

SECTION ONE • 50 MINUTES

# Leadership Today

*The challenges we face — and what they mean for all of us.*

**Bryon Hough**

CEO • Children's Activity Management • [bryon@camincorporated.com](mailto:bryon@camincorporated.com)

**Presenter-Led with Audience Discussion**





# Our 50 Minutes Together



|           |                                                         |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| 0–5 min   | Opening discussion — start with what's real in the room |
| 5–15 min  | The landscape — challenges, pressure & trust            |
| 15–30 min | Generational dynamics — five generations, one team      |
| 30–42 min | New challenges shaping the field in 2026–27             |
| 42–50 min | Principles & bridge to collaborative problem-solving    |

## OPENING DISCUSSION



**“What’s the biggest leadership challenge  
in your organization right now —  
and do you think the people around  
you are dealing with the same thing?”**

*Take 2–3 minutes. Turn to someone near you — then we’ll hear a few to kick things off.*

# Leadership has never been harder — or more important.

In the children's activity world, we carry all the challenges of modern leadership — plus our own.



**Generational  
Diversity**



**Constant  
Change**



**Burnout &  
Wellbeing**

# The Landscape of Leadership Today

**1. Varying views of authority**

**2. Work-life balance expectations**

**3. Technology adoption gaps**

**4. Motivation & career priorities**

**5. Knowledge transfer**

**6. Avoiding stereotypes & bias**

7. Constant change & uncertainty

8. Trust & transparency

9. Talent attraction & retention

10. Burnout & wellbeing

11. Faster decision-making

12. Inclusion & accountability

**13. AI anxiety & new technology**

**14. Psychological safety**

**15. Parent escalation culture**

**16. Seasonal workforce loyalty**

 *Generational focus*

 *New challenges (2025–26 research)*

## SHOW OF HANDS



**How many of you made a leadership call recently that you weren't fully confident in?**

- ▶ Keep your hand up if you made it anyway — because it needed to be made.
- ▶ Keep it up if you're still second-guessing it.

*Every call carries weight. Decision fatigue is real — and everyone in this room is carrying it.*

# Communication:

## Where Leadership Gets Real



When staff don't know WHY, they fill in the blank — and it's almost never more charitable than the truth.



Under pressure, we default to telling instead of connecting. The result is compliance without buy-in.



Tone, timing, and channel land differently across generations — the same message can build trust or destroy it.

**TURN & TALK** — Think about the last communication breakdown in your organization. Was it the message — or the relationship underneath it?



P A R T   T W O

# Generational Dynamics

*Five generations. One team. Real tensions — and real opportunities.*

SHOW OF HANDS



How many of you lead people  
from a  
**different generation**  
than your own?

*Raise your hand if you lead someone 10+ years older or younger than you.*

Keep it up if that's most of your team.

# Who's In Charge?

## It Depends Who You Ask.

### Hierarchy & Structure

- ▶ Clear chain of command
- ▶ Respect for experience & tenure
- ▶ Decisions from the top down
- ▶ Defined roles and expectations
- ▶ Stability and consistency

### Collaboration & Access

- ▶ Open-door access to leaders
- ▶ Input valued regardless of title
- ▶ Shared decision-making
- ▶ Flexibility over rigid process
- ▶ Purpose-driven work

*Neither is wrong. Great leaders read the room and flex.*

# Knowledge Transfer:

## The Two-Way Street

Organizations need leaders who preserve institutional knowledge while encouraging fresh ideas.



### Seasoned Leaders

Pass down institutional wisdom, context, and hard-won experience.



### Emerging Leaders

Bring fresh perspectives, new tech, and energy for change.

*Without deliberate transfer, history repeats, mistakes recur, great people leave.*

# What Motivates Your Team?

## Baby Boomers

born ~1946–64

Stability, loyalty, legacy, recognition of tenure and dedication

## Gen X

born ~1965–80

Autonomy, work-life fit, results over process, pragmatic trust

## Millennials

born ~1981–96

Purpose, flexibility, growth, recognition, collaborative culture

## Gen Z

born ~1997–09

Authenticity, inclusion, direct feedback, digital-first, stability

## Gen Alpha

born ~2010+

Immediate feedback, visual learning, AI-native — need structured onboarding & high support

*Leaders who understand these differences treat everyone fairly — not identically.*

GENERATION — ENTERING NOW

# Generation Alpha: The Newest Face in Your Organization

Born 2010+. Already coaching, lifeguarding, and teaching in programs like yours.



## Who They Are

AI and smartphone-natives from birth. Post-pandemic childhoods disrupted early social development — they arrive with more anxiety and less baseline workplace experience.



## What Sets Them Apart

Expect immediate, specific feedback. Video-first learners — abstract instruction loses them. Higher anxiety rates than any prior generation.



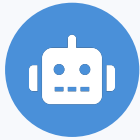
## What They Need

Step-by-step onboarding — don't assume basics. Frequent check-ins, not "find me." Visual demos and peer learning over manuals.

*They're already in your building — the leaders who figure them out first will have a real edge.*

NEW CHALLENGE

# AI Anxiety & Technology Adoption Gaps



## Gen Z & Gen Alpha

Gen Z fears job replacement. Gen Alpha has never known work without AI — but may lean on it as a crutch. Both need guidance on responsible use, not just a ban.



## Gen X

Pragmatic adopters. Will use tech if it makes the job easier. Resistant to changes that feel like surveillance or micromanagement.

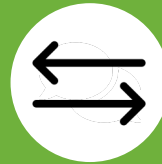


## Baby Boomers

May distrust automation. Risk feeling bypassed or deskilled. Thrive when tech is introduced as a tool, not a replacement.

*Your job: introduce AI as a tool that helps people do what they're good at — not replace them.*

## DISCUSSION



**"Think about a moment when a generational  
difference in your organization created  
real tension — or a real breakthrough.  
What made the difference?"**

*Turn to someone you haven't spoken to yet. 3 minutes, then we  
share a few with the room.*

NEW CHALLENGE

# Psychological Safety Across Generations

Whether team members feel safe to speak up is the #1 predictor of team performance (Harvard/Edmondson).



## The “Call-Out” Generation

Millennials, Gen Z & Gen Alpha expect transparency around mistakes. Gen Alpha in particular has little filter — leaders need explicit feedback norms set early.



## The Private Correction Norm

Boomers & Gen X expect corrections to happen privately. Group feedback feels humiliating — not fair.

*Leaders who don't set explicit feedback norms will find their teams fragmented.*



PART THREE

# Navigating New Pressures

*Parent escalation, seasonal culture, and the challenges that weren't in any leadership manual.*

## NEW CHALLENGE

# Parent Escalation Culture: The External Leadership Test

Aspen Institute 2024: Sharp rise in aggressive parent behavior toward children's activity staff post-pandemic.

### Who gets hit hardest

Youngest, least-experienced staff are most often left to manage escalating parents alone — without clear organizational backing.

### The generational gap

Older staff tend to have more authority and comfort managing confrontational parents. New staff don't know when or how to escalate.

### What leaders must do

Build explicit escalation protocols. Publicly back your staff. Make it clear the organization will always step in — and then actually step in.

## NEW CHALLENGE

# Seasonal Workforce: Building Culture with Temporary Staff

Deloitte 2024: Children's activity orgs over-rely on full-time engagement models for workforces that are largely hourly and seasonal.



### The structural reality

Part-time, seasonal, variable-hour staff can't be managed the same way as full-time employees. Career ladders don't apply here.



### What Gen Z & Gen Alpha think

Seasonal or gig work doesn't mean lack of commitment — it's a conscious choice. Gen Alpha entering the workforce expects flexibility as a baseline. Leaders who read it as disloyalty lose staff unnecessarily.



### The culture challenge

How do you build genuine culture and continuity with people who are structurally temporary? Belonging doesn't require permanence.



# Inclusion & Accountability: The Modern Leadership Paradox

## Inclusion Means:

- ▶ Fair, respectful environments
- ▶ Voice for every generation
- ▶ No age-based assumptions
- ▶ Psychological safety to speak up

## Accountability Means:

- ▶ Consistent standards for everyone
- ▶ Outcomes that actually matter
- ▶ Honest performance conversations
- ▶ Following through on commitments

*You can't have one without the other. Both require courage.*



# Principles for Leading Today

- 01** Lead the person, not the generation — stereotypes are a shortcut that costs you trust.
- 02** Be transparent about decisions, especially the hard ones. People can handle honesty.
- 03** Create space for knowledge to flow both ways — up and down the generational ladder.
- 04** Hold the line on accountability while staying curious about what drives each person.
- 05** Your consistency is your credibility. How you lead on hard days defines your culture.

# What We Covered



Leadership today is genuinely complex — and the complexity is real, not an excuse.



Generational differences in authority, motivation & knowledge transfer are our biggest internal challenge.



New forces — AI anxiety, Gen Alpha entering the workforce, parent escalation — are actively reshaping the job.



Trust, inclusion, and accountability are not soft skills — they're operational necessities.

**Up Next: Jason — Collaborative Problem-Solving**

# Thank You for Joining Us

This presentation and additional congress materials are available for download online.

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[camincorporated.com](http://camincorporated.com)



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