

Advita Patel

Good morning, everyone. Good morning. How are you all doing? Are you all good? I can't tell you how excited I am about today's event. I am already classing it as the number one event of 2025. Absolutely no pressure, speakers, at all. I'm calling it. My name is Advita Patel, and I am the CIPR's 2025 President, and I'm also going to be your chair for today. One of the privileges of being President is that you get to choose the theme of the annual event. Last year when Kat came over and asked me, and she said, "What do you want to theme the event for next year?" I knew instantly it was going to be leadership and impact.

Steve Bryant

Hello and welcome to the CIPR Engage podcast. In a bit of a special episode, we're taking you behind the at the CIPR annual conference 2025, Leadership and Impact: The Future of Strategic Communications. I'm Steve Bryant, Co-Chair of the CIPR podcast Editorial Board, and today we're going to bring you a few of the great speakers we were lucky enough to listen to and speak with during the day.

Without further ado, here's our first speaker, James Peach. He's a multi-award-winning global marketing leader behind Uber, Coca-Cola, Vinted, and Innocent. He's also cycled 41,000 kilometres around the world, hiked across three continents, completed the first triathlon of an entire country, cycling the length, kayaking the width, and climbing the height nonstop.

James Peach

Today, I was talking about the concept of modern leadership and how leadership has changed over time and what the modern world requires from a leader that is different and how leadership has needed to adapt, to adapt to the fact that we operate now in a world of constant change. We have different people of different generational experience coming through, like Gen Z, who have a different experience of the world and how leadership needs to adapt in order to allow all different generations to flourish.

Trying to just make the audience stop and think about how they operate as leaders and whether they are doing what they were doing yesterday and weeks and months before, or are they stopping and considering what the new world requires from a leader? Those big things were around prioritising perspective and stopping, thinking, stepping back, seeing the bigger picture, making sure you're taking people on the journey, because when you've got loads going on and tonnes of change, it's important to continually stop and take in and make sure you're pointing the

right direction as a leader. Other Things such as collaboration and communication and operating in a more candid method.

I was telling stories about some of the companies I've worked at that are from Eastern Europe and other areas in Europe where people are much more functional and direct in the way they communicate and the benefits of that and how modern leaders can learn from that, the importance of being direct in communication but also empathetic.

Then lastly, talking a lot about embracing the unknown, how we as human beings are not really designed to embrace the unknown because our brains are designed to protect us from scary things and things that might hurt us. In modern leadership, your job really is to create for you and people around you. Psychological safety, so people feel like they can take risks and do things differently, which is obviously critical in a world where things are changing quite as much and quite as fast as they are.

Hopefully, one thing that definitely gets lodged in people's brains is, especially with the way people see intergenerational workforces now, and we see a lot of noise about Gen Z and about different generations and how they interact. I think every generation of employees requires nurturing and requires nurturing in different ways. Really, it's about understanding the context which they've come from. You find a lot of leaders that I work with don't take the time and energy to really understand that context and understand what each generation on a broad level requires in order to thrive. I hope that's what was taken away, to stop, think, really understand what's needed here because all generations want to win and want to be successful and want to work hard to achieve a great outcome. Applying that approach will support all leaders in doing that.

I love perspective, and it's amazing that we have so much leadership training and different types of training organisations. Very rarely do we actually talk about perspective and the importance of it in every role. In modern leadership, and with the amount of change that goes on in businesses right now, everyone needs to play a role in terms of having agency and operating like a CEO or a managing director and being able to take decisions and work out what is the best thing for the business in their specific role. You can't do that unless you have the time to stop and think.

We operate in a world where content is obviously in huge growth, but the capacity and ability to make content for AI is getting much easier to make huge volume and of improving quality of content. The reality is that humans love humanity. We love people, and we interact and respond well to people. The more vulnerability in communications, the more admitting faults, the more admitting the realities of different roles and the way you communicate, I think will bring value and continue to cut through all of that noise. Risks don't have to be shooting from the hip. Just because

you're taking risks doesn't mean that you're shooting from the hip day in, day out and front page news because you're doing all sorts of weird and wonderful stuff.

Steve Bryant

We next asked James about how he empowered his teams to take risks, especially in times of crisis basis.

James Peach

If you look at, let's say, Nike, the communications they put out during the previous Trump government and the risk that they took, which meant people were then burning their shoes, but they were standing up for what they believed in within the framework of their business and what they believe business is there to achieve. They took huge risk, risk that meant people were stopping, or not even stopping buying their product, but burning the existing products. It's a massive risk that must have scared a lot of shareholders, but they took it because it was authentic to who they are as a business. It's within the framework that they have built of what Nike is and how Nike behaves. The best piece of advice I can give is ensure you are not operating in protectionism, as in making sure you are not protecting your role and the work you're doing.

The reason I call that out is because I see it a lot in businesses, where the reason that the leadership aren't confident of getting on board is because they haven't been taken on the journey. They really don't understand your role, the challenges within your role, what the approaches you're taking, why you're taking that approach, what benefit they're going to get from this. I mean beyond a PowerPoint presentation. I mean really getting them behind exactly what you're trying to achieve. You can't often do this over Slack or an email or PowerPoint presentation.

I spoke earlier at the conference about the idea of candid collaboration, over-collaborating, over-communicating, but really sitting in each other's roles and understanding each other's context. It's very hard as a... I'm lucky enough to be on the leadership team of a number of businesses. It's really hard to make decisions without not just the everyday context around ROI and why we're doing it, but the reality of your role, what your challenges are, what your blockers are, and why this thing will solve it. Any leadership can be convinced about taking risks if they are taken properly on the journey beyond just the normal day-to-day of business operations.

Steve Bryant

Next, we caught up with Lucy Holliday, Senior Employee Communications Manager at the Financial Times. Lucy played a central role in the FT's AI Transformation Programme, a company-

wide campaign designed to build AI fluency and confidence among employees. The campaign, which won a 2025 CIPR Excellence Award, combined live events, creative competitions, and targeted workshops to engage a global workforce.

Lucy Holliday

Given the pace of change that we're all experiencing right now, I think it's important for PR professionals to make sure that they're taking a beat to pause look around, think about the context in which they're working, and make sure that those things are aligning with their values, their organisational values, and behaviours that they want to be seeing. It's quite a big instinct right now to add a lot of noise and volume out into the world.

Actually, it's important sometimes to take a beat and just think about, is this actually going to be serving a purpose that we need to? Is this what we want to do? Is this aligned with what we want to achieve as an organisation? Be that using AI, be that launching new products, the things that we're doing, just to make sure that we're aligned in what we're going to do and that it fits with our bigger picture mission.

Steve Bryant

What advice did Lucy have for getting teams on board with change?

Lucy Holliday

I think when you have teams who are less receptive to change, it's important to understand what are the things that are making them feel that way. Just trying to ride a railroad over the top of that isn't going to get you anywhere. Once you understand those objections, you can then work with them to meet them where they're at. In terms of editorial adoption of AI, it's working out, okay, there's understandably a concern about what that might mean for our roles. There's understanding that actually there is a very legitimate concern about the quality and the reliability, the consistency of this technology.

Then it's working with them to go, okay, but what are the things that you do want to see changing? What are the things where you could see this helping you? Then working with those teams, and that's what we've been doing. Pairing products, people with editorial, and with journalists to identify what are the things you need to do? Is it about going through a huge data set in order to get that investigation done in a way that's going to be timely and important? Then that's going to help them get on board because they can see the value because it's actively helping them, not causing problems for them.

Steve Bryant

Next, we've got Josephine Hansom, who recently represented the interests of young people at the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee. She spoke about building multi-generational teams that drive impact in the age of Gen Z.

Josephine Hansom

The key focus of my talk today was about the future of leadership. Unfortunately, I gave nobody a clear path of what we're going to be doing in the future because nobody knows. Regardless of your generation, it's really hard to predict what's going to come in near future. We're in a state of chaos. I was saying that I think this is quite a good time to be thinking about improving the future rather than reflecting on being rock bottom.

I hope the key message was about empathy and understanding your team better and the people that you sit next to in the workplace or on teams calls with. Everyone might have a different priority. However, I don't see those priorities as competing. If we layer everyone's priorities, whether you're new into your profession or someone very senior in leadership, if we layer everybody's priorities together to make a whole, it will be much better for everyone and include everyone rather than seeing these things as competing priorities.

The conference has spoken a lot about AI this morning, and I think it's really, really important to recognise that it's happening and embed it into your everyday work because it's definitely not going away. However, what's also not going away for PR professionals, marketing professionals, or indeed for my profession, market research, is that we're all about people, connecting with people, motivating people, understanding people, and that's not going to go away either.

Steve Bryant

We next ask Josephine about the concept of people looking for purpose or being mission-driven in their work.

Josephine Hansom

I think purpose in work is an interesting concept when you're looking at the different generations, because I think purpose through your main job is definitely a millennial concept. I don't think older generations necessarily saw work as being as fulfilling as millennials hoped work would be for them. Millennials definitely to work, work to live, whichever way that might be, their work became something they enjoyed, and they wanted it to be fun, which is a really new concept.

I think purpose is something that will become more individual rather than be something that the workplace in and of itself will deliver for everyone universally because everyone's lives are so individual now and unique, and so the future is not that you will be a baker or a PR professional or a market researcher. You will have the skills of a PR professional, a market researcher, a baker, but you'll be doing other things as well, because not one thing will be able to deliver what you need to live a good life in the future, in my opinion.

I think we'll need to diversify, and that will give people the opportunity to explore different parts of their personality. We're not set up for that yet. At the moment, we're struggling where work is not delivering everything that people wanted, if it's to deliver everything, and they haven't got the time, the space to be able to explore other avenues that could supplement or enhance their life and purpose. Every company should embody the needs of their workforce. If the vision, the mission, all of that stuff, if it's not relevant to the people that work at your organisation, you're not going to be connecting in a meaningful way, and people will not understand what you're about, and so they won't be giving the best to your company.

That comes from hiring the right people for your company, given what you think your company does, and then having that vision of what people are able to deliver. It's not a one-way street. It's not just from leadership setting the tone. It's about listening to the people that you're hiring and that are delivering the work for your organisation, so that you don't feel like there's a mismatch there. I think you're right. At the moment, with all of this change within the workforce and technology, it's really hard for both of those things to match up, especially in this age of mass redundancy and trust in leadership being eroded.

Steve Bryant

Our next speaker is Naomi Goodman from MHP Group. In her talk, she explored how PR and comms professionals can confidently step into their role as change leaders, moving teams from chaos to calm.

Naomi Goodman

Today, I talked about change and whether we should step in or step back as communication leaders. The one thing I really hope that the audience took away is that we are perfectly placed to step into our role as communications and change leaders, largely because we understand our business. We have a brilliant network. We are able to tap into the right people that can help influence and drive change. I think change, yes, it is about the organisation. Yes, it is about the team and people of their impacts. It also starts as us as individuals and how we choose to show up as communications and change leaders.

Let's not forget that in times of change, constant change, change fatigue is high. We need to fuel ourselves first. I think leading with calm is key. Leading with calm really is all about how we create the circle that creates, effectively, that boundary to empathy. In times of change, there's a lot of uncertainty, a lot of fear, a lot of disruption. As leaders, we need to make sure that we are leading with empathy, but we are not absorbing all of that negative energy. We need to make sure that we create that circle that creates that protective sphere, almost, that bounces back the negative energy. We're able to detach, but we're also able to lead with calm, lead with empathy, lead with compassion.

We have so many thoughts, on average, 60,000 thoughts in our head every day. We are constantly distracted. We're also dealing with a lot of high emotion. Actually, we can be very overwhelmed ourselves. We may feel shorter breath, faster heart rate, clammy hands, all those things that are signs of stress. Actually being able to tune into our breath and focus slows down the stress hormone. That really is our opportunity to really make sure that we are able to focus, and we are able to move into the L, the listen attentively, to really tune into the room, make sure we understand what's being said, what's not being said, ask the right questions. Then also the final part in the lead with calm is really around being able to make time for the micromoments.

Really making sure it comes back to us as individuals that we are recharging and retuning into our own tank. Thinking about what are the opportunities and the things that we need to build in order to make sure that we've got resilience. It's things such as going back to the breath, finding time for meditation, or it's things such as more movement, or the need to get out in nature, or the need to tap into friends, or it may be more study, more time for increasing knowledge, all those different micromoments, making sure that you're making time for you. I think as communication leaders, we've got a real opportunity in times of change to lead with calm, but it does start with us and how we choose to show up.

Externally, the world is a noisy place, and it is causing, or it can cause a lot of disruption internally. We'll see companies, we've seen a lot of companies who will make quick and snap decisions, then maybe actually they're not the right decision, so they're having to do a U-turn. I think for PR professionals, really, it's about being the barometer, making sure that you really understand and tune into and work out what is actually just noise and what is actually something that is really significantly potentially going to impact your business.

Change can't happen in silo, so there it needs to be a really good, strong business case, but also narrative around how that fits into your strategy. It really needs to be grounded in a real business need, but also clear line of sight on how that links to the business strategy. There's the strategic

justification on why all these changes need to happen. There's also the need to really listen to employees, actively listen to your employees, and understand what their concerns are.

Whether it is too much change, whether it's not quite understanding the "why" behind things, whether it's not really understanding or feeling like there's too much training, too many disparate things happening at the right time. To actively listen to employees so that we are really, genuinely coming up with the right solutions and the best way to embed change. It's not a top-down approach that you bring people along on the journey, you get them involved, you get them working through what those solutions could be as well.

Steve Bryant

In a breakout session tailored to professionals who are new to freelancing or considering taking the leap, Sarah Naylor, Co-Chair of CIPR's Independent Practitioners Network, asked, "Is it worth it?"

Sarah Naylor

One thing I was really hoping that people would take away from the panel is to not be afraid of taking the leap, becoming independent, because it's hugely satisfying to run your own operation, to have that satisfaction of landing clients, or delivering really excellent work on a project, or contract basis, and being asked back because of how good you are. Not because of somebody else's name on your business card.

What we mean by a modern independent, is somebody who may have 2 days a week as a corporate PR job, and they've developed some private clients on the side, a side hustle. Maybe they're doing that to supplement their income in order to make sure that it fits around their family life, et cetera. Actually, a lot of people find, once they start doing independent work, that they prefer it. That becomes the main focus of what they do. To see it actually as an augmentation of their career path rather than, perhaps in the past, wondering why you would become independent, a lot of people are seeing the benefit of portfolio career now.

Ben Veal

I hope the people who were considering going freelance have come away from the session feeling more confident. They realise that there is a community, there within the CIPR, that can support you as an independent practitioner, and realising that actually, there's some very exciting things that come with going solo.

Steve Bryant

That's Ben Veal, founder of Second Mountain Comms, who also spoke in the breakout session.

Sarah Naylor

I think in 2006 we're actually at a tipping point. The first revolution in IT was the internet. I think a lot of PRs were taken by surprise by that. They didn't really appreciate how different things would be once the internet was established. We've had that lesson. Now we've got AI. We're at the tipping point with AI. I think AI is going to massively change the practise of PRs and also the potential to be independent because there's a lot of excellent tools out there. I encourage everybody to go out there and be brave and bold, and find the tools that really augment their practise and business, and be early adopters. That's where the advantage is.

Steve Bryant

Were Sarah and Ben worried about any ethical implications of increasing AI use?

Sarah Naylor

Those of us who are members of CIPR, which I am, I'm a chartered practitioner, we're very aware of the ethical restrictions. It's not just restrictions. It's how we are. It's in our DNA as PR practitioners, who are CIPR members, so I don't have any concerns there. However, with all new technology, I think there's a great risk that people hang back too long to see what regulations would come forward. I think we had a fantastic speaker on that very point today.

I would say, be bold, be brave. Use those new tools, but be alive to your particular clients, and understand any particular ethical considerations. For example, those who are in health care, you've got to really think, "Is it appropriate to be using anything with private data?" Because you've got to really understand the potential for that data to leak into AI engines and become public knowledge without that ever being intended. I think that's a piece of work that will become more important as time goes by. Really think about what you're feeding into AI engines, "Is it appropriate?" Do you want that information to become part of a large language model, for example?

I would not want to entrust a large language model to just generate press releases. Unless it's competently done and overseen by a skilled PR practitioner, you get something called hallucinations. That's where we get made-up experts from AI engines with made-up quotes. People will need to become very, very skilled and technically competent at framing the request that they put to AI and generating those releases. Do I think it's a useful tool? Yes, I do. Do I think

we should just feed everything into an AI engine and leave it to get on with it? No, I don't. There'll always be a role for really excellent, competent human intelligence in the process.

Steve Bryant

Are you enjoying today's listen? If you want to build your skills and stay ahead at PR and communications, take a look at CIPR training. Our courses help professionals at every level to grow, adapt, and tackle new challenges with confidence, covering everything from crisis management to creativity, AI, leadership, and more. Find the right course for you, or your team, at cipr.co.uk/training.

Sarah Naylor

I just want to remind everybody that the CIPR Independent Practitioner Network is relaunched, particularly for our times, and to provide an opportunity to connect, learn, and thrive for all independent practitioners, whether that's a small part of your working life, or you're considering the transition, or it's your entire focus of your working life.

Go on to CIPR's website and look at the sectors, and click on Independent Practitioner Network, and join us from there. It's for everybody. Brand-new members, long-established members. Some of our recent joiners are fellows. Some of our recent joiners have only just joined the CIPR. There's something there for everybody. The unifying factor is you're either curious about, or to some degree, carrying out independent practise, either as a contractor, or you have your own direct clients. Everybody's welcome. Please come along. It's your network. It's for you.

Ben Veal

I think going afresh into businesses is challenging, especially in this era of AI. Much of it comes down to your own personal brand, developing yourself, continuing to be part of bodies like the CIPR, and as I say, just not being complacent, and always trying to find different ways to add value. I think the CIPR, like any chartered body, it's as much as... You get out of it what you put in. I think it's that reality.

It's a community of people, it's a network. Lots of like-minded people here with shared connexions, and there's lots of, obviously, professional development and groups you can do. If you use it to its full, the potential is there. Otherwise, it's a little more than a badging exercise. I found I've got the most out of CIPR when I've been involved on council, when I've been in regional committees, when I've been involved with networking and supporting other people. I think the CIPR is an opportunity. It's for you to make the most of it.

There's also a point of difference. If you're chartered, or if you're a member of the CIPR, you're saying to clients, from day one, that you abide to a code of conduct, that you work in a specific way, that you're an ethical practitioner. All of those things have been hard baked into my pitches from day one as an independent, or when I was at agency side before. There's definitely value in that regard. If you're starting from scratch, then I think to say, from day one, you are a member of the CIPR, is an important difference maker.

Steve Bryant

We then caught up with Dr. Jack Lewis, who in his session had delved into the impact of technology on the brain, emphasising the importance of maintaining critical thinking.

Dr. Jack Lewis

The subject matters in particular covered today, were the neuroscience of decision-making. If you understand how brains make decisions, then you're much better positioned to help people reach the decisions you want them to make, whether it's professionally, perhaps if you're pitching for new business, or personally, at home, trying to convince family members to go to the place that you want to go on holiday. Then the other part of it was the impact of technology on the brain. A little bit about neuroplasticity, how the environments we spend a lot of time in shape the physical structure of our brain as well as our capabilities.

Technology is an extension. Digital environments are also environments we spend enough time in for it to have a physical impact on our brain. It's not necessarily for our betterment. Sadly, overuse of tech is related to a lot of negative outcomes. I'm warning people off of overuse of various technologies, including generative AI, which is great in some use cases, but leaning too hard on it, doing too much cognitive offloading leads to the peril that is losing your critical thinking capabilities. That's my 40-minute talk in about 60 seconds flat.

The brain is use-it-or-lose-it in the sense that neuroplasticity describes how the brain can mould itself and reshape itself to help support certain cognitive capabilities that you use on a daily basis. The classic example is the drivers of London's famous black cabs. They spend 2 years, sometimes more, learning the knowledge, which is 20,000 streets, 25,000 landmarks within a 6-mile radius of Central London. By virtue of doing that, they change the physical structure. They make the hippocampus' memory bank's navigation a little bit larger as a result of all that hard work, but then after they retire, when they have their brain scanned again, that area, that specialisation, it shrinks back down to normal size.

In the context of not overusing generative AI, if you're getting generative AI to do simple tasks, make simple decisions that don't really matter too much, like what to have for breakfast, or organizing your schedule for getting out the door in the morning, for example, that's not a problem. That's never going to lead to any peril because those decisions aren't important. No. Who cares if it goes wrong? It's just one day. But when it comes to really big decisions, if you're leaning too hard on generative AI to process all the data and think through all of the possibilities, and you just let it do all the hard yards and then just take the answer and run with it, you leave yourself, basically, very vulnerable. Because it takes ages to develop those critical thinking skills all the way through adolescence, but also into early adulthood.

Those brain areas that support critical thinking don't reach full maturity until the early '20s. Then to allow it to go to waste because you're getting GenAI to do all that critical thinking for you, and you're not doing it yourself, if you think of the analogy of, or the example of how retired cab drivers, their specialisations for navigating London, shrink back down again, and they lose their ability to navigate without looking at Satnav or a map, the same thing is going to happen with our ability to do critical thinking. It's the most important human skill.

On an individual basis, it will mean that you're not very future-proofing your role because if you're getting GenAI to do everything, eventually they'll take you out of the loop. That critical thinking is the bit that you can add that generative AI can't because generative AI is stupid. It has no common sense. It's just a pattern-spotting machine. It spits out the most highly statistically likely pattern of words. Seventy percent of the time, it does an incredibly good job of creating coherent sentences and useful structures of words, but a third of the time, it gets it completely wrong.

We need to keep humans in the loop, and we need our critical thinking skills, not least because it's how we end up realising when we're being manipulated. If you don't have those brain areas nicely honed to give you those critical thinking skills, you will not realise that you're being duped. That is terrible for the individual, but also, if you think about it, across an entire society, across culture, it's absolutely devastating.

Steve Bryant

But what about Jack's work in the PR world?

Dr. Jack Lewis

PR people can draw the public's attention to a certain subject matters. Something which is much more generically applicable is the impact of how technology is influencing people's lives. We've all noticed that wherever you go, people are head down on their smartphone. Just because it's

ubiquitous doesn't mean it's okay. It is possible that 90% of people on every train, on every bus, us on every tube, are spending way too much time staring at screens, and it's to their detriment. They could all simultaneously be screwing up their brain, their wellness, their mental health, their cognitive capacities. Yet, there is, understandably, this sense of, when everyone else is doing it, playing the sound out loud on their phone... Just because certain behaviours are ubiquitous doesn't mean they're good for you.

I think it's really important to draw attention to those aspects of behaviour fundamentally impacted by... Essentially, technologies are designed to be addictive. They're designed to, in an attention economy, to keep us on those screens for as long as humanly possible. They're not doing it to be evil. They're doing it because it drives income. It drives profit. They do A/B testing to work out what is the stickiest, what keeps people on it for as long as possible. If a PR company can draw attention to, "Get off your screens, and you will have a better quality of life," they won't just be doing the brand they're supporting a favour. They'll be doing society a favour.

Undoubtedly, there's huge pressure on all companies across the Globe to use generative AI more and more and more because it's a useful tool. But that's all it is. It's a useful tool. It's a very flawed useful tool. The impatience, the desire to not get left behind by competitors is what's driving people to go headlong into generative AI. Why not? Why not upskill your workforce as much as humanly possible and work out where it can improve efficiencies.

I have no objection to that whatsoever. My objection is to when people trust the output without checking it. If you don't carefully go through the output of generative AI algorithms with a fine-tooth comb, you will miss out on editing and correcting the vast number of errors. The fact that... From one moment to another, even a brilliantly-written piece of prompt engineering, it will do things differently one day to another. Unless you have experience of that, you don't realise that it doesn't do things the same, twice. There's always some variation embedded in it.

Of course, we need to get to know it better. We need to become more intimately knowledgeable and learn how to use it through trial and error. But the problem comes when you trust it too much, when you require it to do everything, when you go from AI automation to AI agent to AI swarms of agents, because then you're taking the human out of the loop. When you're taking the human out of the loop, no one knows why it's gone wrong. Ever since ChatGPT went against... Gemini comes along, and all these different companies come along, and there's an arms race, everyone's just blindly running into the future and no one wants to get left behind.

The trick is, play with it, inform yourself, use it, but as with overuse smartphones, don't take the shortcut every single time. Use it a bit to increase your efficiencies. Double-check everything,

because AI hallucinations happen 1 in 3 times, then maintain your cognitive capabilities by doing it the long way, at least a quarter of the time, half the time. These are rules of thumb.

The research hasn't been done yet to give any clarity on what the actual number should be, but if you're just letting GenAI do all the hard yards, your brain will go to mush. The brain is use-it-or-lose-it. If you do something on a regular basis, the brain has a motivation to reinforce those pathways. If you leave it to fallow, and you're no longer doing those cognitive tasks yourself for days, and weeks, and months on end, your brain will lose the ability to do them. It will retard us.

Steve Bryant

The final keynote came from Karen Blackett CBE, who shared her reflections on trust, authenticity, and adaptability, plus a recipe for good leadership.

Karen Blackett CBE

The key focus is about what I believe, with a 33-year career, on what the key ingredients are for good leadership. We are talking about the PR professionals today, but I think it's leadership in your career, so also it's leadership in life as well. In terms of one thing to take away, I think it's that everything is changing. I think it's been termed VUCA. We're living in a VUCA world. The fact that everything keeps changing means that you have to keep on top of your game. It means that you have to lean in, take every training programme that there is. Also, please make sure that you are mixing with a wide circle of people as well because that's incredibly important, especially for anybody in the communications profession.

Obviously, technology has been the big accelerator and the big catalyst. It has helped us do things faster, helped us go further, helped us go wider, but at the same time, it has meant that we work more. I do think over the 33 years, we are seeing people use tech. Now we've got AI coming in and how we use AI, but at the same time, we're seeing an increase in mental health issues. I think a lot of that is because of what we have to do in terms of constantly learning. It's like a fitness programme. You can't get off the treadmill. You've got to keep going. That has huge ramifications unless you balance work and life properly.

The thing that hasn't changed is people. People are weird, funny things. What is changing is the diversity of people that we have to communicate with. The frustration is that people need to understand that the best way to communicate is to build empathy, which means you have to understand people whether it's background, age, demographics, whatever it may be. Unless you understand who you're talking to, they won't listen, which I believe is a John Steinbeck quote.

Steve Bryant

What guidance does Karen have for us in 2026?

Karen Blackett CBE

In 2026, PR professionals need to really focus on how you harness and leverage AI as part of what they do. It's not a replacement for people. It is a way of getting incredibly talented people. You skill people to be able to do more, but without sacrificing themselves. If you go back to the early '60s when mainframe computers came in, everyone thought that with people in the working office using computers, that we'd all be working 4-hour days, and that we'd all be then going home early because computers were going to do everything. We now all have powerful computers in our pockets. We all use laptops as part of our day job. Is anybody working a 4-hour day? I think we are working more with every advancement of technology.

I think if anyone thinks that AI is going anywhere, it's not. You really need to try and embrace it, and harness it, and not be afraid of it. I think it is an add-on when people don't understand it, and they're not leveraging it properly.

Steve Bryant

We gave 3 CIPR Chairs a chance to wrap up the conference. First up, outgoing Chair, Advita Patel.

Advita Patel

Today's been exceptional. I think the conference speakers themselves have added so much value to the challenges that we're all facing in the industry already. Kicking off with Jack's talk where he set the scene perfectly about what is modern leadership. I think that resonated with so many people in the room in terms of their roles and responsibilities when they are going back into the workplace tomorrow.

Steve Bryant

Next, it's Farzana Baduel.

Farzana Baduel

I thought today's conference was incredible, super energizing just to be in the room of hundreds of fellow PRs who are grappling with the same issues that we are thinking day to day. We're thinking about AI. We're thinking about the generational workforce and how to navigate different

generations. We're thinking about the geopolitical instability in the world. Just to have a stellar line-up of speakers. All I saw at the conference was just people constantly snapping away at the screen, taking pictures, tuned in, writing things down, scribbling furiously because there was so much insight. Just to have a day where you can actually just think strategically, and through osmosis, taking this incredible ideas that come from the speakers and also the ideas that come from the networking when you meet fellow PRs.

Steve Bryant

And Daniel Gerrella.

Daniel Gerrella

For me, I think conferences like this are really important. It's a really good way to bring people together to learn from their peers, and some really excellent speakers. I think the thing I've liked today is that they have been speakers that have been a bit more of a sideways look. It's not the same old faces. We've seen people coming in with very different perspectives, which give really important learning opportunities, I think, for the people in the room. I also think it's really important that we use this time really effectively to take that time out. It's a lot of a commitment to take a day out, but to really then focus, do some learning ourselves, and then we can take those things back to our teams and our days of work.

Steve Bryant

What's in store for 2026?

Advita Patel

The conference theme today is all about facing the fear and not worrying too much about failing and taking those risks. All the speakers spoke about leaning into that area of work where we are so fearful of taking those risks that we may not move forward with the work that we're doing. I think that is... We can't predict the future. It's really difficult to predict what 2026 is going to bring us. This year has been unexpected, I would say, for many of us. Rather than focusing too much on predictions, which are difficult to prove, I would say, let's lean into the fear, let's try something new, let's give modern leadership a bit of a go and see what the outcomes are.

I would say it's recognising that we could be entering in the golden age of public relations. When we look at all the attributes of a typical PR person, the ability to horizon scan, critical thinking, building contextual intelligence, that's what more and more organisations and individuals need in

terms of how to navigate this world. It's really understanding that we have the skill set for the challenges that the world is facing.

Daniel Gerrella

I think for me today, it's the lesson that we need to learn to be agile. It's a very changeable environment out there. All the focus is on leadership that can adapt, that can change with what's happening in society, what's happening with our teams, the ways of working, the technologies that are impacting us and influencing us, the political arena. There's so much going on, but it is going to be constant. I think the thing that I really like, one of the speakers today talks about learning, and actually that constant approach to learning, so that we're always ready, and we're always able to give our clients the best advice that they need.

Advita Patel

One of my biggest parting lessons is to listen to what people are saying. I mean our members and our volunteers. Ultimately, CIPR wouldn't exist without them. We have such a dedicated group of volunteers who are doing so much for our membership, and we need to listen more to what they need, what they want, and what we can deliver. As presidents, that's our role, our responsibility to bring their voices to the boardroom. That is my biggest tip to the future. Presidents, how are we listening, and where are you listening?

Steve Bryant

That's it for this episode of CIPR Engage. Hopefully you've enjoyed the listen. Don't forget to check out the variety of resources offered by CIPR at cipr.co.uk.