

CITY OF MADISON

December 10, 2025– Leadership Gathering Results

2025 Theme

Leading with Humanity: Building a Culture of Care



Purpose

The gathering aims to foster a collaborative environment where leaders from across TeamCity can:

- **Share insights** and **learn** from each other.
- **Build relationships** in a way that **breaks departmental silos** and **strengthens the City's collective efforts**.
- Identify actionable strategies for **enhancing leadership practices** while **ensuring care and accountability**.

Attendees

- 115 total attendees. This is a **47% increase in attendance** from the 2023 Leadership Gathering and an **8% increase in attendance** from the 2024 Leadership Gathering
- 29 out of 32 agencies were represented. This is **90% of all city agencies**.

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Keynote – Leading with Humanity: Building a Culture of Care by Paul Wesselman, The Ripples Guy

76% response rate, (n=87)

- 98% of respondents rated the keynote as valuable
- 98% of respondents report that they can apply what they learned from the keynote

Biggest Takeaways from the Keynote – per Attendees:

After completing a thematic analysis of the open-ended feedback from 79% of respondents (n=69/87) please find the results below.

High-Level Synthesis:

Overall, the feedback reflects a **strongly internalized learning experience** centered on *growth through discomfort, relational leadership, and shared learning space*. Participants repeatedly reference the **comfort-challenge framework** and the **comfort-growth continuum** as both a personal reflective tool and a practical leadership framework. The data suggests the experience functioned less as content-heavy training and more as a **catalyst for mindset shifts, normalization of discomfort, strengthened self-awareness**, and reinforced the importance of **relational connection across the organization for growth**. Leaders are seeking opportunities to **translate these insights into practical applications** – particularly in supervisory transitions, team development, and performance conversations—while maintaining balance and psychological safety for themselves and their teams. There is also a clear signal that leaders value **protected time and space to reflect, connect, and recalibrate**, particularly during transitions or periods of stagnation.

Leadership Gathering Evaluation

Overall Gathering:

	95% of respondents rated the gathering overall as excellent or good
	95% of respondents rated the food and drink as good or excellent.

Goals of the Gathering:

	99% of respondents rated the gathering successful in promoting cross-departmental collaboration among participants.		99% of respondents rated the gathering successful in strengthening collective efforts.
	100% of respondents rated the gathering successful in promoting a sense of unity among leaders across different departments.		100% of respondents rated the gathering successful in promoting breaking down silos
	97% of respondents rated the gathering provided them with ideas to address their department's needs		

Thematic analysis:

Top 3 Patterns Identified in Thematic Analysis:

1. Mindset Shift: Discomfort Is Reframed from Threat → Signals

Participants consistently reposition discomfort as *informational* rather than *dangerous*.

2. Growth Is Relational, Not Solitary

Even highly personal insights are framed through connection with others.

3. Leaders Are Seeking Calibration, Not Acceleration

Themes of balance, pacing, scaffolding, and not pushing into panic suggest a desire for **sustainable leadership**, not heroic overextension.

Theme 1: Personal Growth & Self-Awareness

Definition: Individual reflection related to presence, mindset, emotional regulation, and self-care as foundational to leadership effectiveness.

Key Subthemes:

Theme	Details
Presence & Mindfulness ("Here / Now")	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Repeated verbatim references ("Here now" appears over 15 times)
Emotional Awareness & Self-Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognizing boredom as normal Acknowledging panic vs. fear vs. growth
Self-Compassion & Acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Normalizing discomfort, stagnation, and/or regression "It's okay to be in panic—just don't stay there"

Theme 2: Comfort Zone Management (Discomfort as a Growth Mechanism)

Definition: Understanding and intentionally navigating the continuum from comfort → fear → panic → learning → growth.

Key Subthemes:

Theme	Details
Normalization of Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear as necessary and productive ("embrace it rather than avoid it")
Boundary Management (Fear vs. Panic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong distinction between <i>productive discomfort</i> and <i>overwhelm/panic</i>
Intentional Stretching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choosing discomfort rather than drifting into panic
Individual Variability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One person's comfort = another's panic

Theme 3: Leadership Development & Application

Definition: Translation of concepts into leadership behaviors, systems, and relational practices.

Key Subthemes:

Theme	Details
Leading Through Transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New supervisors moving from peer → leader Loss of relational readiness and role clarity
Coaching & Developmental Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scaffolding growth Supporting staff without overprotecting
Systems Integration	Applying frameworks to:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance evaluations • Personnel conversations • Change management
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Theme 4: Relational Leadership & Human Connection (*Emergent, Strong*)

Definition: Leadership as a relational, social, and community-based process rather than an individual endeavor.

Key Subthemes:

Theme	Details
Relationship-Building Across the Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting new people • Learning from those outside one's immediate circle
Shared Experience & Psychological Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Encouraged by the people here" • "It takes a village"
Dedicated Space for Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders value protected time together

Theme 5: Learning Process & Pedagogy (*Meta-Learning*)

Definition: Reflections on *how* learning occurred, not just *what* was learned.

Key Subthemes:

Theme	Details
Visual & Metaphorical Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zones diagram • Frogs • Ripples
Embodied & Experiential Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement between tables • Real-time reflection

Looking for more details on the Leadership Gathering?

Reach out to OrganizationalDevelopment@cityofmadison.com to get in touch with our Leadership Development Specialist.