BEYOND THE COMPETENCE TRAP · NOVEMBER 2026

Inside the Leadership Circles

What surfaced when leaders stopped performing and started telling the truth.

Saturday, November 14, 2026 · The Atrium, Nicol Building, Carleton University, Ottawa
A sold-out day · 42 participants · 19 faculty · 6 facilitated Leadership Circles
CI3, Curated Leadership Experiences

The heart of the day was not the stage. It was six small rooms. In each, a handful of leaders and their faculty sat in a circle and worked through the question underneath their careers, the one most of us carry quietly and rarely say out loud.

This report shares what came up. The rooms ran under a confidentiality agreement, so no participant is named and nothing here traces back to a person. What follows are the collective threads of each circle: the question the faculty posed, the assumption the room named and let go of, the challenges people were brave enough to say out loud, and the practical steps they carried back out the door. Where a facilitator's own reflection captured the room, we have kept it in their words.

The six circles and their faculty

- **Business & Entrepreneurship**: Deanna Davies, Alexander Omijeh, Elizabeth Omosebi
- **Career Influence**: Adeniyi Ajao, Yenga Ndinsil, Germain Aoun
- **Finance & Career Capital**: Franklin H. Ezenwa, Charles Oviri (PhD), Scott Gonsalves
- **Leadership Health Check**: Michael Ehiginwa, Saima Naqvi, Chika Nwuche, Patrick van Abbema
- **Leadership Identity**: Christiana Essie Sagay, Brij Bali, Temitope Akintunde
- **Strategic Visibility**: Temisan Sagay, Kevin Judge, Roula Eid

Business & Entrepreneurship

FACULTY: DEANNA DAVIES · ALEXANDER OMIJEH · ELIZABETH OMOSEBI

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

> *What is the one thing in your venture that only you can do, and what is it costing the business that you are still doing everything else?*

The faculty pressed it further: who can run, or step in to lead, your business when you are not available?

WHAT CAME UP

The founder as the bottleneck. The room circled three words again and again, delegation, trust, and community, and the uncomfortable truth beneath them: that the business only moves when the founder moves. People were doing everything, and quietly afraid of what would happen if they stopped.

THE ASSUMPTION THE ROOM LET GO OF

That your staff and collaborators will offer feedback, and make you more efficient, without you ever actively seeking it. They usually will not. Help, ideas, and support have to be invited, and the people you lean on have to be chosen with care rather than inherited by accident.

WHAT EMERGED

- Encourage your team to bring ideas, and make it safe for them to do so.
- Screen your inner circle; proximity is not the same as alignment.
- The one thing only you can do is the vision; almost everything else can be shared.

WHAT PEOPLE LEFT WITH

- Curate your circle with intention, and know your go-to person for each kind of need.
- Identify what only you can carry, and begin, deliberately, to release the rest.

Career Influence

FACULTY: ADENIYI AJAO · YENGA NDINSIL · GERMAIN AOUN

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

> *What do you want to be known for, and what evidence would make a stranger believe it?*

The faculty turned it on the present moment: what are you doing with your time while you wait for that job, that promotion, that progression? And underneath it, the quieter one, what do I really want professionally?

WHAT CAME UP

- **Fear**, in several forms: of failure, of rejection, of asking the wrong question, and the simple inability to articulate your own worth.
- **Imposter syndrome**: constantly doubting your skills, feeling you are not enough, auto-disqualifying yourself from spaces you belong in.
- **Shrinking yourself to fit**: people removing certifications and qualifications from their resumes to be considered for lower-level roles, then struggling to be seen, and being overqualified yet settling for less out of necessity.

THE ASSUMPTION THE ROOM LET GO OF

That visibility was optional, that LinkedIn was not for them. By the end, participants had reopened their accounts mid-session and begun connecting with everyone at the table. A second belief shifted too: that you must take the lowest rung because you have no choice, a move that quietly becomes a trap. Negotiating your worth at the start positions you far better than hoping to climb out later.

WHAT EMERGED

- Name your fear; what you can name, you can work with.
- Rejection is redirection. Success is when opportunity meets preparedness.
- FAIL is a First Attempt In Learning, so do not be scared to fail.
- It is all right to be the odd one out. Excellence always wants more.

WHAT PEOPLE LEFT WITH

- Practise communication deliberately: record yourself, play it back, note what to improve, and do it daily.
- If you are pivoting, for example into project management, you are not starting from zero. Transferable skills and experience get you visibility and promotion faster. Network, volunteer, build relationships.
- If you stripped a PMP or other credential off your resume, build relationships with the relevant teams and speak up about your qualifications when the moment comes.

- Articulate what you want: ask to shadow a senior person, volunteer to organise an event that makes your work visible.
- Build alliances with your peers, not only upward. Lift others as you ascend; developing and investing in people is part of the work, and it gets lonely higher up.

Finance & Career Capital

FACULTY: FRANKLIN H. EZENWA · CHARLES OVIRI (PHD) · SCOTT GONSALVES

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

> *What has your career built in you that you have not yet converted into leverage?*

Put plainly: what skills from your past work are you not leveraging, for fear they will not be acknowledged in the Canadian job market, and how could you turn that into a selling point?

WHAT CAME UP

- How to navigate the system as a newcomer carrying a wealth of experience from back home.
- The wall of "no Canadian experience" while job searching, and the quiet undervaluing of a whole career because it happened elsewhere.

THE ASSUMPTION THE ROOM LET GO OF

Several participants were new to the country and did not think highly of volunteering. The faculty offered concrete examples of how volunteering gets a foot in the door, and the view shifted. Experience from a home country counts when it is positioned well, and certifications matter most when you can also defend them.

WHAT PEOPLE LEFT WITH

- Find one volunteering opportunity and give it your best.
- Tailor your CV to each job description rather than sending one version everywhere.
- Turn the experience you have been hiding into a selling point.

> *From the faculty: "There were two participants and three faculty leaders. We mostly asked questions, heard from the participants, and shared personal stories to make our points. We missed the part where participants voice their commitments aloud before wrapping up. We will be mindful of that next time."*

Leadership Health Check

FACULTY: MICHAEL EHIGINWA · SAIMA NAQVI · CHIKA NWUCHE · PATRICK VAN ABBEMA

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

> *Which of your strengths is costing you the most, and what would make your leadership sustainable for the next three years?*

The faculty sharpened it from two angles: am I the problem, or is the environment the problem? And for the project managers in the room, why am I doing the work for others, building dependency instead of capability?

WHAT CAME UP

- The hard move from operator to manager, and letting your value be seen rather than being known only as the dependable go-to person.
- Constant availability, friction with the hierarchy, and a pace that is quietly unsustainable.
- Knowing when it is time to change the environment, and when it is not.

THE ASSUMPTION THE ROOM LET GO OF

That the environment is always the problem. Sometimes it is not; sometimes it is you, and you have not yet scanned the environment to understand its currency. And the hardest one to accept and the most freeing: everyone is not responsible for your growth. You are.

WHAT EMERGED

- Notice whether the culture of your workplace is inhibiting your growth.
- The competence that brought you to this position is not the competence that takes you to the next.
- You need a personal strategic plan to move yourself forward. Build capability, not dependency. Improve systems and procedures to get noticed, and build relationships by understanding what each person's "currency" is.

WHAT PEOPLE LEFT WITH

- Scan your environment regularly, and develop capabilities rather than dependencies.
- Know who needs to see the results of your work, and make sure they do, through intentional communication.
- Recognise when a high level of competence has tipped into overload. Sustainable leadership means a healthy pace, not constantly pushing to the edge.
- Identify one specific boundary or delegation move you can make on Monday. That small, concrete action is where real change begins.

> *From the faculty: "What I valued most was the chance to explore, with other faculty and participants, how we evolve as leaders beyond the expertise that first earns us recognition. The cumulative effect of these exchanges goes far beyond the room. Your capacity to listen, adapt, and encourage others is just as important as the skills you started with."*

Leadership Identity

FACULTY: CHRISTIANA ESSIE SAGAY · BRIJ BALI · TEMITOPE AKINTUNDE

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

> *Who are you as a leader when you are no longer the person who fixes everything?*

And its sharper twin: what are we willing to stop being recognised for, in order to become the leaders we want to be?

WHAT CAME UP

- Delivering immediate results versus creating the time and visibility for a broader, more strategic contribution.
- Maintaining quality through your own direct involvement versus giving others room to exercise judgment and take ownership.
- Securing support for better ways of working versus genuinely understanding the concerns and constraints that keep the current ways in place.

THE ASSUMPTION THE ROOM LET GO OF

The belief that being consistently reliable, taking on more work, and personally solving problems will naturally lead to greater influence and recognition. The fuller understanding that replaced it: broader leadership also means communicating the significance of your contribution, exercising judgment about where to intervene, and enabling others to take ownership. Advancement asks for attention to relationships and to how opportunities are allocated, not output alone.

WHAT EMERGED

- A clearer leadership identity comes from being able to explain the contribution others can trust you to make, supported by real examples.
- Technical expertise converts into influence when its connection to organisational priorities and decisions is made visible to others.
- Sharing responsibility becomes meaningful only when others have clear outcomes, real decision-making space, and access to support.

WHAT PEOPLE LEFT WITH

- Make a contribution visible within a week: a brief example of a problem, the judgment you exercised, and the result, shared through a work update or development conversation and tied to a wider priority.
- Clarify ownership of shared work with a colleague: who owns what, which decisions they can make, when to consult, and when progress will be reviewed.

- Explore a stakeholder's perspective on a process that needs improving: what works now, what creates difficulty, what a useful improvement would look like. Agree one small next step and how to assess it.

> *From the room: individual reflection, facilitated questioning, and peer feedback. The schedule was kept, though the conversation lingered well after the circle officially closed.*

Strategic Visibility

FACULTY: TEMISAN SAGAY · KEVIN JUDGE · ROULA EID

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

> *Which rooms decide what matters to your career, and what do the people in them know about your judgment?*

The faculty asked it from the other side, too: when the room makes a good decision without you, what does that say about the value you believe you bring, and who gets to decide?

WHAT CAME UP

- **Being yourself versus performing for the room.** People worried that being visible means acting fake, chasing approval, putting on a show online. They wanted to be seen without losing themselves.
- **Being needed versus being visible.** Several do the work, put out the fires, and fill roles that carry no title, yet are not in the rooms where decisions are made. Being good at the job did not automatically get them noticed.
- **Relying on a sponsor versus building your own network.** One person's access depended on their manager being in the room; when the manager was away, they were left out. Reaching out directly felt like overstepping the hierarchy.

THE ASSUMPTION THE ROOM LET GO OF

That wanting to be liked makes your visibility suspect, something to feel guilty about and hide. What replaced it was a cleaner test: the motive matters less than whether it holds up. If the work moves the organisation's goals forward, helps people, and gives you real satisfaction, it is legitimate. The aim was never to be liked; it was to be valued and to have influence.

LINES FROM THE ROOM

- "What happens when your boss, who seems to be your only corporate protector, wins the lottery and leaves the company?"
- "Some folks could like you and not want you to get ahead. They might not value you, but they might like you."
- "If everything I'm doing is to move my organisation forward, I should not really bother about the gossip."

WHAT PEOPLE LEFT WITH

- **Build a referral chain.** Ask your manager for three people you should know, and book short meetings to listen: "What makes you successful here? What should I know?" At the end of each, ask for three more names, and open the next request with "[Name] suggested I talk to you."

- **Treat a missed invitation as a role question, not a personal slight.** List the meetings and escalation paths your role should be part of. If you are left out, ask once, plainly, based on the role: "Given I own this, should this role be on the invite?" Then propose adding the role, rather than you personally, to the plan.
- **Ask one useful question in a public forum,** tied to what leaders care about: cost, time, or risk. Showing your judgment in the room makes you visible without talking about yourself.

> *How the room worked: a Chatham House confidentiality agreement (the "Vegas rule"); equal airtime for every challenge; naming and then challenging an assumption; asking a participant to give the advice she would offer someone else in her position; "how does it feel hearing yourself say that?" and "what changes in your question?"; parking off-topic threads for later; and writing down a single next easiest step before leaving.*

The threads that ran through every room

Visibility is not the same as competence. In circle after circle the same ache appeared: being good at the work does not get you into the rooms where decisions are made. Being seen is a separate skill, and the day treated it as one that can be learned, practised, and done without self-promotion that feels false.

Influence without authority. So many people fill untitled roles, carry the load, and solve the problems, and still go unseen. The reframe across rooms was to stop asking "how do I work harder" and start asking "how do I move the right people, and how do they come to know my judgment."

Fear and the imposter. Fear of failure, of rejection, of asking. The habit of shrinking your own credentials to fit a smaller room. The day's quiet rallying cry: name the fear, and remember that failure is a first attempt in learning.

Carrying experience across a border. For newcomers, the work is converting a real career from elsewhere into recognised leverage here, positioning hard-won experience as a selling point, and refusing to aim lower than that experience deserves.

From operator to leader. The strength that earned your seat can quietly cost you the next one. Sustainable leadership means building capability in others rather than dependency on you, protecting a healthy pace, and letting go of being the one who fixes everything.

The courage was the point. Underneath every theme sat the same move: saying the true thing out loud, in a room that agreed to keep it. That is what a circle is for.

What they carried out

No one left with a slogan. They left with a single next step, written down before they stood up: one boundary to set, one person to reach out to, one contribution to make visible, one fear to name. That is the quiet power of a circle. The room gives you the courage, and you leave with something you can actually do on Monday.

Our deep thanks to the faculty who held these rooms, and to every participant who chose to be honest in them. Our next Curated Leadership Experience is in March 2027. The circles continue.