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> 2025 Leadership Summit February 12, 2025

## Leadership in the Age of AI

By: F. Frank Ghannadian, Ph.D.  
Dean, Sykes College of Business



F. Frank Ghannadian, Ph.D.

Many of us have become accustomed to using data to make decisions for almost everything we do. We are bombarded daily with data that is everywhere around us in our phones, computers and reported on social media. We check out the reviews and the data on restaurants. We even send our children to college based on data and rankings provided by many organizations. We use these types of analysis and data when moving to a new city or state and even when searching for a job or career. All of this has become normal for us in today's world of ratings and quick feedback. Making decisions today is very different than how decisions were made 40 or 50 years ago especially for businesses. Now artificial intelligence (AI) has crept into our lives and with its power of information has left the non-user behind others who use it.

Today we are again moving to a new paradigm in our decision making, and everything seems to be going the way to AI. What does artificial intelligence do and what is it? AI refers to machines programmed to think, learn and perform tasks that used to require human cognition and thinking. Some subsets of AI are known as machine learning (ML) which allows systems to learn from experience, and deep learning (DL) which excels in image, speech and more advanced functions and more. Some of this is not so new as businesses have utilized AI to automate tasks in factories for production, for predictive modelling and finance. However, today businesses are moving into using a more sophisticated system of making strategic choices to drive decision making, reduce operational costs and enhance customer experiences by engaging them more effectively

to increase loyalty and satisfaction. While this short essay cannot provide a sophisticated technical review of AI, its intention is to answer a main question that is upon us in teaching leadership, which is where does all of this fit into the grand scheme of teaching leadership? With its great potential, AI brings significant challenges and many unknowns which require careful and thoughtful implementation.

It is astonishing to learn that, in a recent survey of several hundred executives, less than a third of the data is used by managers to make business decisions with two thirds of the data gone unused. In a world where information is everything, how can a business stay in the lead with lack of information and data? In almost every case, data driven decision making is here to stay and only those using it are going to thrive no matter what business they are in.

How do C level and VP level executives lead with AI now part of the equation? Authors Anderson and Zettlemeyer say in their book "Leading with AI and Analytics," AI and analytics are not just fads and are here to stay. They argue that in addition to being responsible for budgets, strategic planning and accountability, in order to succeed, leaders need to make calls on tough decisions based on the data on hand. The authors realize that understanding data is hard and those with a Ph.D. in data science are better equipped to understand what the charts and indicators show. However, successful leaders are able to look at key data and the analytical output and ask the right questions leading to a better decision without understanding

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the mathematical intricacies that go behind the data.

It is a mistake to think the role of the leader is diminished as a result of evidenced based data that is now available. There is a lot of hard work beyond this for leaders. After AI your business of science is over but what are the interpretations and how are you to lead with the recommendations? Here are some recommendations that may help leaders make better decisions:

**1. Hire the right data expert/scientist** to give you the right data to analyze. This is important since the right data and its interpretation are important for any type of decision making for a C suite manager or even a mid-level executive.

**2. Create an accelerated learning trajectory.** Ensure your team is trained to have a working knowledge of the data and work together to understand the consequences of the information that is coming upon you. This requires good critical thinking skills. The team working under your leadership needs to be trained to plan on execution and measurement of the data when that data becomes available to them.

**3. Developing an AI culture is critical to success.** By culture what is meant is the values and spoken or unspoken norms that influence thinking and behavior in the organization. This means making measurement a routine. This will reinforce people to think in advance about the value of their initiatives.

**4. Visionary leadership is still needed.** The human capability of imagination and a vision rooted in meaning and purpose is still needed to motivate individuals.

**5. Ensuring the ethical deployment of AI.** It will be up to leaders to ensure that fairness governs and that ethics is above and beyond the standards needed in different situations.

**6. Lead the blended workforce.** Here the workforce is human talent and AI machinery

creating a balance between the two to improve productivity to create a winning strategy for companies.

**7. Blending Soft skills with AI analysis.**

AI, at least at the present, is unable to understand human emotion, culture and nuance. Conflict resolution, critical thinking and emotional intelligence are invaluable parts of leader abilities.

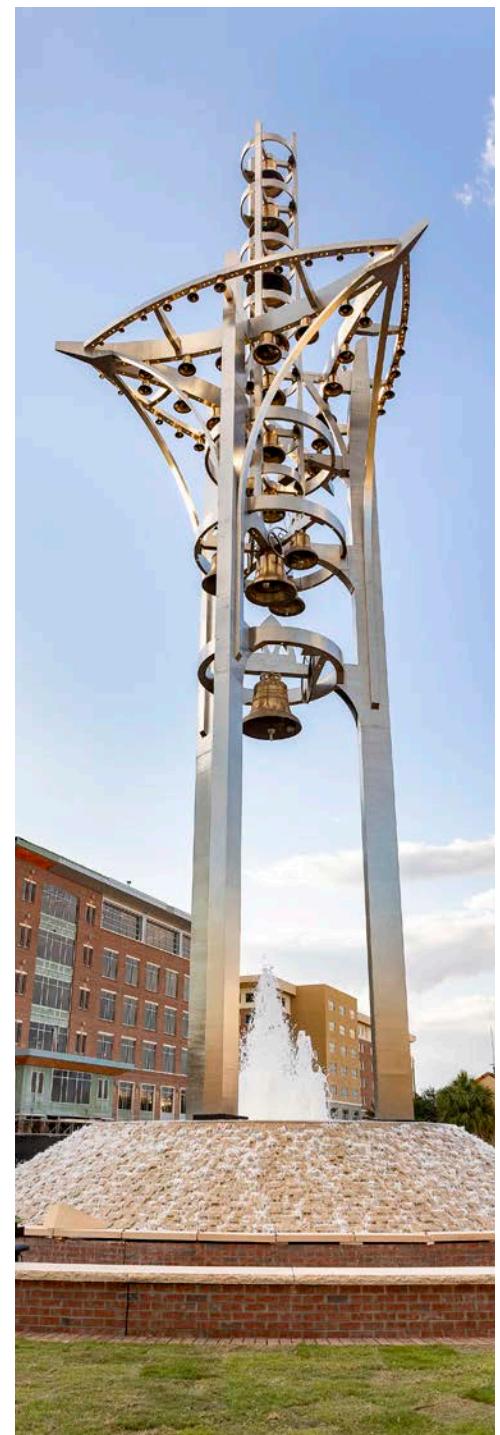
**8. Failure and risk are an option:** Make your followers understand that “failure” is always a possibility and for them not to fear what comes next after innovation and change.

In conclusion, AI has fundamentally changed business strategies, operational frameworks and customer interactions. For businesses to survive, they need to embrace AI to maintain competitive advantage and to be able to maintain growth and relevance in the digital and data driven world. Leaders today must navigate these transformative times with an open mind and embrace the continued evolving nature of this phenomenon and continuously monitor how human contributions could add value.

Chat GPT and particularly the newest version of it, CHAT GPT 4, is a buzz at all universities these days. It can provide students with reports and answers to problems that until recently were only achievable by humans. Most students say Chat GPT is a great tool to help them learn better. Some professors, but not all, agree. Of course, it has its downsides and negatives, which are beyond the scope of this essay.

The question for us in academia and business schools is how we get our learners ready for this as we graduate and place them in job markets. First, all of AI has to be incorporated in our classes we teach as integration of AI into business education is not without its challenges. There is no doubt AI technologies will provide students with real-time feedback, offer a higher level of interactivity and simulate a more realistic business scenario where pedagogy will be enhanced. The role of the business professor will certainly evolve, and AI will offer the opportunity to free professors from repetitive and mundane tasks and let them place their time and energy on student experiences. Business schools certainly

want to make their students more valuable for the job market, and they can fulfill their promise by focusing on ethical leadership skills that would make them trained for the most powerful new technologies with the goal of long-term societal impact.





## Nurturing Resilience: Key Strategies for Leaders

By: Deirdre Dixon, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Management and Entrepreneurship

Resilience is a term that's gained significant traction across various sectors, from the military to corporate environments, reflecting its pivotal role in navigating challenges and achieving success. As a researcher specializing in resilience, particularly among individuals facing life-threatening situations and those in high-stress professions like the military, police and firefighting, I've delved into the core aspects of what makes resilience a critical skill for leaders across all domains.

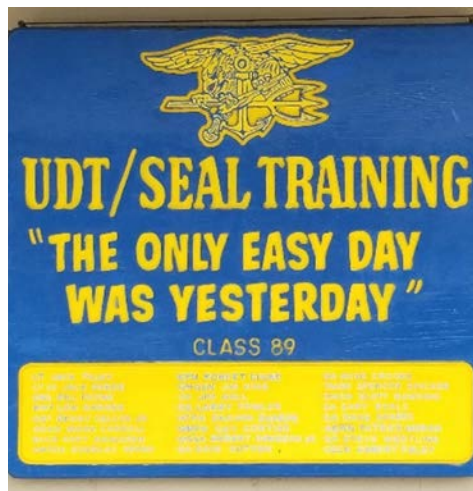
So, what precisely is resilience? It's the capacity to rebound, recover and regain equilibrium in the face of setbacks. Resilience isn't about ignoring challenges; rather, it's akin to the Admiral Stockdale Paradox—acknowledging harsh realities while maintaining faith in eventual triumph. Admiral Stockdale knew a little bit about resilience; he was the ranking prisoner of war in Hanoi, Vietnam for over seven years.

One of my ongoing research endeavors centers on a study focusing on the resilience development of aspiring Navy SEALs. The research team I am a part of was able to do not only psychological assessments, but also physiological assessments, along with in person interviews. While these research results hold particular significance for the military, its insights have broader applicability, resonating with anyone striving to excel in demanding roles. Leadership transcends mere technical and tactical expertise; it encompasses the ability to maintain composure and adapt through adversity.

The post-pandemic era has highlighted the widespread mental health challenges, especially among younger demographics, such as college students. In our current VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) environment, resilience emerges as a potent asset, enabling individuals to thrive amidst turbulence.

Physical resilience forms a foundational pillar, encompassing elements like exercise and adequate

sleep. Research underscores the symbiotic relationship between physical well-being and effective leadership, with exercise contributing to enhanced cognitive functions, creativity and overall mood. Additionally, activities like 'green bathing' or 'forest bathing' have shown remarkable benefits,



rejuvenating both body and mind with as little as fifteen minutes walking just a few days a week spent in outside settings.

Leadership demands rigorous effort, often leading to neglect of self-care. However, prioritizing rest, relaxation, and establishing personal boundaries are indispensable for sustained effectiveness. Analogous to the airplane safety protocol of donning one's mask before assisting others, self-care is imperative for leaders to remain resilient and serve effectively in the long term. And remember, self-care does not always mean exercise. My daughter, a professional ballerina who exercises for her job about eight hours a day for five days a week, cannot use exercise as self-care. She finds other activities, such as reading, to be effective self-care. Self-care is something you do for you, something that provides you enjoyment.

Sleep, another crucial component of resilience, is often undervalued. Much of the popular literature

have often talked about exercise, but not as much about sleep, which includes not just the

quantity of sleep, but also the quality. Adequate sleep is essential for optimal decision-making, emotional regulation, and cognitive prowess. Leaders must recognize the detrimental effects of sleep deprivation on various facets of well-being and performance. Many of us try to get by on little sleep, but according to the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), the majority of leaders in the United States say they don't get enough sleep to feel well rested, with 42% trying to get by on 6 hours of sleep or less. Decisions and learning, however, according to CCL, require 7 to 9 hours of sleep a night. Less sleep can lead to increased anxiety, appetite, depression, impulsiveness, irritability, smoking and sedentary behavior overall. It also can cause diminished attention, concentration, creativity, decision making, memory, reaction time and more.

Psychological resilience complements physical robustness, incorporating mindfulness, emotional intelligence, humor, and a growth mindset. Mindfulness practices are embraced by many major organizations globally, such as Google, Goldman Sachs, NFL, American Express, Ford and the military, to name a few. Mindfulness is about observation, concentration, and choice; paying attention on purpose, without judgment is a good way to think about it. During mindfulness, often peoples' minds wander, but if it does, you will just need to bring it back and choose to practice mindfulness. It helps to just focus on one thing, not multitasking, and admit it if distracted. I personally was not a big believer in mindfulness when I first started practicing, but I noticed through my Fitbit App that my heart rate often dropped from around



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70 to the high 40s when I did a 3-minute mindfulness exercise through my Fitbit device - that evidence convinced me.



Mindfulness cultivates focused awareness and decision-making acumen. Emotional awareness, conversely, fosters a deeper understanding of emotions, facilitating learning and growth even in challenging circumstances. And this emotional awareness is not just an individual's emotions, it also includes understanding other's emotions. Learning from feelings can help one remember that discomfort can mean growth. One of the findings from our U.S. Navy SEAL study was that one of the keys to success in SEAL school (Called Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training, or BUD/S) was that SEAL candidates learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Humor, a hallmark of resilient individuals, reframes crises as opportunities for growth and fosters a positive outlook. Without being asked about humor, over one third of the candidates in our BUD/S interviews mentioned humor as a key to their success. Resilient people can navigate crises and find the humor in them, as the situations were not just seen as threats, but rather as challenges to

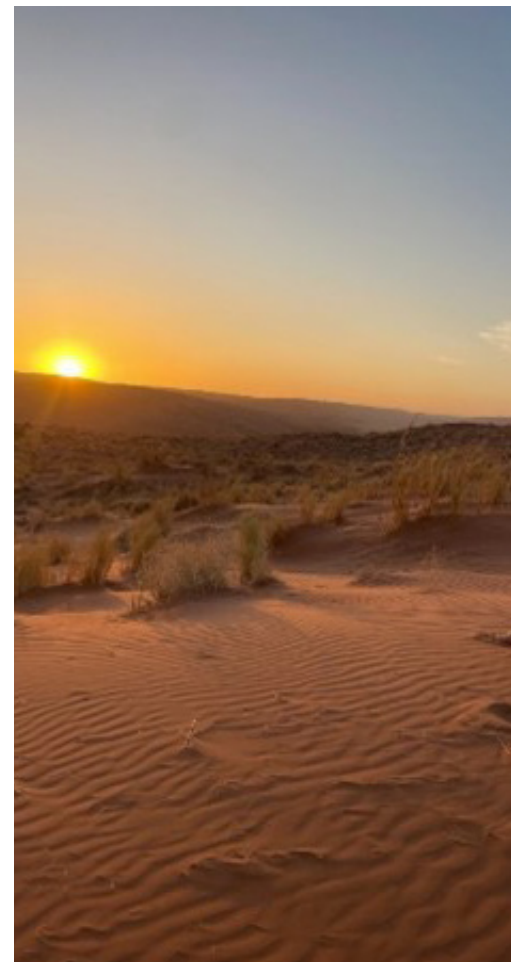
overcome.

A growth mindset, emphasizing effort and positivity, fuels resilience by empowering individuals to navigate setbacks with tenacity and optimism. Growth mindset means that a person has agency, or locus of control over himself; an individual who works hard will be rewarded. One gets good grades not only because she is smart, but because she worked hard to achieve her goals. Growth mindset also includes positivity along with gratitude. Each of us has down moments, but consistent negativity does not help with motivation. When is the last time you wrote a thank you note or email to someone? Focus on the positive. Mentally resilient individuals practice gratitude even during tough times. It's not that one must ignore pain or minimize hardships, it's more about reminding oneself of the good things and the resources we do have. Gratitude notes can be simple, reminding others of concrete, specific things and the influence of their behavior on you. These notes are impactful to others, but in reality, they also help the writer.

No article about resilience would be complete without discussing failure. We found in our SEAL study that those individuals who had failure in their life and then learned from it, tended to be more resilient. At West Point, the institution that I graduated from, boxing has been a required course since 1905. Since 2016, even the women are required to box, and they must pass a boxing class to graduate. But the class is not only about learning to box, it is learning mental toughness, learning how to face one's fears. It teaches leaders how to face adversity, suppress their fear and to continue to function despite it. Learning from your fear doesn't only happen in the boxing ring, it can happen anywhere. Fear can slow growth. Resilience is about going forward, in the face of obstacles, knowing you can prevail in the end. Failure can be a good thing if we learn from it. Thomas Edison showed us this thought when asked about his failures, "I have not failed 10,000 times – I've successfully found 10,000 ways that will not work."

In conclusion, resilience isn't just about bouncing back; it's about bouncing forward—leveraging

challenges to propel oneself towards growth and success. A poignant illustration of resilience lies in Curt Richter's drowning rat experiment, highlighting the transformative power of belief and resilience. In his experiment, the average time for rats to drown was 15 minutes. He then changed the protocol, and pulled the rats out right before they were about to die, and dried them off before putting them back in the water. The next time the rats lasted HOURS – because they believed they would be rescued; they had hope. Richter was looking at hope, but it can also be an example of resilience. What could a belief in yourself and your resilience do for you? By nurturing both physical and psychological resilience, leaders can not only weather storms but also emerge stronger, ready to surmount future obstacles with unwavering resolve. Remember what you are capable of and keep on swimming!



## Leading Change From Perseverance to Growth: A First-Time CEO's Journey

By: Mary Pat King, M.S., CAE, Chief Executive Officer of Girl Scouts of West Central Florida

On paper, the morning of March 16, 2020 should have been my dream come true. I finally reached the peak of my ambitious career climb: I was named the new chief executive officer (CEO) of Girl Scouts of West Central Florida (GSWCF). Soon after, I plunged into reality of the enormous challenges to come.

As a first-time CEO, I found myself at the helm of an organization dedicated to building girls of courage, confidence and character, just as the world was plummeting into unprecedented chaos. The COVID-19 pandemic instantly changed the landscape for my role – the thriving organization I inherited was descending toward a 33% membership loss and substantial revenue decline.

The pandemic was reshaping every aspect of our lives. But I believed that our core mission remained as relevant as ever. While many organizations scrambled to “pivot” in 2020-2021, we chose a different path. We rallied around the word “persevere.” We pushed forward with mission delivery methods that embraced digital and outdoor experiences, and we encouraged our Girl Scouts to support essential workers with their kindness, their chalk art, and yes – even their cookies.

Perseverance set the tone for my leadership in the challenging times to come. Now, almost five years later, I am grateful to share some of the invaluable lessons that helped us to go from perseverance to growth.

### Lesson #1: Leadership Takes Practice

When I reflect back, I can see the steepest learning curve during my first two years as CEO was navigating all that was happening between my ears – my own personal thoughts of fear and self-doubt.

I am a student of leadership. I have devoured so many blogs and books. I've attended numerous leadership development experiences. I have observed some of the best – and worst leaders. I even spent four days with John Maxwell and his

team absorbing their leadership strategies. I always thought I knew a lot about leadership. And I did – theoretically.

But between 2020 and 2022, I learned **great leadership is not something you know – it's something you practice.** And I needed practice.

My greatest lesson was that leadership starts with leading ME. I had to dig in and persevere through the work – the hard work – on a healthier leadership mindset. I had to grow my self-awareness, notice and regulate my emotions, quiet my anxieties and fears, empathize with all levels of my team, show more curiosity – all while scanning the threats and assessing the strategic way forward. I had to shut down my hyper-achieving internal voice cautioning me incessantly about the high risk of failure.

Unlike my past successes, the way forward could not be at a high-performing project manager's pace. I had a whole organization of people navigating unprecedented levels of their own fears and stressors during this pandemic. As their CEO, I had to set a pace that ensured we persevered together – in sync as one leadership, staff, and volunteer team.

The best decision I made early on was to hire a great executive coach – Ellen Nastir, whom I met at a virtual conference hosted by the Nonprofit Leadership Center of Tampa Bay. Nastir introduced me to “Positive Intelligence” by Shirzad Chamine and personally trained me to embrace a new set of techniques that I continue to use daily. These leadership practices helped me to believe that in every challenge or disappointment – the gift of deeper understanding brings with it the next best opportunity.

### Lesson #2: Hope IS a Strategy

In early 2022, after two years of uncertainty, I recognized that our staff, volunteers, and the girls we served needed hope – not blind optimism, but

a grounded, purposeful hope that could galvanize our clarity and drive us forward together.

At the same time, my vision for achieving organizational growth was clear. Inspired by *Ted Lasso*, I announced that BELIEVE was our team's word of the year. I asked our team to join my optimism – to BELIEVE we could grow back stronger and more diverse than ever.

I challenged them to be *mission-driven, member-centered and people empowered.* To do this, we needed to restructure our organization. We reimaged ourselves as a community-centric model and we designed a hyperlocal relationship-building plan. We embraced that “word of mouth” was the best way to reignite Girl Scouts as an essential youth experience and part of the cultural fabric of every community. Nothing about this plan was transactional.

We pledged to put forth our collective energies to create more opportunities for girls and eliminate barriers to a high quality Girl Scout leadership experience. We set a bold membership goal of 30,000 members by 2030.

We believed this goal was possible – and we built a team of people who believed it too. Our team's energy started to shift and mindsets expanded from scarcity to possibility.

### Lesson #3: Stride Must Be Sustained

While the possibility for growth was energizing, there was a year or so when we too often felt like we were flying the plane while building it. Because we were. Most of our staff were new to their positions and yet, they were responsible for defining the way forward. They developed standard operating procedures, project management tools,



Mary Pat King, M.S., CAE



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training resources, after action reports, and more.

As passionate and committed as they were, I could not ignore the exhaustion too many people were experiencing. Sadly, we lost some great people to burnout that year. I knew I needed to inspire a healthier pace of work and encourage even more streamlined execution.

In 2023, our word for the year was STRIDE. I challenged staff to seek their own personal stride. I encouraged them to set boundaries, decrease duplicated efforts, and streamline systems so that we were working smarter – not harder – for our mission and members. Collectively, we defined our values, desired leader behaviors and strategic priorities. We stopped reinventing wheels and started emphasizing the value of time. We acknowledged the fact that most of our programs and community engagement happens on the weekend – so we need to make it a norm to flex the hours our staff are required to work outside of typical business hours.

To be honest, I think we are still working on our

stride – I know I am. My passion and commitment to our cause both fuels and nags me. That's why I keep practicing positive intelligence techniques because they help me keep my stride – and lead with stride.

### Lesson #4: Uplift as You Grow

By 2024, we began to see the fruits of our labor. Our pace of work was improving, and we were building momentum. It was time to celebrate a remarkable achievement: we had become one of the fastest-growing Girl Scout councils in the country. This realization sparked our theme for the year: UPLIFT.

The concept of 'uplift' became our north star, guiding our efforts to elevate our people, our mission, and our impact. We implemented a multi-faceted approach to include positive culture-building experiences, professional development opportunities, and more employee recognition.

We also amplified the impact of Girl Scouting across our communities. We generated a continuous drumbeat of stories that celebrated our amazing Girl Scouts and volunteers and showcased the many ways they are using their courage, confidence and character to make the world a better place.

Uplifting our people has created more engagement and stronger relationships, which are essential

ingredients for continued growth.

### Lesson #5: Progress Transforms

Looking back, I see a pattern in my approach to change management since joining Girl Scouts of West Central Florida. Each year's theme built upon the last, creating a narrative of resilience, purposeful adaptation, and sustainable growth – all in service to our mission to empower girls.

We persevered through the initial crisis, believing in our ability to emerge stronger and more diverse than ever before. We found our stride, creating systems that allowed us to work efficiently while expanding our reach. We uplifted our staff, our volunteers, and the girls we serve – fostering a positive and more collaborative culture for all.

I also see that as my team and our organization evolved, so did I. Fear of failure has been replaced with confidence, clarity, and determination to keep doing the work – the work on me that I have to practice and recommit to every day.

Finally, this journey has taught me that effective change management isn't about grand, disruptive gestures. It's about consistent, purposeful steps guided by a clear vision that builds on momentum. With so many leaders seeking to make "transformational change," I have to wonder: what if transformation is not about the change at all? Perhaps it is simply – progress multiplied.



Natasha Veltri, Mary Pat King, Dean Frank Ghannadian, Deirdre Dixon and Bella Galperin at the Spring 2024 Leadership Speaker Series event.

# TAMPA BAY LEADERSHIP REVIEW

A PUBLICATION OF THE TECO ENERGY CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP



**SYKES**  
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

**SAVE THE DATE**  
**Feb. 12, 2025**  
**7:15 a.m. – Noon**

The University of Tampa  
Vaughn Center,  
9th Floor, Crescent Club

## 2025 LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

### Keynote Speaker: Kris Kelso

Kris Kelso, PCC is a keynote speaker, entrepreneur, and is the author of "Overcoming The Impostor: Silence Your Inner Critic and Lead with Confidence." Trained and certified as a leadership coach, Kelso has worked with hundreds of entrepreneurs, business owners, and their leadership teams across six continents. He serves as the dean of entrepreneurship at the Professional Christian Coaching Institute, a growth coach at Heroic Public Speaking, an advisor and instructor at the Nashville Entrepreneur Center, and is a contributing writer for publications including *Fast Company Magazine*, *Yahoo Finance*, and *The Nashville Business Journal*. Kelso has also founded multiple companies and has served on the boards of directors of several non-profit organizations.

#### LEADERSHIP PANEL:

**Chris Letsos**  
CEO,  
Big Brothers Big Sisters of  
Tampa Bay

**Liza A. Mizel**  
SVP, Treasury Management  
Relationship Manager,  
Regions Bank

**Barbara Tripp**  
Fire Chief,  
Tampa Fire Rescue



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