



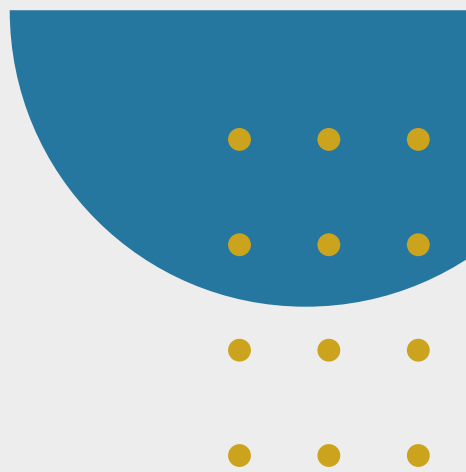
Connecting the Dots

Reflections on Innovation and Leadership
from the Fast Company Innovation Festival 2025

What's Going On

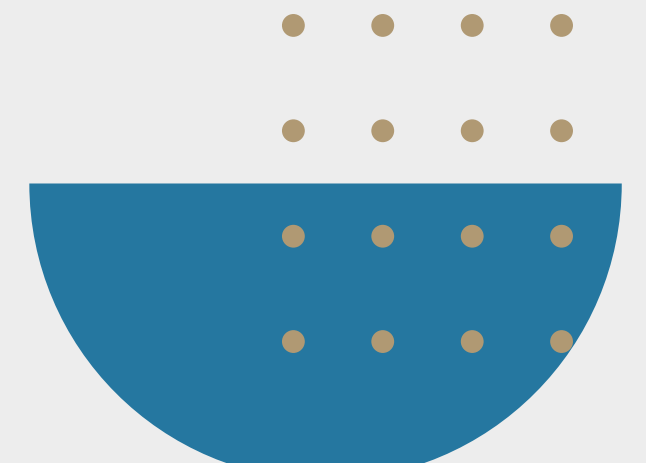
I attended the Fast Company Innovation Festival in New York City in September 2025 because I wanted exposure to fresh ideas — especially those with a private-sector emphasis — in an energizing environment. As a solopreneur, I look for professional development experiences that keep me malleable and continuously learning, so I can bring more insight and value to my clients.

Linking seemingly unrelated ideas is how creativity works, and that's exactly what I'm trying to do with what I learned at the festival. I'm capturing my takeaways here to connect the dots. The event's decentralized format meant that every participant's experience would be different, depending on the sessions they chose. What follows are my reflections — filtered through my lens, shaped by my work, and offered in the hope that they'll be useful to you.



About Me

If we haven't met yet, I'm Dr. Rebecca Sutherns, a trusted advisor, bestselling author, master facilitator, and certified coach. For nearly three decades, I've worked with organizations around the world, helping people and teams imagine fresh possibilities—and then build the courage and structure to pursue them.



Design Matters

Setting matters.

New York City was a vibrant backdrop — energizing in itself. Main sessions were held in a sleek conference venue, but many also took place in offices and restaurants around the city. It was fascinating to meet entrepreneurs in their natural habitats, though admittedly a bit exhausting.

Timing matters.

Most sessions were just 30 minutes long. The frequent task-switching was demanding, but I appreciated the brevity. Most conversations don't need longer than 30 minutes to get the point!

Transparency matters.

I never quite knew which speakers were paying to be on stage versus those who were paid to be there. To me, that distinction matters.





Choice matters.

I loved the variety of sectors, settings, and formats on offer.

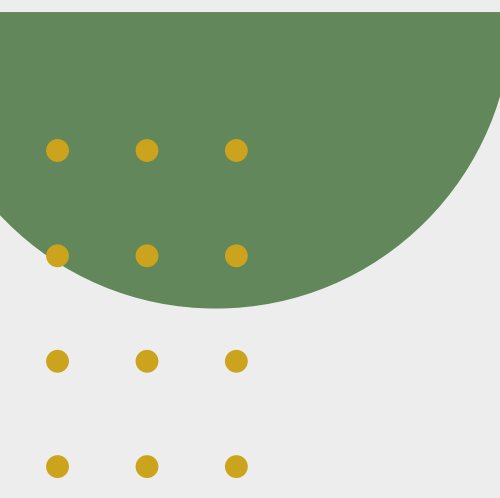
Format matters.

Too many panels felt more about the moderator's questions than the panelists' insights. I preferred sessions where speakers had space to interact with each other, or to share longer reflections. One highlight: the Creative Director of *Fast Company* encouraging us to use both digital and analog tools, handing out paper and Sharpies so we could create new uses for a flashlight on the spot.

Expectations matters.

As a first-timer, I had no idea what to expect. Pre-conference communications left me wondering basic things — like whether food was included. A helpful reminder for anyone planning events: anticipate people's questions and shape their expectations in advance.





Interesting, Not Innovative

All of the sessions were interesting, but few were innovative. Despite the festival's name, I didn't encounter a flood of groundbreaking, original ideas. The Executive Chef of *The Modern* shared a telling insight: it's difficult to surprise diners when not only menus but photos of dishes are online before guests arrive. For him, innovation today requires extraordinary creativity. Perhaps the same was true of the festival — it is harder than ever to genuinely surprise us.



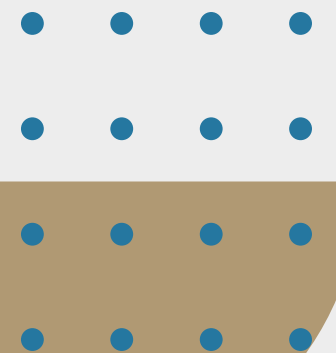
Nonprofit “No Kiddings”

Although I run a for-profit business, much of my work is in nonprofit environments. Nonprofits are often perceived as lagging behind the private sector, yet many of the messages highlighted at the festival are already baked into nonprofit life. Commitment to the importance of connection, belonging, and purpose is embedded in the sector’s day-to-day operations. In some ways, nonprofits may even be ahead — practicing values and approaches that the private sector is only just starting to recognize. Be careful of the stories we tell ourselves!



Lost Connection

Across sessions, a strong theme emerged: the human craving for deep, in-person connection. People have forgotten how to host; Starbucks is bringing back more seating to foster community; Jonathan Haidt urges us to put our phones down; and retailers notice customers are coming to their stores seeking “community as a source of stability.” The CEO of The Malin, a beautifully designed co-working space, insisted that “our best work happens in person.” While I’m not sure I agree entirely, I did leave reflecting on how much of my own work remains remote — and whether it still needs to be.



AI-Driven Personalization

Generative AI was, unsurprisingly, a major theme at the festival. Across multiple sessions, a clear message emerged: AI still isn't living up to its full promise. It was described as "a new intern who needs lot of training", or "a clumsy superhero" unaware of the full extent of their powers. The tools are powerful, but they still require thoughtful human guidance.

One of the most interesting threads was the way AI is enabling "personalization" at scale. Companies are increasingly able to customize interactions with customers, tailoring experiences in ways that were previously impossible. Yet there's an irony here: while AI can create more human-centred experiences, it may also deepen feelings of loneliness and disconnection in doing so.

The overarching reminder was clear: data alone does not make decisions. Human judgment, creativity, and imagination remain essential.

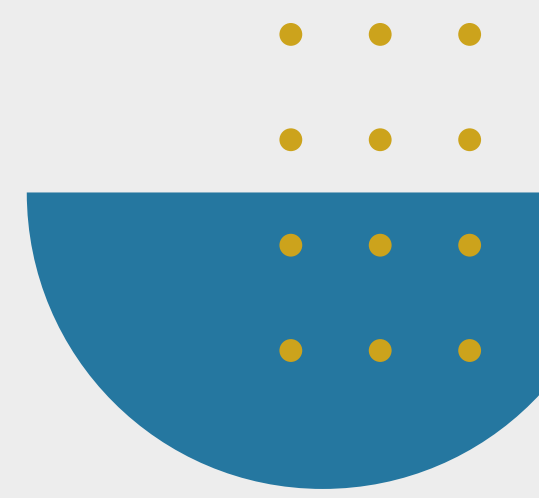




Magnet, Not Mandate

The conversation around return-to-office mandates was lively. *The Malin's* approach resonated: create spaces so appealing they draw people in, rather than enforcing mandatory attendance. The same principle applies to values and mission. When an organization's purpose is compelling, people choose to engage and commit, making rigid rules unnecessary.

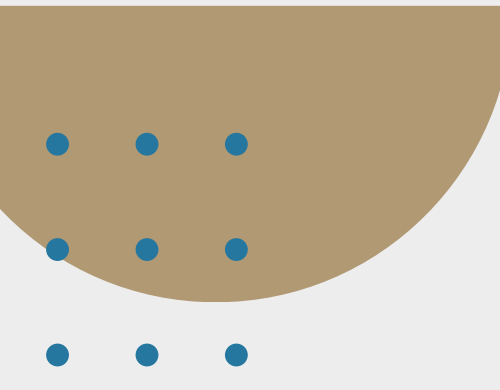




Be Better

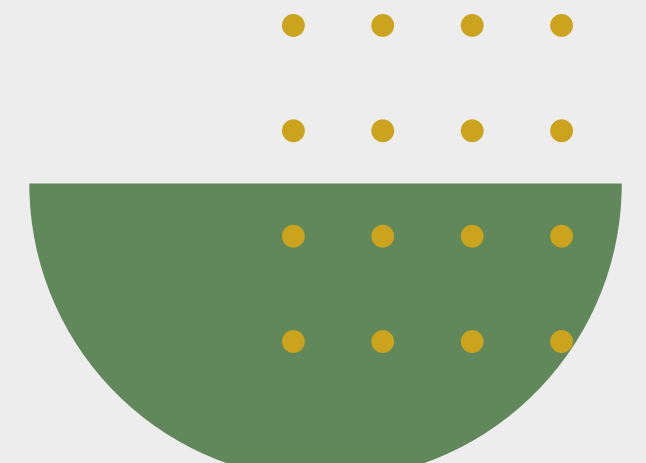
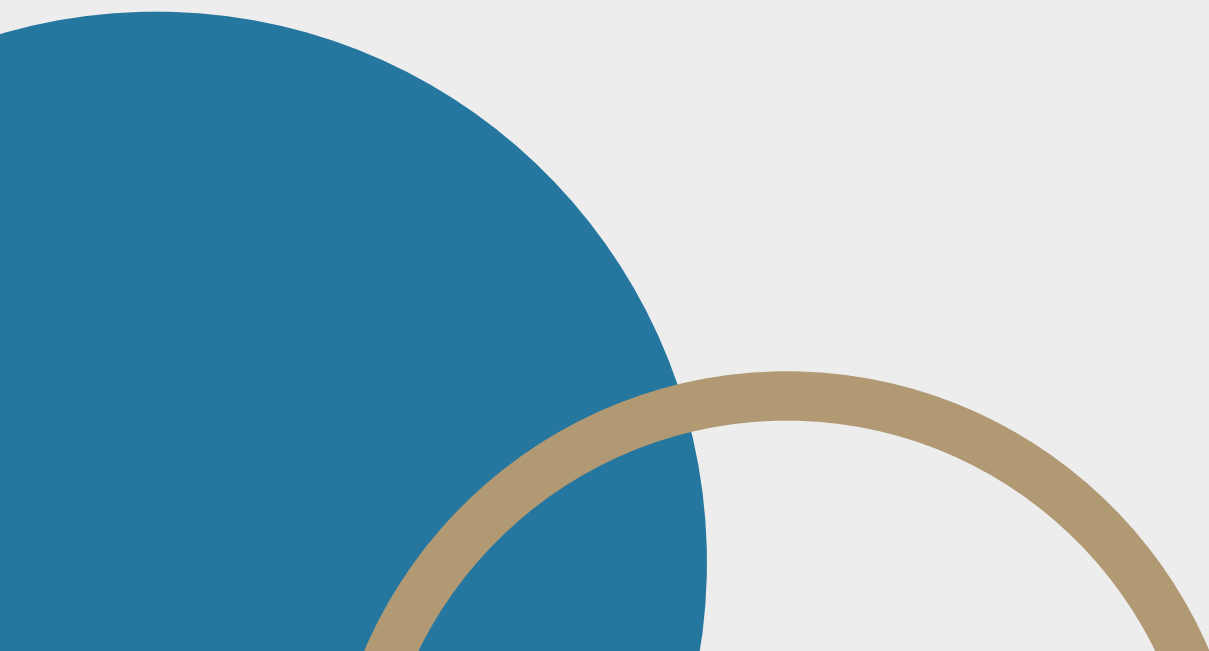
We are not just competing with other companies in our industry; we are competing with all the alternatives vying for people's attention, time, and energy. Co-working spaces must outperform home setups. In-person gatherings must be more compelling than Netflix or scrolling our phones.

The challenge to "be better" extends inward as well. What might raising our own expectations allow us to achieve? Many stories at the festival demonstrated that dramatic improvement is possible in a short time — the past doesn't have to define the future, in substance or pace.



The Power of Focus

Some of the most compelling stories highlighted the value of disciplined strategic focus. Equinox thrived during COVID by chasing fewer priorities. The Malin concentrates on being a great place to work, despite numerous suggestions to add more programs or to focus on community building. Limited focus brings clarity and energy, and the organizations that thrive are those that are uncompromising about it.



Plumbing and Poetry

Brené Brown quoted James March's idea that leadership is "plumbing and poetry." It's a motif in her new book, and that phrase stuck with me. There is artistry in strategy development, and there is rigor in execution. The organizations that combine both are the ones that soar.



Courage and Agility

I was struck by the pressure on leaders to work against our brain's strong preferences for safety and certainty. Brené noted that the “observable behaviours” associated with courage might look different now than when she did her earlier research fifteen years ago, but the need for courageous leadership remains strong.

The CEO of the *Project Management Institute* emphasized the need for “enterprise agility” above most other skills, citing that 85% of organizations identify it as very important, but 68% don't have it. He went on to note that most don't know how to build it. For me, this signals a huge opportunity for AQai and similar tools, which can measure and improve personal and collective adaptability.



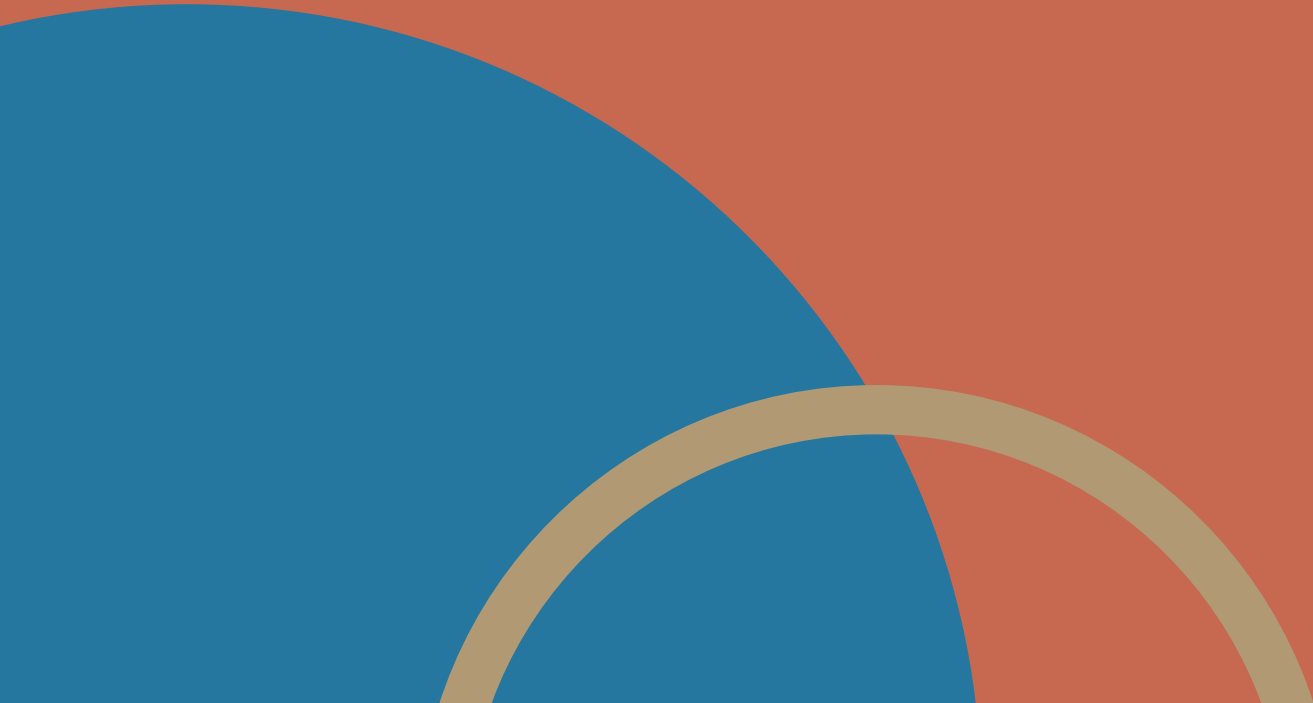
Gutsy Leadership

I did witness a few truly bold approaches. Geezer Creative, for instance, only hires people with 25+ years of experience, reframing age as an asset. The CEO of Unapologetic Foods is combatting deep-rooted racism in the restaurant industry, unapologetically embracing his culinary identity: “If you want a dish that’s less spicy, order something else!” These examples reminded me that standing firmly in your values, even when it might make others uncomfortable, is very compelling.





Generational Leadership



With five generations now in the workforce, generational dynamics were a recurring theme. Speakers discussed how to leverage the strengths of Gen Xers — their time, money, adaptability, experience, and desire to make an impact on the next generation — even as they are a small cohort whose stage of life involves navigating significant loss. They also explored how to meet the expectations of Millennials and Gen Z, whose work habits and professional priorities often differ significantly from those of the people hiring them.

I'm a fan of multi-generational life in many contexts, and I value the opportunities it creates for collaboration and perspective-sharing. Yet I left wondering whether these distinctions are meaningful or examples of unhelpful generalizations. Overemphasizing differences can risk creating self-fulfilling prophecies, dividing people rather than uniting them.



Living Well

One sobering statistic: the gap between lifespan and healthspan in the U.S. is 13 years. A quick search suggests that the gap is 11-12 years in Canada. That's more than a decade of life spent in poor health.

Two sessions explored ways to directly increase quality of life. The CEO of Autonomic shared insights from brain research, emphasizing “keystone habits” that have an outsized impact on health. Her core message: lower stress, improve relaxation, and find the sweet spot where head and heart decision-making align. Another session took a more unconventional approach, using tarot cards and a pendulum to explore intuition as an underused leadership skill, referring to it as “memories from the future.” It was memorable precisely because it was so different from every other session. There is power in differentiation.

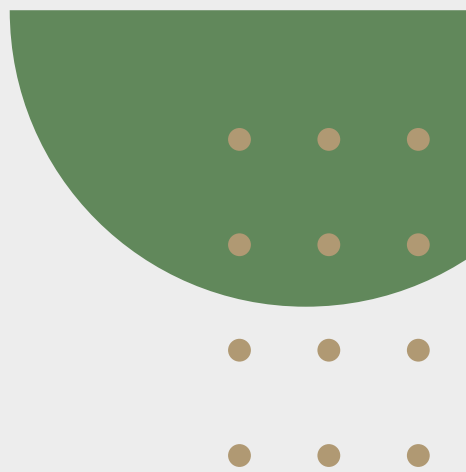
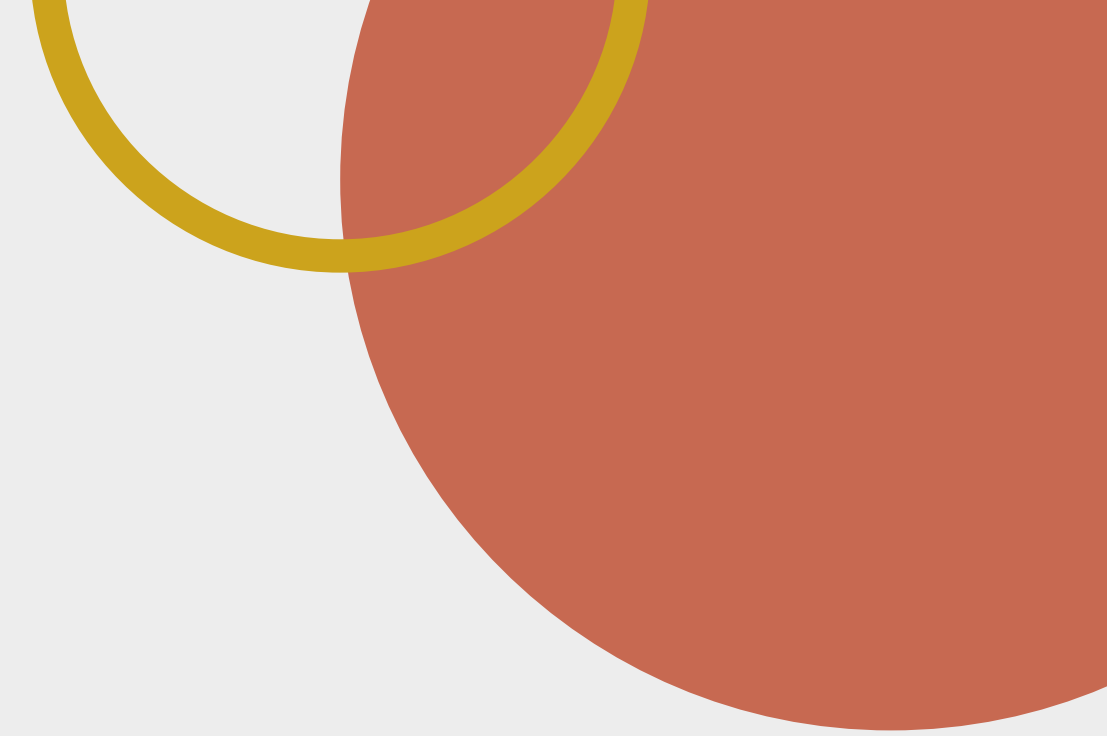


Take Action

Festivals are most fruitful when they lead to action.

A pointed encouragement from one presenter: “Create your own opportunities rather than waiting to be picked.” We live in a remarkable era for those willing to step forward, take initiative, and imagine what’s possible.

Brené Brown uses a lot of sports analogies (another reason I like her), and she reminded us that we would never bet on a team with no coach — so why do we think we can perform at our best without guidance?





If you'd like to chat about ways to put these insights into action in your context, get in touch:

- Tap into trusted advice with a 1:1 coaching package
- Invite me to speak at your next gathering
- Join my no-reading-required book club
- Map out your organization's strategic direction

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