opportunities, Greeven cautioned: “All of the blue oceans are red oceans in a way, there’s a lot of competition in these regions already — but still a lot of opportunities.”

Bridging Markets and Building Trust

Drawing on IMD's experience, Greeven described how working across regions has revealed unexpected commonalities. He shared an example of a Peruvian company that expanded into Singapore and China, with IMD supporting them along the way. Experiences like this highlighted an opportunity to connect leaders across regions who are facing similar challenges, even while they operate in very different contexts.

This led to the creation of cross-regional immersive programs, bringing together participants from different parts of the world to meet companies, share experiences, and learn from one another. One byproduct of a fragmented global landscape, is lack of direct competition between participants, helping to make a program like this possible.

At the same time, success in new markets depends on trust. "The core value proposition of IMD works the same as it does for a Swiss business, whether in India or Indonesia — we just need a bit of extra sauce to establish trust in these new regions."

That "extra sauce" often comes through partnerships. In India, IMD worked with the Confederation of Indian Industry; in Indonesia, with Danatara Indonesia. These partnerships provide legitimacy, credibility, and access, often supported by co-created thought leadership and case studies.

New Business Models Emerging

One of the most discussed parts of the session was Greeven's exploration of new, tech-driven business models emerging in China. He shared three examples — Bosum, Action, and Key Logic — each illustrating different approaches to scale, customer acquisition, and program delivery.

Bosum, in particular, stood out as both provocative and original. Founded in 2006 and headquartered in Shenzhen, the company operates 11 delivery centres, offers 200+ online programs, and reaches over 200,000 corporate executives. Its model combines online and offline learning, with executive programs accounting for around 45% of revenue.

What captured attention was its approach to marketing and growth. Bosum uses short-form video and social media — particularly Douyin — to promote faculty intellectual property and attract learners. Faculty themselves are influencers, with millions of followers. The model relies heavily on their ability to communicate and engage at scale.

Behind this is a highly data-driven system. Through a "horse racing" approach, content is produced at scale — two days of filming can generate thousands of short video clips, which are then distributed across multiple accounts. This enables large-scale A/B testing, with algorithms matching content to audiences and driving conversion.

The funnel is set-up to convert across multiple audiences: low-priced online programs attract large numbers of participants, who are then offered high-end in-person programs, and even customized offerings.

This is a “tech-driven business model,” in the true sense, with a strong focus on efficiency and performance, including commissions of up to 50% for sales agents. The reaction in the room was mixed. Some saw it as shallow — a “TikTok-ification” of learning. Others were more pragmatic: “It doesn’t matter the colour of the cat as long as it catches the mouse,” offered Greeven.

Three Strategic Approaches

Drawing these threads together, Greeven summarized three broad approaches for executive education providers looking to grow internationally:

- **Cross-regional immersions** — leveraging fragmentation to bring together leaders from different markets
- **Ecosystem partnerships** — building local legitimacy while maintaining core offerings
- **Software-enabled solutions** — using technology to scale delivery and engagement

Finding Your “Blue Ocean”

The session closed with a practical exercise, asking participants to map their own portfolios and identify one “blue ocean” market for the next 24 months. Using a simple four-quadrant framework, markets were assessed based on demand and the institution’s “right to win”:

- **Build-to-Win** — high demand, low right to win: invest in research and partnerships
- **Blue Ocean** — high demand and strong right to win: move in the next 24 months
- **Exit / Avoid** — low demand, low legitimacy: do not invest further
- **Harvest** — strong position but slowing demand: maintain margins without further investment

The exercise reinforced the central message of the session: while the global landscape is becoming more competitive and complex, opportunities for growth remain out there for business schools. Capitalizing on them requires clarity, focus, and a willingness to adapt both strategy and delivery models to very different regional realities.

SESSION 7

Are You Future Ready?

Strategic Talent Solutions

Are You Future Ready?

Following a series of sessions exploring disruption, geopolitics, and growth, the final session of day two turned the focus inward, asking a more immediate question for participants and their organizations: are we ready - personally - for what comes next?

Led by Dean Misiek Piskorski, the session introduced IMD's Strategic Talent Solutions framework, applying it to the context of executive education providers.

"Our strategic talent solutions are all about amplifying the impact of executed," Piskorski began, "We're responsible for impact."

At IMD, this ambition is explicit, and something conference attendees could not fail to get a strong sense of across the three days: "We set ourselves the goal of becoming the most impactful business school in the world."

A System Designed for Impact

The framework presented is built around a sequence of reinforcing elements, each designed to strengthen the link between learning and performance. It starts with a performance model, focused on the factors that make the biggest difference to company outcomes, grounded in ongoing research.

From there, assessments are used to uncover hidden talent and generate insight — while also personalizing the learning journey and increasing buy-in from participants.

These insights feed into targeted development plans, designed to create what Piskorski described as "positive tension for change," around the gaps needing to be closed.

Learning is then delivered through personalized, connected, multimodal experiences that build over time, rather than as isolated interventions.

At the organizational level, company reporting provides a clearer picture of the overall talent pool and its development needs. And critically, impact measurement is embedded throughout — allowing institutions to show a clear "delta" between baseline and outcome, and to attribute value more directly to the learning experience.

From Programs to Impact

Piskorski explains how this approach is closely woven into IMD's flagship program, the Orchestrating Winning Performance (OWP) program. Held annually, OWP brings together around 500 executives for an intensive week on campus, with over 50 faculty and a number of high-profile keynote speakers.

Participants can choose from 12 different thematic streams, shaping their own learning journey across the week — with these choices informed by the Strategic Talent Solutions assessments and individualized reporting.

One rule for faculty stands out: "You have to teach something you've never taught before." The aim being to ensure content remains fresh, innovative, and closely tied to new ideas and emerging practice.

Impact measurement is taken seriously. IMD reports an 80% response rate to post-program impact assessments, which is driven in part by personalization. "Remember you said you wanted to get better at negotiations?" their surveys ask, "We want to check in on that." A follow-up like this is clearly more powerful than traditional "happy sheet" evaluations.

The Leadership Challenge: Perform and Transform

At the heart of the session was a broader leadership challenge, one that sits behind many of the changes discussed throughout the conference. "We are all operating in a paradox or tension... of perform vs transform," Piskorski said. On one side is performance: running the business, delivering results today. On the other is transformation: changing the business, preparing for the future, "These dual transformations are everywhere."

Piskorski illustrated this with the example of Shell: Executives might attend a session at 9am on how to extract oil more efficiently — and another at 10am on how to exit oil altogether.

The question becomes: "What kinds of leaders have the ability both to perform and transform?"

The Rise of the Ambidextrous Leader

Drawing on IMD's research, based on insights from around 20,000 leaders each year, Piskorski described the concept of the "ambidextrous leader."

These are leaders who can navigate multiple tensions at once, using situational judgement to decide when to prioritize one mode over another. They operate in what he described as the "ambi zone" — the ability to choose and execute effectively across competing demands. This plays out across several key paradoxes:

Strategy — Operator ↔ Transformer

Execution — Implementer ↔ Experimenter

Stakeholders — Administrator ↔ Networker

People — Conductor ↔ Coach

Self — Regenerator ↔ Explorer

"Leadership is full of profound trade-offs," says Piskorski, adding, "Only around 12% of leaders are able to master all of these paradoxes."

Misiek Piskorski, IMD's Dean of Executive Education

Implications for Executive Education Importantly, developing ambidextrous leaders is not about replacing one strength with another, but about building new capabilities on top of existing ones. For executive education providers, there are several implications.

Piskorski says the largest group of leaders falls into the "not ambidextrous" category — suggesting both a significant development need and a strong motivation to change. Other groups show partial capability — strong on business but not on people, or vice versa — raising the question of where to focus development efforts.

The key takeaway is that leadership needs are not uniform. *"Understanding that the needs of different leaders vary — different leaders need different things — helps us have more impact."*

The session reinforced a theme running through the conference: impact is becoming the defining measure of executive education. Not just delivering programs, but diagnosing needs, personalizing journeys, supporting change, and demonstrating tangible outcomes.

In a world defined by constant tension between present performance and future transformation, the ability to develop leaders who can operate in both, can be a fruitful strategic goal for executive education.

SESSION 8

Building Strategic Partnerships at Scale

Building Strategic Partnerships at Scale

This session focused on a strategic question that is increasingly prominent in executive education: how to build partnerships that extend reach and capability, without losing what makes an institution distinctive.

Led by Anna Dunand, the session explored both school-to-school partnerships and collaborations with non-school providers, facilitating participants to surface opportunities, as well as potential blind spots to look out for when considering a new partnership.

Participants worked in groups to unpack their own experiences and assumptions, before sharing back a set of practical considerations, tensions, and lessons.

Why Partnerships — and What Makes Them Work

Across both types of partnership, there was a clear recognition of the value they can create in today's executive education markets - and a lot of crowd-sourced experience from the room - firstly on partnerships between schools:

School to school partnerships often emerge from strong underlying relationships or 'chemistry' — whether between faculty with shared interests or complementary expertise, or through broader institutional alignment and history.

Leadership alignment helps too, for instance at Dean level.

Establishing clearly defined roles that play to the strengths of each partner is critical.

There is also a need to be explicit about purpose: What is the strategic rationale for the partnership?

And just as importantly: *“What's in it for me?”*

When partnerships work, they allow schools to combine strengths, access new audiences, and create something that neither could do alone.

With non-school partners, the value proposition is often more functional and capability-driven. These partners can:

- **Provide access** to new markets
- **Offer expertise in specific areas** — such as tax, compliance, or regulatory environments in regions like MENA
- **Bring credibility or legitimacy** through an established presence in a given market

In some cases, the complementarity is very clear. Industry associations, for example, may be able to fill a classroom but lack their own content — creating a natural fit with a business school.

Other partnerships bring different kinds of strengths. Reflecting on IMD's experience working with the learning academy of large professional services firm, one insight stood out: *"They are highly application-focused — even by IMD's standards... it's at the next level."*

At the same time, their gaps were in the "secret sauce" of learning design and education that a business school can bring. There is also something to learn from how these partners engage the market. *"They go straight to the business leaders — not via L&D,"* as Piskorski noted. *"Once they are bought in... they say to the L&D leaders, 'we need to work with these guys.'"*

Blind Spots, Risks, and Tensions

Alongside these opportunities, the session surfaced a number of challenges and blind spots:

For school-to-school partnerships, one of the first hurdles is commercial: How do you make the financials work? Revenue share, profit share, and cost allocation all need to be clearly defined from the outset.

There are also structural questions: Do you have a decision-making process that enables partnerships — or slows them down?

And operational clarity is essential. Roles and responsibilities need to be explicit, particularly around delivery and client engagement.

For non-school partnerships, the challenges can be even more complex:

Brand equity is one area of tension. If a larger brand lends its reputation to a smaller partner, there is often an expectation of value in return.

Customer ownership is another: Who owns the client after the first intervention is complete?

And there are deeper questions around alignment: Is there alignment on brand, values, and ways of working?

Participants also highlighted a number of practical challenges and considerations:

Who owns any content created through the partnership?

Who owns different stages of the customer journey — from sales to follow-up?

When and how do you exit the partnership if it is no longer working?

There are also risks that can be underestimated:

Non-school providers may not fully appreciate the challenge of filling programs — even for institutions with strong brands and significant marketing spend.

At the same time, partnerships can introduce additional cost pressures. With two organizations involved, the cost of client acquisition can rise significantly.

And across both types of partnership, there is a need to guard against unexpected changes in cost or scope over time.

“Trust and transparency are key to a lot of these,” as Anna Dunand noted.

Balancing Value and Viability

A recurring theme in the discussion was the tension between commercial sustainability and long-term value. As one participant noted, while the goal may be to build a commercially sustainable system, an overly narrow focus on revenue at the outset can prevent a partnership from getting off the ground.

Instead, successful partnerships tend to start with a clear strategic rationale, strong alignment, and a shared understanding of value, with commercial models evolving over time.

As the landscape becomes more competitive and more fragmented, the ability to collaborate — across institutions, sectors, and capabilities — may become a key differentiator. The challenge is to do so in a way that is intentional, transparent, and grounded in a clear understanding of both the opportunities and the risks.

SESSION 9

Your Own Personal Resilience

Your Own Personal Resilience

After several sessions focused on strategy, markets, and disruption, this session offered crucial space to address something more personal: the human capacity to navigate all of it.

Led by Susan Goldsworthy — who is a unique combination of PhD, Olympian, and reverend — the session explored what it takes to sustain high performance in a world defined by uncertainty, disruption, and constant change.

Her starting point was stark: *“We’ve lived through the loss of the assumptive world.”* The assumptions that once underpinned daily life — stability, predictability, freedom of movement — have been shaken. The effects of COVID, followed by banking crises, geopolitical conflict, and the rapid rise of AI, have left many operating in a prolonged state of stress and uncertainty.

“We are a social species. We thrive in company. When that is restricted, we suffer.” Some groups, she noted, have been particularly affected — including children who started school or university during the pandemic, missing critical periods of social development.

And while technology has filled some gaps, it cannot replace human connection.

“AI gives us no social nourishing,” she warns.

A World That Demands More

Goldsworthy widened the lens, pointing to broader systemic pressures. Water scarcity is becoming a critical global issue. The infrastructure behind AI — particularly data centres — is highly resource-intensive: *“Every ten prompts you make is like emptying a glass of water.”* At the same time, progress toward the UN Sustainable Development Goals remains limited: *“How many are we on track to hit? Zero.”*

These challenges are global, interconnected, and require cooperation, yet that cooperation is often lacking. Goldsworthy pointed to the emergence of the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) - of which IMD is a founding partner, and which focus on developing the internal capabilities — thinking, collaborating, acting — needed to respond to the challenges of sustainable development. The central concept here: before we can change systems, we need to work on ourselves.

Not Just Time Management, Energy Management

At the heart of the session was Goldsworthy's idea that thriving in uncertainty is about managing one's energy. She introduced a framework of four "energy zones" to illustrate the challenge:

Survival Zone (high energy, negative energy) — fearful, defensive, anxious

Performance Zone (high energy, positive energy) — confident, connected, challenged

Burnout Zone (low energy, negative energy) — exhausted, defeated, hopeless

Recovery Zone (low energy, positive energy) — calm, peaceful, restored

Research across 9,000 executives suggests that many spend most of their time oscillating between survival and burnout — with the recovery zone receiving the least attention.

The challenge, she argued, is not to wait for recovery — holidays, breaks, time off — but to build it into daily life. *"How do you get to the recovery zone every day?"*

Reframing Our Responses

A key theme running through the session was the need to consciously shift how we respond to pressure. Our brains are naturally wired toward negative states — a protective mechanism. That means thriving is not automatic. It requires deliberate effort.

In practical terms, this can be as simple as reframing how we interpret physical and emotional signals. Referencing Simon Sinek, Goldsworthy described how feelings of nervousness — a racing heart, clammy hands, anticipation — can be reframed as excitement. Saying it out loud: *"This is exciting,"* while acknowledging the symptoms, and choosing how to interpret them - can have a powerful effect.

This kind of shift — from threat to opportunity — is central to what Goldsworthy described as "playing to thrive," rather than "playing to avoid."

Practical Tools for Resilience

The session closed with practical techniques, including mindfulness. Described as a "magic pill," mindfulness offers a way to reconnect body and mind through something as simple as breath.

Participants were guided through a breathing exercise, illustrating how quickly this can shift attention and energy. The benefits are wide-ranging — reducing stress and anxiety, improving focus and decision-making, and supporting overall wellbeing.

SESSION 10

Building Your Team Resilience

Building Your Team Resilience

The final session of the conference brought the focus fully back to participants' own personal experience, with the aim of leaving everyone with something practical to take away and apply with their teams.

Led by Katharina Lange, Affiliate Professor of Leadership at IMD, the session built on the personal resilience themes from earlier in the day, but shifted to the team level - addressing the fact that many executive education teams are operating under sustained pressure, dealing with repeated shocks, constant change, and increasing demands.

Resilience, in this framing, is far abstract. Lange's definition: *"Resilience is the capability of a system, organization or person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in face of dramatically changed circumstances."*

She also noted that resilience is fundamentally a reactive capability, in that resilience is a quality that is only truly revealed when situations become difficult.

"It takes situations changing dramatically... to reveal whether people or teams have resilience."

Katharina Lange, Affiliate Professor of Leadership at IMD



What Resilience Looks Like, Individually and Collectively

At the individual level, resilience is closely tied to realism and agency. Resilient individuals tend to demonstrate:

- Self-awareness and a staunch sense of reality
- Pragmatism and resourcefulness
- The ability to act — to use agency
- A connection to meaning and purpose

In some cases, resilience even shows up as departure. *“When healthy individuals join a dysfunctional team they are likely to leave after a short time — a sign of resilience as a survival skill.”*

At the team level, resilience takes on a more collective form - with resilient teams tending to have:

- Strong mental models of how they work together — an understanding of how others think and act
- The capacity to improvise, drawing on diverse experience
- A sense of potency — balancing confidence with caution
- Psychological safety that allows for sensemaking

Surfacing What Is Unsaid

One of the most powerful parts of the session focused on what is often left unspoken within teams. The question Lange posed: “What aren’t we saying?”

When explored openly, this surfaces underlying tensions and anxieties that might otherwise remain hidden.

Examples shared included:

- Shifting roles and changes happening behind closed doors
- Erosion of trust
- Concerns about compensation and its link to performance

- Fear of layoffs and job security
- Disengagement and lack of innovation
- The underutilized capacity of middle layers

Naming these issues is not easy, but it is often necessary for teams to move forward.

Five Practical Tools

The session concluded with a set of five practical tools that participants could take back and apply immediately - aimed at creating the conditions for openness, learning, and adaptability:

- 1. The pre-mortem:** Before any major initiative, ask: if this failed, why did it fail?
- 2. Good News Friday:** Share one thing that worked, and one person who helped — and name them publicly.
- 3. “What aren’t we saying?”:** A monthly 20-minute conversation with no agenda except honesty.
- 4. Celebrate intelligent failure:** Recognize teams that tried something bold and failed well.
- 5. The personal resilience contract:** Leaders openly share their own limits and edges with their teams.

Absorbing Chaos, Transmitting Clarity

As the session and conference drew to a close, one idea stood out: “The challenge for all of us is to absorb chaos and transmit clarity.”

In environments defined by uncertainty, this becomes a core leadership task, one that requires both personal and collective resilience.

Closing the conference, Melanie Weaver Barnett reflected on the broader role of the community: “We’re still here because we know how to learn — and to base that learning on evidence.”

It was a fitting end to a conference that had moved from meaning, to action, to strategy, and finally to the people and teams responsible for carrying that work forward.





UNICON DIRECTORS' CONFERENCE 2026

Leading in the Age of Intelligence: Executive Learning in a Fragmented World

Impressions, insights, and takeaways from
UNICON's Directors' Conference 2026 hosted by
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