

Shape the Future Consortium Conference 2026: key themes and discussions

Introduction

"We deliberately didn't call it Shaping the Future. We put it as a command – Shape the Future. I think that's an obligation rather than an option." - Dr Nigel Paine, co-founder, Shape the Future Consortium

The second Shape the Future Consortium Conference, held at Nyenrode Business University, explored the four major themes that guide the work of the consortium: sustainability, AI for good, skills and leadership.

This year's event built on the inaugural event at INSEAD by digging deeper into how the group of 60 learning and talent leaders, many representing global employers, can help affect change around these themes.

"With the kind of roles that we have and the number of people that we touch, we can change organisations and possibly change the world," Dr Paine said.

This report explores the key insights from the event.

Navigating institutional friction

The conference opened with a diagnostic look at organizational health through the lens of a red/amber/green framework. Delegates discussed a set of scenarios and scored them based on whether they were working well (green), mixed or inconsistent (amber) or problematic or stuck (red). Kimo Kppen argued that healthy organisations thrive by deliberately identifying and engaging with red signals across the six critical areas that were discussed amongst the group. The aim was not reassurance based on green signals, but the challenge of working on the red indicators.

Red is not a sign of failure but an indicator of necessary challenge and an indicator of progress. That said, leaders need to be aware when red challenges reflect the wrong kind of behaviors, and are indicators of stress and being overwhelmed, for example.

Another major theme was the friction caused by risk-avoidance. Delegates noted that many corporate cultures reward escalation rather than ownership, leading to a paralysis that prevents the speed of action required in the current business landscape.

The session also highlighted the need for regular, low-risk experimentation as an alternative to innovation theatre, where large-scale projects are often launched without the agility to pivot. This requires leaders who can create psychological safety while modelling a genuine learning-to-learn mindset.

In summing up the session, Paine urged delegates to push for:

- Clear ownership and speed in decisions (versus escalation and risk-avoidance)
- Real use of customer data in daily decisions (versus abstracted or ignored insights)
- Responsible, human-led AI judgment, not blind automation
- Learning in the flow of work (continuous feedback loops), not just at big events



- Regular, low-risk experimentation instead of innovation theatre
- Leaders who create clarity, safety and model learning.

Red is not automatically bad, he said. It can be a sign of necessary challenge and progress, as long as you're moving through it rather than being crushed by it.

Sustainability

Maria Kottari, founder of the Energy Matrix, framed sustainability as the defining existential issue for current and future leaders.

She highlighted that the 2025 Planetary Health Check report (https://www.planetaryhealthcheck.org/wp-content/uploads/PlanetaryHealthCheck2025_ExecutiveSummary.pdf) now shows that humanity has breached seven of the nine planetary boundaries, with ocean acidification becoming the latest system to cross into the danger zone. The seven transgressed limits are climate change, biosphere integrity, novel entities, land system change, freshwater use, biogeochemical flows, and ocean acidification.

Kottari challenged the "gloomy" narrative of climate change by highlighting it as a nexus of opportunity. She argued, "So you actually invest in climate change... you're going to solve many issues in this world, including public health, resource security and social stability."

Kottari emphasized that meaningful change requires a synchronized effort where citizens, public authorities, and corporations each play their distinct roles rather than waiting for "the system" to move first.

Drawing on her European Parliament study on water scarcity and the global water balance ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU\(2025\)765769](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU(2025)765769)), Kottari told delegates that floods and droughts are connected phenomena and that water is becoming "the new gold."

She said climate change will reshape everyday life and economic systems, influencing health and productivity. But investment in climate solutions can mitigate multiple crises at once (health, environment, economy).

What's needed is holistic, cross-disciplinary action. Real progress comes from breaking down silos and combining disciplines (energy, political science, environmental science, etc.). Citizens, public authorities, and all sectors must play their distinct roles, rather than waiting for the system alone to change.

She told delegates that organisations must go beyond ESG labels and start to deliver concrete, repeated action in their operations and strategies.

In a separate session on sustainability on day two, Piers Lea, chief strategy officer at Learning Technologies Group and Katell Le Goulven, Adjunct Professor of Strategy at INSEAD, focused on systems leadership rooted in nature. Rather than treating sustainability as an ESG add-on, they argued that leaders need to learn to see, think and act in systems, using real conservation stories to understand interdependence and how quickly nature can regenerate when the right interventions are made. They stressed that agency must be distributed beyond the C-suite, connecting grassroots employee initiatives and community projects with organisational culture and strategy.



Takeaways from the session:

- Act now, not later – treating climate change as a current, not future, issue.
- View climate investment as systemic problem-solving, not just cost or compliance.
- Center water and the energy–climate–water nexus in planning and policy.
- Make AI and digital innovation energy-aware; technology must be aligned with climate goals.
- Rebuild trust in science and counter disinformation through trusted relationships, not just more data.
- Break disciplinary and institutional silos so science, policy, and practice reinforce each other.
- The power of mobilizing people in large organisations to step up and engage in large projects, in partnership with others, cannot be underestimated.

AI for good

“The challenge is not about building more AI generated content. It's really about how do we get that dialogue right? So when people seek help, they have a bidirectional relationship with that tutor/helper/coach who is acting just like a teacher within a classroom to be able to personalize and contextualize what that learner needs to do,” Lori Niles-Hoffman, founder 8Levers, told delegates.

Opening the session, Niles-Hoffman posed the question: "Is the course dead?". She argued that traditional, one-size-fits-all training is being replaced by AI-enabled tutors and hyper-personalized contextualization that provides feedback in the immediate flow of work.

That means using HR and business data so the AI coach knows your role, manager, meetings, customers and can suggest practice and simulations that match your real challenges. Niles-Hoffman said AI-enabled learning teams need to shift focus from the 10% of formal training (their traditional role) in the 70-20-10 model to supporting the 70% using simulations, avatars and data-driven practice to make experiential learning deliberate and high-impact.

This will require learning to architect and orchestrate the tools to provide an experience that changes as you learn and progress. Closed-loop recording will feed into this by connecting micro-learning events to performance data, so systems can learn how people actually learn and keep improving.

Moving to more of an AI and data-driven model of learning presented a meta-provocation for delegates: will we train AI tutors on our pedagogy, or will their performance data force us to change our own assumptions about pedagogy?

In the second part of the session, Anand Chopra-McGowan, managing director, Valence, Europe, introduced two case studies - Telefónica and Kraft Heinz. Both companies are using Valence's AI coach Nadia.

Kraft Heinz. Implementation.

Kraft Heinz used Nadia to support managers in delivering better feedback, particularly during performance review conversations. The goal was to provide a real-time tutor-like intervention to help managers navigate difficult or critical discussions more effectively.



Outcomes

- 64% of the targeted manager group actively used the AI coach
- Of those who used it, 94% found it useful
- Managers reported that the tool was useful for structuring and delivering performance-related feedback.

Telefónica. Implementation.

Telefónica integrated Nadia into a large-scale leadership program launched under the mandate of the new chairman. The AI coach was positioned as an always-available companion to reinforce the specific leadership behaviors introduced in the program.

Outcomes

- The tool acted as a continuous bridge between the formal leadership training and the daily reality of the managers, ensuring that the program's core values were not lost after the initial sessions
- It provided a scalable way to offer personalized coaching across a massive population, serving as a constant support mechanism for behavioral change.

Speakers said that much of this is still in experimentation. The message is to be brave but evidence-seeking by running pilots, measuring outcomes and refining the approach.

Takeaways from the session:

- L&D leaders must understand AI's systems implications, not just tool adoption
- Governance and ethics are key issues and must be debated and embedded from the outset
- The opportunity lies in augmentation, not automation alone.

All things skills

Simon Brown, global L&D leader at EY leader, challenged the audience to confront an uncomfortable question: is a dominant skills agenda an HR indulgence or a business imperative? He argued that if skills are treated as a side initiative owned by HR, they will remain marginal. If, however, they are seen as central to how value is created and delivered, then they must sit at the heart of the work operating model.

Brown shared the skills journey at EY, starting with business strategy and flowing through every stage of the talent lifecycle. If the firm sets an ambition—such as generating an additional \$60 billion in revenue - the next question is not simply how many people are required, but which services will drive that growth and what skills those services demand. From there, skills inform workforce planning, attraction and hiring decisions. Recruitment should be grounded in a clear understanding of the skills candidates possess and those the organisation needs.

The same logic extends into development and performance management. Within each role, individuals are expected to build and demonstrate defined skills. Skills also underpin mobility and reward: people can be moved to where their capabilities are most valuable, and critical skills can be recognized and incentivized accordingly. In this model, skills are not an abstract taxonomy; they are a practical framework that links



strategy to people decisions across the enterprise. They, in effect, transcend job roles and traditional career pathways.

EY has made mistakes along the way, Brown said. The firm invested in a skills platform and asked employees to input their skills but failed to connect that platform to operational processes. The result was limited impact – useful for career conversations but largely disconnected from day-to-day work. The turning point came when skills were linked directly to scheduling. Once project allocation began to reflect the skills recorded in the system, the model gained real traction.

As AI systems take on more tasks, organisations may need to think of agents as entities with “skills” that are planned and scheduled alongside human capabilities, he said. This extension of the skills model into the digital workforce raises deeper questions. If AI continues to replace roles and drive productivity, what becomes the purpose of the company? Is it solely to maximize shareholder returns, or does it also exist to serve employees and society?

Brandon Carson, former CLO at Docebo, Starbucks, Delta Airlines and Walmart, argued that many organisations are missing the point of skills transformation because they focus on infrastructure rather than redesigning the work operating model itself. Companies are investing heavily in taxonomies, platforms and credentials, yet leaving untouched the way work is structured, decisions are made and roles evolve. Without reshaping that broader system, skills initiatives risk becoming sophisticated but ineffective overlays. For Brandon, skills cannot sit in HR or L&D alone; they must be co-owned with the business, where the real pulse of the work operating model resides.

Drawing on his experience leading a skills-first transformation at Walmart, he describes how the ambition went beyond building a better data system. The goal was to open up opportunity—particularly for frontline employees without degrees—and to ensure scalable impact. Although Walmart built a technically strong skills architecture, mobility did not improve until they addressed culture through the FEEDBACK model:

- Belief - do employees believe they have a future at the company?
- Visibility - can employees see opportunities, and can leaders see employees’ skills?
- Access - are there real, fair pathways and credentialing to progress?
- Connection - do people have relationships, mentors, and community support?

Only then did the model deliver measurable returns for both the business and its people. This will be more so in a world where AI reshapes entry-level work.

Take-aways from the session

- Skills only matter if they’re wired into real work - connect skills to roles, projects, scheduling, and decision-making, not just taxonomies and platforms
- Co-own the skills agenda with the business – L&D/HR can’t do this alone; skills strategy must be built with those who design and run the work
- Culture is the multiplier – belief, visibility, access, and connection determine whether skills investments translate into real mobility and opportunity
- Design operating models where humans and AI work together as skill holders, combining human expertise with machine scalability
- Focus on meta-capabilities and learning to learn – long-term resilience depends on people’s ability to adapt, self-manage their learning, and partner effectively with AI.



Leadership in current times

In his session on leadership, McKinsey senior adviser and professor of leadership and organisational behavior, Professor Nick van Dam, explored what leadership needs to look like given three big forces we face in current times: failing traditional leadership development, rising uncertainty and ethical risk and the disruptive impact of AI on work.

He argued that much corporate leadership development is not working and that organisations invest heavily in it but often make things worse.

He stressed purpose as central issue: people who know and live their purpose are more energized and engaged, and when that purpose aligns with their organization's purpose, performance and commitment significantly increase.

He contrasted profit-only companies with organisations that balance purpose and profit, highlighting leaders and firms willing to sacrifice short-term profits to uphold people-centric values and DEI commitments.

Leadership, ethics, and systems under uncertainty

Van Dam examined leadership behaviors in the context of uncertainty. The potential negative outcomes include micromanagement, endless data-gathering to delay decisions, lack of empathy, blame and resistance to change.

He linked toxic leadership patterns (narcissism, paranoia, psychopathy) with systemic risks, showing how people get pulled into harmful ways of working through fear, conformity, and silence.

Culture, values, real consequences and open dialogue are the main levers to prevent harmful behavior and to keep ethics at the center of leadership, he said.

Humans, AI, and the future of work and leadership

Van Dam argued we're at the beginning of a major workforce transformation driven by AI, automation, and demographic shifts.

Many knowledge-intensive tasks (coding, analysis, wealth-management decisions) will increasingly be performed by machines, reducing overload and freeing humans to focus on connection, learning, creativity, problem-solving, and ethics.

He outlined what remains uniquely human and critical for future leaders: instinct, intuition, imagination, integrity, emotional connection, and "human skills" like building high-performing teams, leading change, and living values over the long careers people now face.

Modern leadership must be deeply human, ethically grounded, and AI-literate, focused on purpose, culture and making a difference.



Takeaways from the session:

- Most leadership development is failing because it ignores purpose, ethics, and real behavior change
- When personal and organisational purpose align, magic happens in engagement, energy, and commitment
- In uncertainty, bad leaders micromanage and delay decisions; good leaders build trust and embrace not knowing
- AI will take over many knowledge tasks, so human skills of intuition, integrity, empathy and relationship-building will become real differentiators
- Modern leadership is about using your influence to make a positive difference, one person at a time.
- Focusing on the system as much as on individuals becomes more important as we navigate complexity.

What next?

In the closing session, e-learning pioneer and chair of the Masie Learning Foundation, Elliot Masie, challenged delegates to rethink how learning really happens in organisations. He talked through his personal story and then set out ideas for what learning and talent leaders should do next. Here is a distillation of those ideas.

1. Think in multiple futures, not one “inevitable” future

- Do not bet everything on a single narrative (e.g. AI is the future)
- Treat AI (and any tech) as one powerful tool among many, akin to HTML: foundational but not the whole story
- Your role is facilitator and experimenter, not evangelist: explore, test, surface risks and benefits and keep a seat at the table where decisions are made.
- Think big picture, not small scale.

2. Be a learner first, L&D leader second

- If you lead learning and aren't actively learning yourself, it is a risk for your organisation
- Model curiosity: pick up new tools, methods, and perspectives and show your organisation what being a learner looks like in practice.

3. Fix the basics: onboarding and internal learning journeys

Onboarding is widely ineffective and rarely remembered positively; yet it's a critical moment in an employee's journey.

Re-design onboarding around:

- What people actually care about in week one - how things work, where to go, who to talk to
- A staged experience: Revisit onboarding three weeks in, when deeper questions appear
- Look at it as a sequence - what should come first/later, and how that differs for different learners.



4. Take informal and on-the-job learning seriously

Most meaningful learning for professionals happens via shadowing, practice, conversations and work itself.

Design structures around this reality:

- Better on the job frameworks and support for the person next to you
- Mechanisms for capturing and spreading what's learned informally.

5. Use diversity and interdisciplinarity as design principles

When building products, programs, or experiments:

- Deliberately mix disciplines – e.g., theatre, storytelling, tech, pedagogy
- Insist on cognitive and demographic diversity in teams (gender, culture, viewpoint)
- Diverse groups change the quality and direction of the work.

6. Elevate L&D as a career of choice

Many in L&D fell into the field, and that's not sustainable.

We need to:

- Make the value and impact of L&D/talent visible to high-potential graduates and MBAs.
- Create clear, attractive career paths in learning, talent, and people development.
- Talent and learning will be central strategic levers - the field needs top talent, not accidental arrivals only.

7. Build (and use) better data and research

Internal L&D often lacks comparative, evidence-based insight into:

- What works in onboarding
- How sequence and personalization affect outcomes
- How informal learning operates and can be supported
- A priority for the profession is to commission, run, and share more serious research on these internal processes, not just on content and platforms.



8. Design for “indexing” - connect to what people already know

- People learn by hooking new ideas into existing knowledge and experiences.
- Watch when people “come alive” or shut down; that’s feedback on where their mental indexes are.

Make it a design habit to start from their world, language, and problems and explicitly link new concepts to things they already recognize.

9. Plan “next chapters” – early and late career

For early-career people:

- Help them see L&D/talent as a future-proof, meaningful field.

For late-career leaders:

- Create cohorts, roles, and pathways so they can refire, not just retire – using their expertise in new ways for the field and society.

As the conference drew to a close, Dr Nigel Paine urged delegates to start with the real problems, put people first, and keep experimenting together and trust that help will come from the group when we ask for it.

