Community sector CEO's

Session 3: Leading Innovation and Sustainability

A three-session program designed to help chief executive officers (and other comparable job titles) understand their role and responsibilities.



scanlon community

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Knowledge Connections Credentials

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Where not-for-profits go for help

Course outline

Session one:
Strategy and governance

Session two:
People and performance

Session three:
Innovation and sustainability

Reflection on practice



- Your name, role and organisation
- Did last week’s workshop prompt new practice, thinking or ideas?

Community Sector CEOs

Learning outcomes for this workshop

- Identify practical ways to protect their own wellbeing as CEO
- Engage boards in supporting CEO sustainability
- Make strategic funding decisions under constraint
- Communicate difficult financial realities with honesty and care
- Balance short-term survival with long-term innovation

Put your oxygen mask on first.

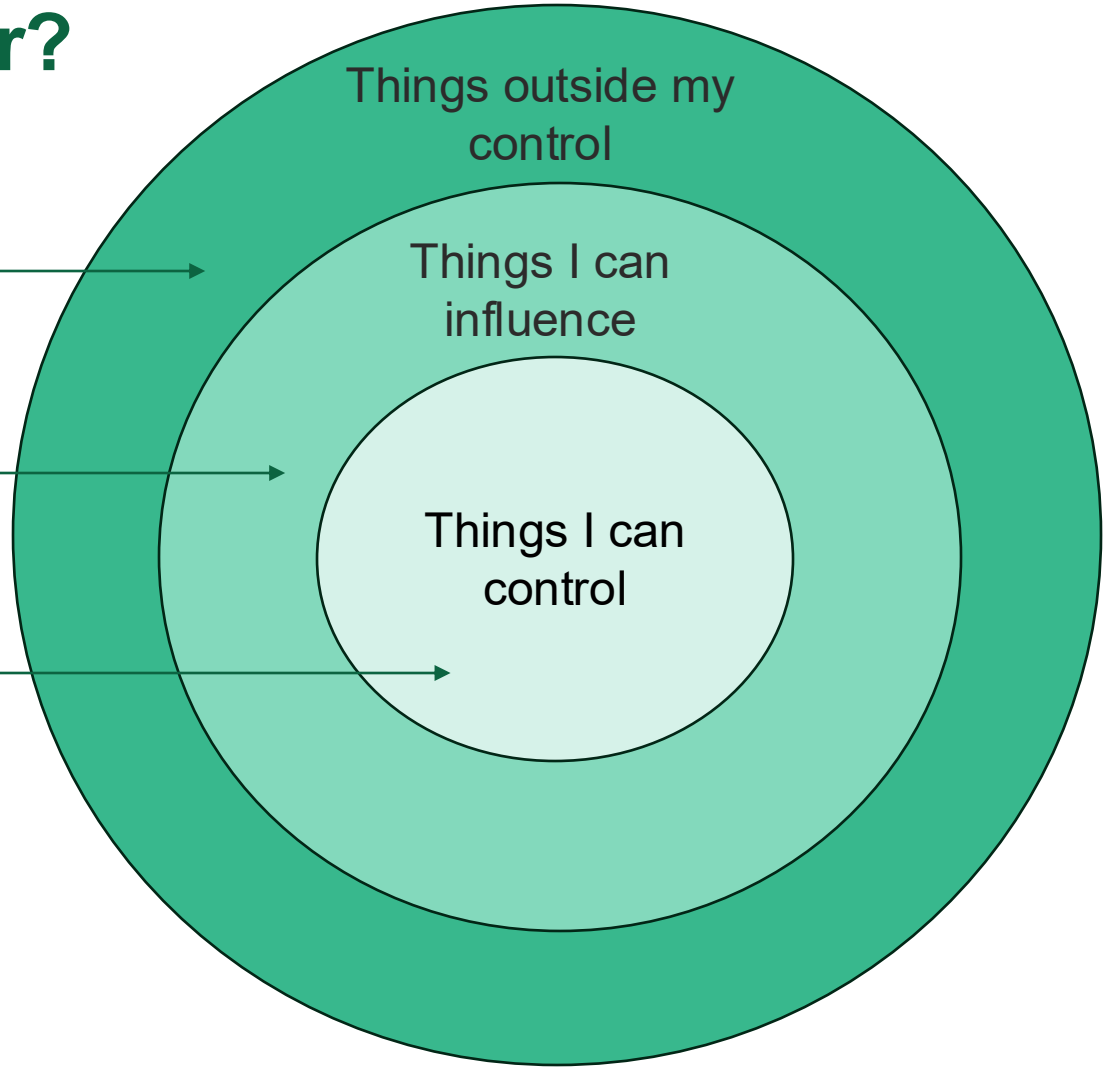
- CEO wellbeing is not aspirational it is foundational to organisational success
- Burnout is a result of system failure not personal weakness
- Prioritisation and compromise
- Be the leader you want to see

What are you NOT responsible for?

Circle of concern

Circle of influence

Circle of control



Breakout activity

Step one: Draw three separate circles and label them CONCERN, INFLUENCE, CONTROL

Step two: Write down as many current pressures, demands, stressors you can think of in each of the categories (3 mins)

Step three: In breakout groups, share one item sitting in concern that is taking a lot of mental space (4 mins)

Step four: Discuss one small action that would reduce load, clarify expectations, or provide support for each item (4 mins)

Step five: Commit to one action and share in the chat for accountability.

Board support for CEO wellbeing

- Partnership and collaboration
- Regular check ins that go beyond KPIs
- Opportunities and encouragement for professional development
- Access to Employee Assistance Program or similar support
- Cultivating a culture of psychological and psycho-social safety
- Ensuring policies reflect organisational values and culture (i.e. family friendly/flexible work)



https://www.lifeline.org.au/
https://www.beyondblue.org.au/

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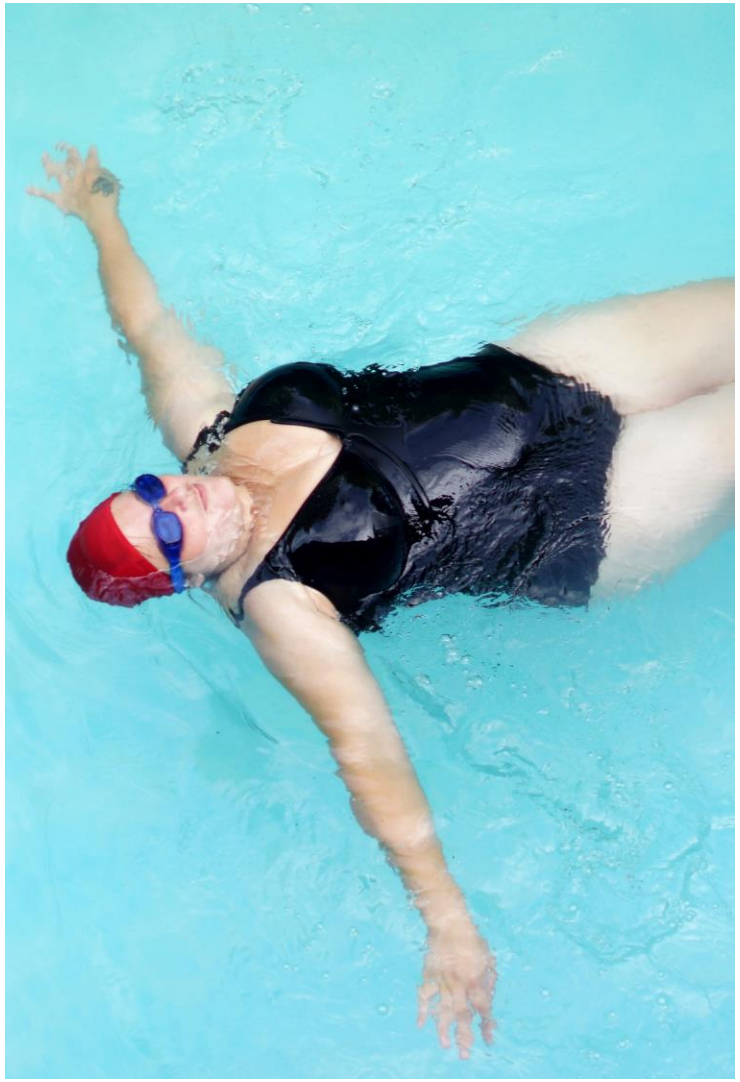
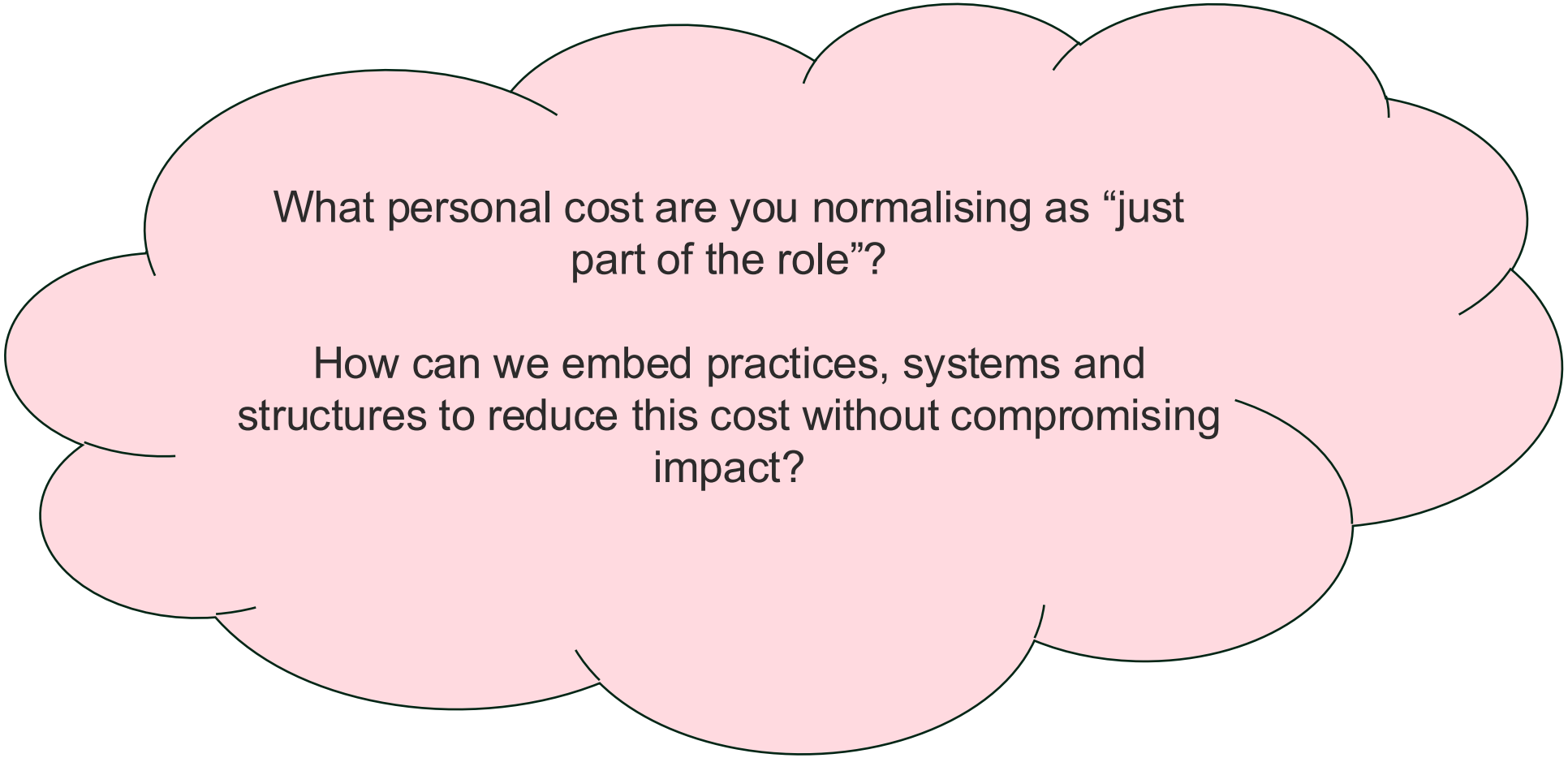
Looking after yourself

- Critical friends
- Schedule recovery gaps in your calendar
- Walking meetings
- Eating lunch and snacks away from your desk (or even the office!)
- Regular intentional exercise
- Meditation
- Reading for fun
- Baths/floating
- Playing/listening to music



https://www.communitydirectors.com.au/tools/personal-leadership-charter-tool

Reflection


What personal cost are you normalising as “just part of the role”?
How can we embed practices, systems and structures to reduce this cost without compromising impact?

Break!

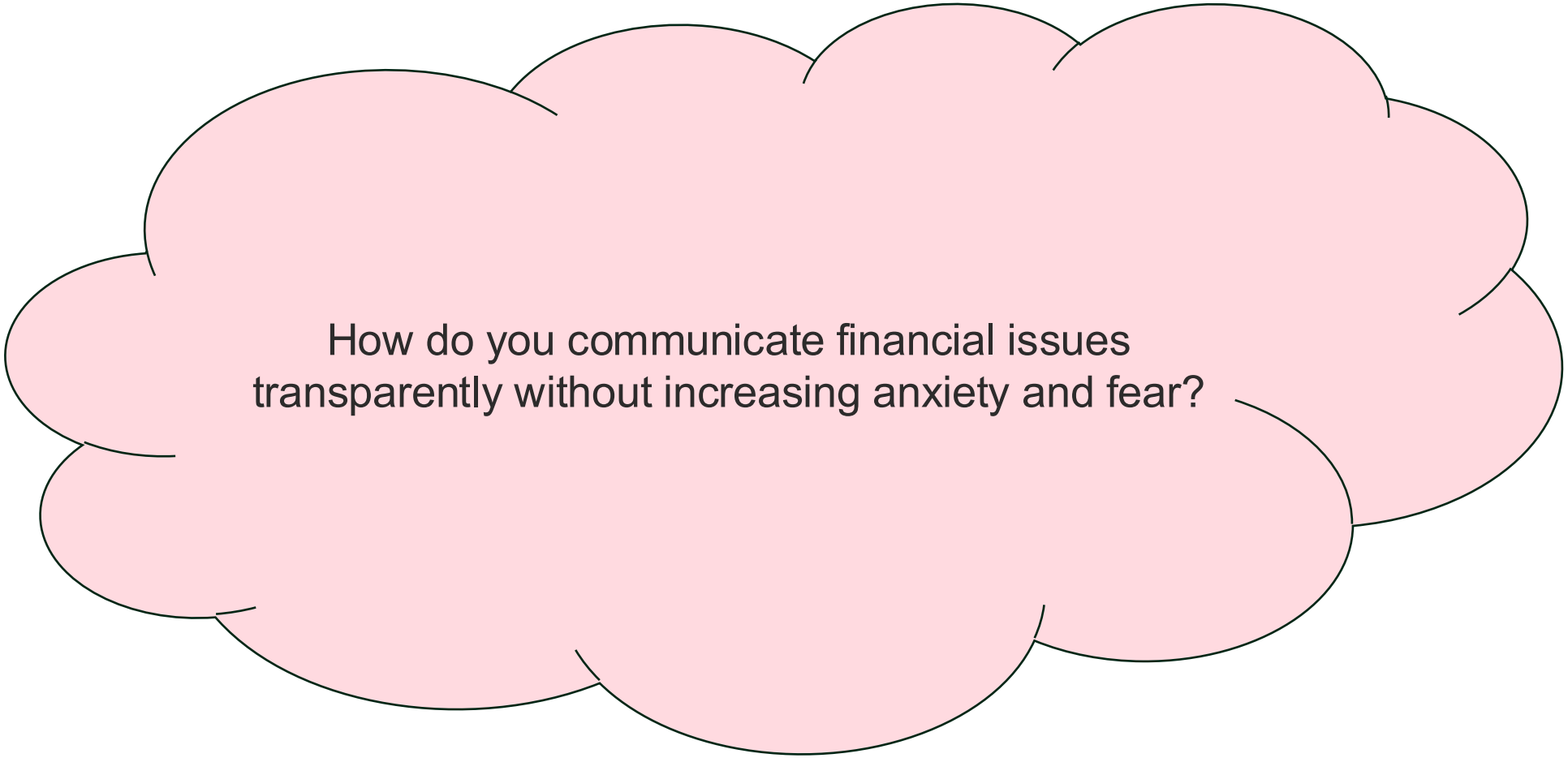


Financial reality as a leadership challenge

- Avoiding optimism bias
- The cost of pretending things are fine
- Financial transparency as a trust builder.



Discussion


How do you communicate financial issues transparently without increasing anxiety and fear?

Are you budgeting for now or for the future?

- Environmental scanning
- Funding mix and risk exposure
- Budgeting for growth, learning and contingency



Sustainable project funding

- Ensure projects are aligned to purpose and strategy and not just created to align with funding
- Budget to be competitive but realistic
- Where possible, include overheads in funding proposal budgets
- Advocate for funding the true cost of work for NFP and community organisations



Reframe Overhead

By empowering fundraisers with tools, resources, and data, *Reframe Overheads* is a campaign helping organisations advocate for full-cost funding and showcase how overheads drive impact. Together, we're breaking the "starvation cycle" and championing a sustainable, impactful future for charities.

Sign the pledge

Pay What It Takes Australia

Communicating hard truths well

What changes in your message when you are communicating financial challenges to staff versus funders versus members?

What does each group most need to hear?

Funding scenarios

Option A: Short term opportunity
Six-month funding that will require additional staff. The funding provides some overhead funds to support existing staff but the program is only loosely aligned with the organisation's strategy.

Option B: Structured program funding
18-month funding that is strongly aligned with strategy. It includes high levels of reporting and ongoing engagement with the funder. The funding supports one new staff member and includes 20 percent untied operational funding.

Option C: Core organisational support
Three-year operational funding that covers 50 percent of the organisation's current costs and aligns with key strategic goals.

Group discussion questions

1. Which option would you choose and why?
2. What are the key **risks** associated with this option?
3. What **trade-offs** would the organisation need to accept?
4. What **board conversations** would be important before making this decision?
5. What additional information would you want before committing?

Innovation with constraints

- **Where might innovation already be happening in your organisation that you are not currently recognising as innovation?**
  For example, changes to processes, partnerships, or service delivery rather than entirely new programs.

- **What is one small experiment your organisation could test in the next six months to improve impact, efficiency or reach?**
  What would make it safe for your team to try that experiment?

- **How does you, your leadership team, and your board currently respond to new ideas?**
  Does your culture encourage small experiments and learning, or does it tend to favour only fully developed, low risk proposals?

The three horizons framework –

ensuring short term focus while planning for what's around the corner

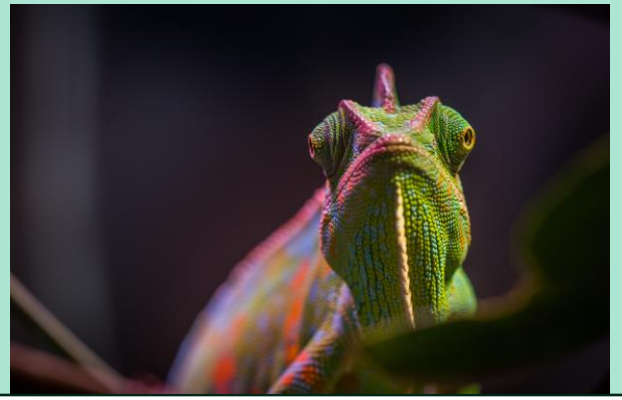
Horizon one: Survival pressures

- Operational dashboards
- Clear board and leadership reporting
- Regular financial and risk reviews



Horizon two: Adaptation

- Small pilots and trials
- Regular environmental scanning
- Partnership exploration



Horizon three: Future relevance

- Scenario planning
- Board discussions on long term trends
- Capability planning



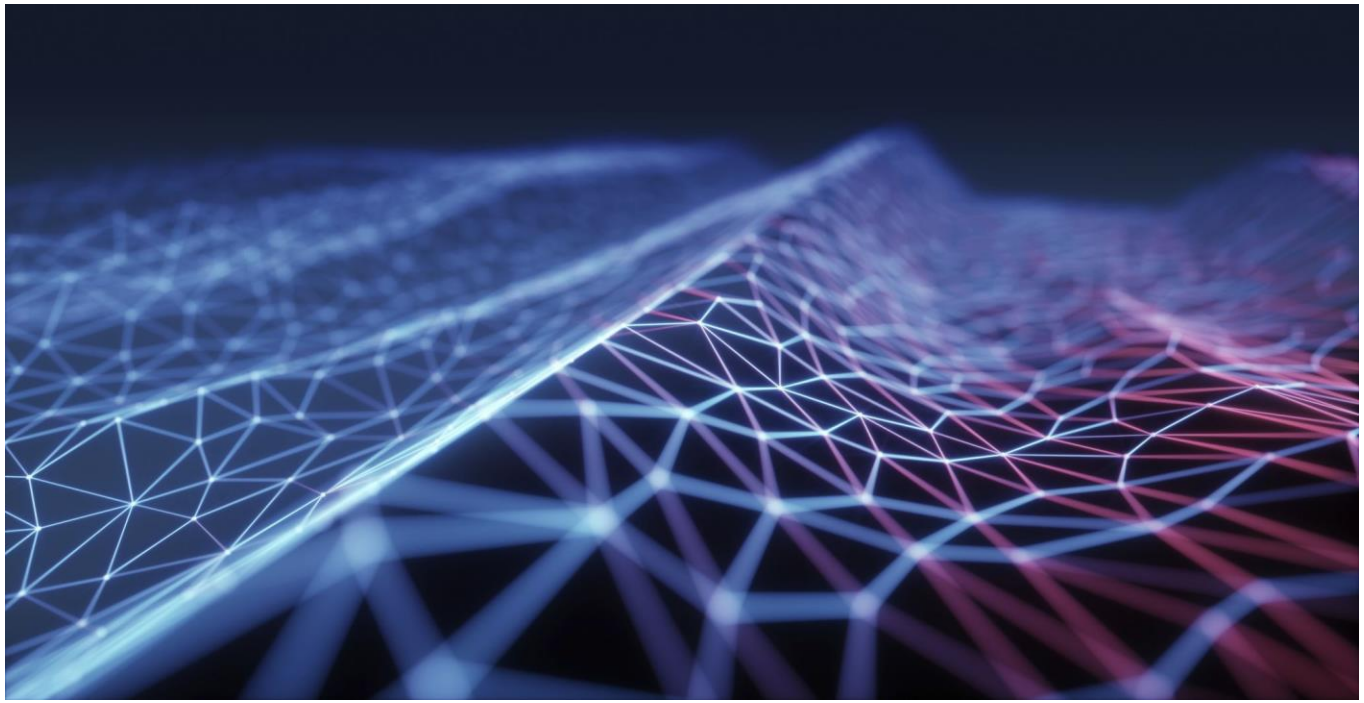
The CEO's role in holding all three horizons

- Time allocated for deep thinking and planning for horizons two and three
- Including membership and stakeholders perspectives through feedback and meetings
- Regular agenda item for board meetings

If nothing changed for five, or even three, years, would your organisation still be relevant?

Using AI to support resilience, planning and future focus

- Reducing cognitive load
- Scenario planning and environmental scanning
- Funding strategy development
- Supporting innovation without burnout



Review and reflection

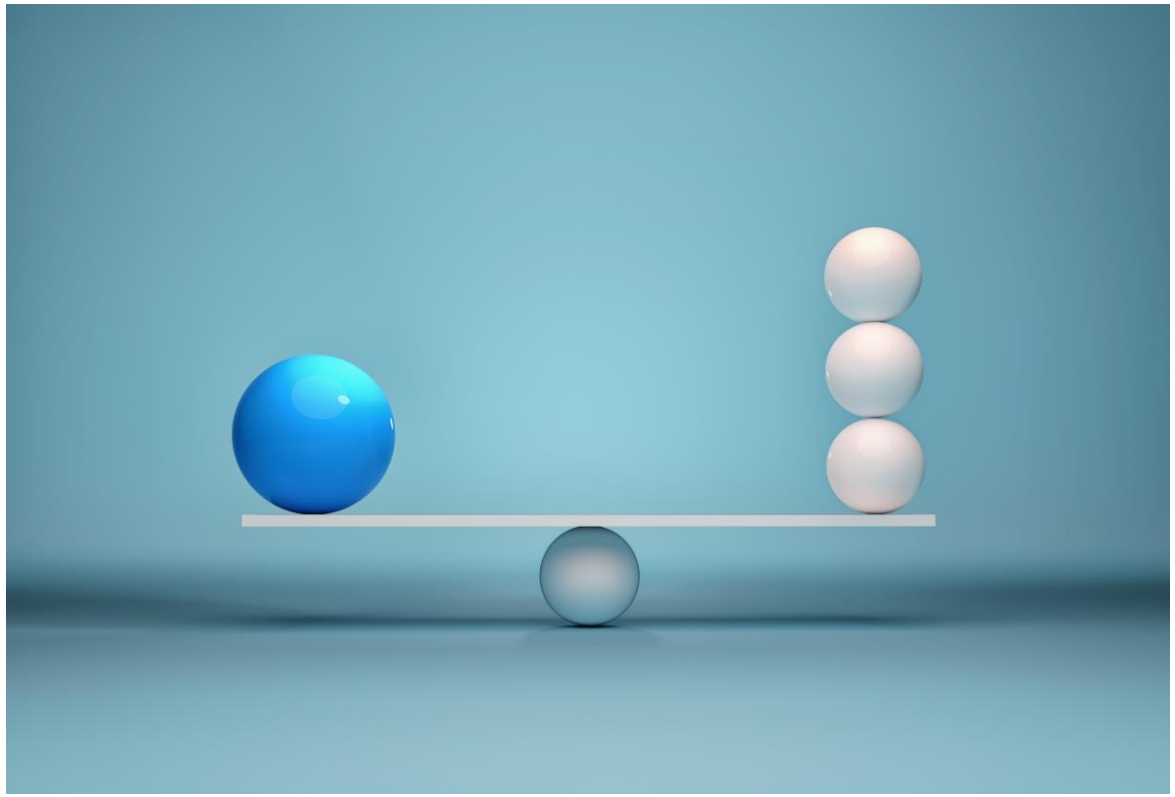
The work of a community CEO is not just about running an organisation.

It is about:

- Holding the mission when pressure pushes toward compromise
- Supporting a board to govern well, even when decisions are difficult
- Creating the conditions for people to do their best work
- Making careful decisions with imperfect information
- Balancing today's needs with tomorrow's sustainability
- Leading with integrity when the stakes are high

Community leadership is rarely simple.

But it matters deeply.



Reflections from today's workshop

- What sustainability means for you personally
- One system change you will prioritise
- One conversation you have been avoiding

Feedback



https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/2026in-house

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https://www.linkedin.com/in/ninalaitala/

https://www.linkedin.com/school/institute-of-community-directors-Australia/

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