

cew × SCAD

2026 REPORT



LEADERS AS LIFETIME LEARNERS:

Inside the Inaugural CEW × SCAD Executive Leadership Fellowship

BY KARA BRABENDER

What happens when you take a group of beauty leaders out of the office, bring them to Savannah and ask them to be students again?

You get conversations that probably wouldn't happen on the average workday. You get executives practicing their on-camera presence, working on networking and personal storytelling, making jewelry, bowling under constantly changing rules and heading to an equestrian center to talk about what makes someone truly coachable. You get different generations, functions and levels of experience learning side by side. And somewhere along the way, titles start to matter a whole lot less.

That was the idea behind the inaugural CEW × Savannah College of Art and Design [SCAD] Executive Leadership Fellowship, held August 4 through August 7 at SCAD. The inaugural program brought beauty professionals from across the country to Savannah for something intentionally different from the typical industry conference. Some had decades of experience. Others were still growing into bigger leadership roles. They came from different companies, different parts of the business and different parts of the country, but shared a reason for being there. They spend much of their time thinking about their companies, their teams and the people they are responsible for developing. For a few days, they had the chance to turn some of that attention back toward themselves.

The fellowship was created by CEW President Elana Drell Szyfer and Dean of the De Sole School of Business Innovation at SCAD, Meloney Moore. Fittingly, their partnership began through the same kind of industry connection they hoped the fellowship would help create for others.

The two had never worked together directly, but their careers were connected through people they had known at The Estée Lauder Companies. A mutual former colleague introduced them, and when Moore came to New York, the two met for lunch.



The ideas lined up quickly. Drell Szyfer wanted CEW to create more opportunities for professional development. Moore was interested in using SCAD's educational platform for executive development and continuing education for industry leaders. Drell Szyfer recalled that within the hour, the idea for the fellowship was already taking shape. Within her first month as CEW president, she was in Savannah meeting with Moore and the SCAD team to start building the program.

Drell Szyfer described CEW's role as a potential "third space" for professional development. Moore recognized how SCAD's immersive approach to education could benefit executives in the beauty industry. The fellowship became the first chance to see what that kind of space could look like.

LEAVING TITLES AT THE DOOR

The diverse cohort of women representing different disciplines, levels of experience, companies and geographic locations contributed to the program's overall success.

Drell Szyfer noticed it too.

"I think everyone kind of left position, rank, whatever at the door," she said. "Whether someone is entry level or senior, I don't think you saw or felt that in this room, and I think that's really, really unique."

It created the kind of cross pollination that can be hard to manufacture. Someone earlier in her career could ask a question of a leader with decades of experience, while that same leader could hear a completely different perspective from someone who entered the industry in a different segment. For Drell Szyfer, those relationships are especially important in beauty, an industry that can feel surprisingly small over the course of a career.

That openness also set the tone for the learning itself. This wasn't a room where experience was treated as proof that someone had nothing left to learn. The fellowship was designed around the opposite idea. The people in the room had already accomplished plenty. The question was what they still wanted to strengthen, rethink or see from another perspective.

LEADERSHIP EDUCATION, THE SCAD WAY

It became clear early that this wasn't going to be several days of sitting through presentations.

The fellowship began with SCADstory, an immersive 4D experience that tells a universal tale of the dreamer in all of us. With SCADstory: Creativity as Leadership, fellows were asked to pay attention not

only to what they saw, but to how those environments encouraged creativity and collaboration, then think about the environments they create for their own teams.

That evening brought Adaptive Leadership in Motion, a team-based duckpin bowling challenge that quickly became less about bowling and more about adjustment. Once everyone settled into the activity, the rules started changing. Participants switched hands. They bowled backward. What began as a casual competition became a chance to notice what happens when leaders walk into a situation expecting one thing and suddenly have to change course.

That idea continued throughout the fellowship.

The next morning, a presentation by CEW President Elana Drell Szyfer, **Global Trends, Executive Implications**, brought the focus back to beauty, examining market shifts, cultural forces and emerging challenges affecting the industry. **The Luxury Mindset**, a lunch and learn presented by Bob Chavez, former President and CEO of Hermès Americas followed, looking at leadership through relationship building, customer loyalty and long-term value.

Then SCADamp, a professional presentation studio, prepared creatives to amplify their stories through verbal, visual, and interpersonal communication included speakers: Leanne Robinson-Maine, Studio Media Lead, Communication Coach, SCADamp and Keita Williams, Communication Coach, SCADamp. **On Camera Poise and Presence** shifted that work to interviews, virtual meetings and other situations where authority and energy have to translate through a screen.

The Art of Exchange addressed navigating networking conversations. This allowed fellows to learn a modular approach to communicating personal narrative in high-variability settings such as networking events, client conversations, and peer interactions. They were able to explore how to balance experience, aspiration, and connection when credibility must be established without dominating the exchange. They also practiced adapting narrative elements in real time to respond to different conversational cues and situational dynamics. Finally, they learned how to apply conversational frameworks and entry points that signal credibility through insight and curiosity rather than self-promotion.

According to Lacy Hitman-Mason from NEST, “The networking workshop was one of the highlights for me. Being in a room where we could speak truth and encouragement over one another gave me a different perspective on myself.”

Suzanne Leroux of One Love Organics said the experience was unlike anything she had done in years. “I have been telling





everyone how [the program] made us talk to different people, practice moving through a room and exit conversations gracefully. I had not done anything like that in years.”

From there, the programming moved from how leaders present themselves to how they lead ideas and creative people. Design Management and Creative Business Leadership workshops were also incorporated. Each introduced a proprietary SCAD framework.

Design Management session speaker Michelle Ryan, Professor of Luxury and Brand Management, SCAD, focused on “Opportunity Mapping,” through which fellows examined larger cultural and consumer shifts to identify future directions for their companies.

Creative Business Leadership focused on “Organizational Gravity,” exploring how fellows could build support for their ideas and influence their organizations to engage with their vision.

Then came the work of turning those ideas into something real. Through **The Innovation Lab**, fellows were introduced to SCADpro, a collaborative design studio connecting current and future art and design professionals with business leaders to solve real-world challenges, which was led by speaker Abbie Biddle, Senior Account Lead.

The point wasn’t to turn beauty executives into designers. It was to look at creativity as something leaders can use to solve problems, spot opportunities and move a business forward.

While the first day executives experienced the aforementioned bowling activity, the second day speaker, Jay Song, Chair of Jewelry, SCAD, offered **The Miracle of Making: Hands at Work, Minds at Ease**, a hands-on jewelry-making session designed for people accustomed to moving between meetings, emails and decisions. The exercise called for a different kind of attention. Working with their hands became a way to think about patience, concentration and the value of slowing down long enough to give one thing their full focus.

The final day took the group to the SCAD Equestrian Center for **The Corporate Athlete, Mindful Leadership in Competition**, with Ashley Henry, Director and Head Coach, SCAD Equestrian. The setting changed, but the leadership questions were familiar. How do you respond to pressure? What happens when circumstances change? How do you recover when something doesn’t go your way? And how coachable are you when you already know you’re good at what you do?

Even experienced riders cannot rely on experience alone. Conditions change. Horses change. Equipment changes. A strong rider still has to listen, adjust and be coached. The parallels to leadership were immediate.





On the next day, Paul Austin led fellows through an immersive journey through the scents of Savannah, drawing on his work with the SCAD Fragrance Atelier. The experience invited fellows to slow down and notice how scent shapes memory, place and mood — often in ways more visceral than sight or sound. For many, it reframed fragrance not just as a product category but as a storytelling and branding tool, one capable of carrying a narrative the way a color palette or a tagline might.

Throughout the fellowship, the settings and subjects kept changing, but the expectation remained consistent. Be willing to try something. Be willing to listen. Be willing to adjust.

There was a reason adaptability came up so often. Beauty is not an industry that stands still for long. AI, social commerce, shifting consumer expectations, changing definitions of luxury and larger cultural forces are influencing how brands operate and how consumers find, buy and think about products.

Jillian Techatanalai, AVP of Fragrance Merchandising at Bath & Body Works, said the range of topics was one of the things that stood out to her early in the fellowship. She was especially interested in the conversations around AI and the cultural forces that have influenced the industry over the past several years, along with what leaders should be paying attention to next.

"It just really underscored the urgency of how quickly everything's changing," Techatanalai said.

The takeaway wasn't that leaders need to chase every new platform or trend. It was that they needed to pay attention, understand what is changing around them and know when it is time to respond.

Techatanalai was already thinking about what would happen once she returned to work.

"I always look towards, like, what are those actions that you can really take from the theory, the observations, to bring back to the team," she said.

That question came up repeatedly in conversations with fellows: What from their time in Savannah would actually make its way back to their teams?

TAKING SAVANNAH BACK TO WORK

For Dana Paolucci, Head of Engagement Marketing, Social, PR & Influence, Dove US at Unilever, one answer was more human than technical.



“I’m excited about infusing a little bit more empathy, human nature and just like heart back into work,”

PAOLUCCI SAID.

She leads a hybrid team, and like a lot of leaders, she can arrive at meetings already thinking about what needs to get done and how little time everyone has to do it. The fellowship made her think differently about the value of taking even a minute to connect with someone before getting into the agenda.

For Claire Rust, Executive Director, Global Supplier Management Strategic Initiatives at The Estée Lauder Companies, she was thinking about the impact the fellowship had on the many facets of her job. She runs an internship program for her department and chairs a Women in Supply Chain employee resource group. Throughout the fellowship, she kept finding ideas she wanted to take back to someone else.

“Every single day this week I had a different group in my orbit that I’m like, I want to give this to them,” Rust said. “I can see paying it forward in so many different ways.”

Colleen Martorano, Vice President of Global Education at Olaplex, was making similar connections.

“There have been a lot of really informative things that you can action immediately when you get back,” Martorano said.

For Martorano, part of the value came from seeing leadership lessons show up in places she might not have expected. She pointed to the Equestrian Center as one example of being able to draw a direct line between what was happening there and how she could manage, coach and develop a team back at work.

For Jenine Guerriero, Head of Marketing and Consumer Insights, Fine Fragrance at Givaudan, the takeaway was more personal. Networking has always been a challenge for her, even as her role increasingly requires her to present and connect with others.



She had access to coaching, presentation training, 360 evaluations and other experiences that helped develop her as an executive beyond the requirements of any one job. In partnering with Moore and SCAD, she saw an opportunity to create that kind of space for other beauty leaders, but in a way that also encouraged creativity, experimentation and connection.

"I wanted people just to kind of meet and learn from each other," Drell Szyfer said.

Once the fellowship was underway, that learning moved in just about every direction. People who usually give feedback received it. Leaders who spend much of their time developing other people had the chance to focus on themselves. Women at different stages of their careers shared the same tables, tried things they were not already good at and heard perspectives they may never have encountered inside their own companies.

By the time the fellowship ended, many were already talking about what they planned to take home. New approaches to managing teams. More intentional ways to connect. A different way to think about networking. A reminder to stay coachable. Ideas for leading through an industry that is changing faster than ever.

That is ultimately what Drell Szyfer and Moore set out to create. Not a room full of people starting from scratch, but a room full of accomplished professionals willing to keep going.

The fellows arrived in Savannah as leaders. Once there, they gave themselves permission to be students again.

And they left with a reminder that the two roles were never really separate in the first place.

"This session is incredibly helpful for me because I've been in this industry for years, and networking has always been a challenge for me," Guerriero said.

She described herself as introverted, and the fellowship gave her a place to work on something that wasn't necessarily comfortable without pretending it was already a strength.

The impact also does not stop with the people who were physically in Savannah. These fellows returned to teams, interns, colleagues and professional communities of their own. Rust was already thinking about paying the experience forward. Paolucci was thinking about how she runs meetings. Martorano saw tools she could use immediately. Techatanalai was thinking about turning observations into action.

A concentrated stretch of professional development can have a much wider reach when the people in the room are responsible for developing others.

It was exactly the kind of exchange Drell Szyfer and Moore had hoped to create when they first began planning the fellowship.

Professional development has been personal for Drell Szyfer throughout her own career.

The Savannah College of Art and Design



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SPOTLIGHTS



The Last Three Feet

AFTER NEARLY 25 YEARS LEADING HERMÈS IN THE AMERICAS, BOB CHAVEZ SAYS THE PART OF LUXURY THAT MATTERS MOST HAPPENS PERSON TO PERSON.

After nearly 25 years leading Hermès in the Americas, Bob Chavez has spent plenty of time around beautiful products, exceptional craftsmanship and some of the most recognizable luxury experiences in the world.

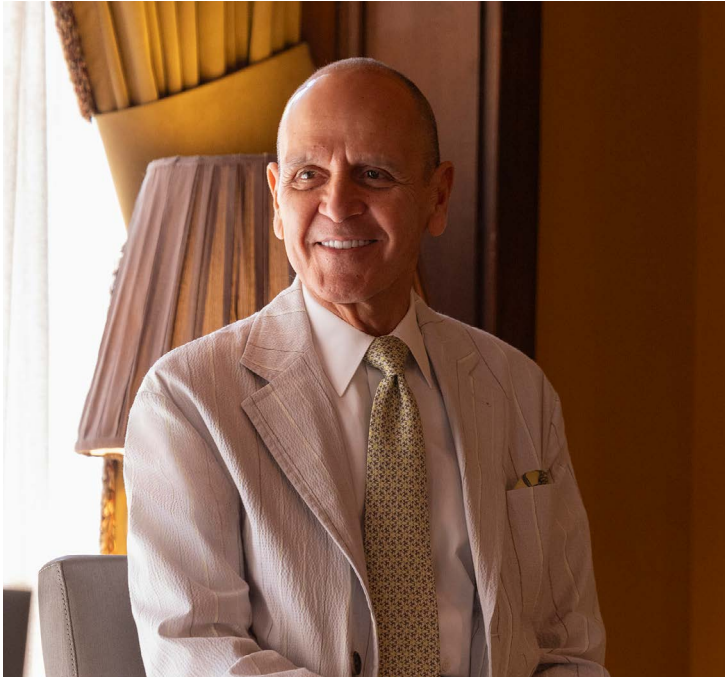
But one of his clearest lessons about luxury has very little to do with a price tag.

It comes down to people.

During his conversation at the CEW × SCAD Executive Leadership Fellowship, Chavez described what he calls **“the last three feet.”** A company can source the finest materials, hire talented craftspeople, build an incredible store and put years of work behind a brand. Then a customer walks through the door and comes face to face with the person representing all of it.

That final interaction can shape how the customer remembers everything that came before.

“It’s the last three feet, and especially in the beauty industry, it’s that last three feet that’s really critical,” Chavez said.



If the experience goes badly, he explained, even the best product and environment may not be enough to save it.

"We gave her a horrible experience, and that's her takeaway," he said.

For Chavez, that makes the people delivering the experience just as important as the customer receiving it. His approach to leadership at Hermès grew from that idea.

"My people were always my clients," Chavez said. "They're my VIPs, so I work for them. They don't work for me."

He made a point of visiting stores, learning employees' names and knowing the people who represented the brand every day. The logic was simple. If employees are responsible for creating an exceptional

experience for customers, leaders have to create an environment where those employees feel valued too.

That human approach also shapes the way Chavez defines luxury itself.

For someone who spent much of his career at Hermès, his definition is surprisingly open. "If you're a Maybelline customer, then that's your luxury," Chavez said.

His point was not that every brand or product is the same. It was that luxury looks different depending on the person experiencing it. A customer buying a Maybelline lipstick still expects value, service and someone who knows the product. Another customer may find that same feeling in a Chanel lipstick or a Hermès handbag.

The price changes. The expectation of being treated well does not.

That is what connects Chavez's view of customers to the way he led employees. Luxury is not finished when a product leaves the workshop or when a store opens its doors. Someone still has to deliver the experience. For Chavez, that is where all of the work behind a brand finally becomes personal.

And those last three feet belong to the person standing in front of the customer.





Learning by Doing

AT THE CEW x SCAD EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP FELLOWSHIP, SOME OF THE BIGGEST LEADERSHIP LESSONS HAPPENED WHEN FELLOWS STEPPED AWAY FROM THE CONFERENCE TABLE.

There is a certain comfort that comes with being good at what you do.

For many of the women attending the CEW x SCAD Executive Leadership Fellowship, that meant years of experience leading teams, making decisions and working in an industry they know well.

Then SCAD asked them to bowl backward.

It was part of **Adaptive Leadership in Motion**, a duckpin bowling challenge on the opening evening of the fellowship. Fellows were divided into teams and given a straightforward assignment. Then the rules started changing.

They switched hands. They adjusted their approach. Eventually, they were asked to turn around and bowl backward.

The score was never really the point.

The exercise put accomplished professionals into a situation where the plan they started with suddenly stopped working. They had to react, communicate and figure out what came next while everyone around them was doing the same.

That feeling is not exactly unfamiliar in business.

A strategy changes. A deadline moves. A new competitor appears. A team gets reorganized. The comfortable way of doing something is suddenly no longer available.

The bowling challenge turned that reality into something fellows could experience together instead of simply discussing it.

Later in the fellowship, the pace shifted in the opposite direction.

During **The Miracle of Making: Hands at Work, Minds at Ease**, with speaker Jay Song, Chair of Jewelry, SCAD, fellows traded phones and laptops for jewelry making tools. Instead of reacting quickly, the challenge was to slow down enough to focus on one thing at a time.

For people used to moving between meetings, messages and decisions, working with their hands required a different kind of attention.

In the team's later debrief, CEW President Elana Drell Szyfer recalled how participants talked about the experience. Many rarely get the time to work with their hands, and the level of concentration required gave them a break from thinking about everything else waiting for their attention.

It also changed the dynamic in the room. Titles did not make anyone better at making jewelry. Experience in beauty did not provide much of an advantage. Everyone was learning something new at the same time, which created its own kind of connection.

Then came the SCAD Equestrian Center.

The Corporate Athlete, Mindful Leadership in Competition, speaker Ashley Henry, Director and Head Coach, SCAD Equestrian, brought the conversation to what happens when experience meets circumstances you cannot completely control.

In collegiate equestrian competition, even highly skilled riders have to stay coachable. They may not be riding their own horse. The equipment may feel different. The conditions can change. Knowing how to ride is only part





of what makes someone successful.

The rest is listening, adjusting and staying grounded when the situation is unfamiliar.

One of the techniques shared during the experience was to return to three fundamentals when everything else starts competing for attention: hands, hips and heels.

Those specifics belong to riding, but the idea was easy to carry back to leadership.

When everything around you changes, what are the basics you return to?

Across the fellowship, the three experiences asked leaders to do very different things. Bowling asked them to react. Jewelry making asked them to slow down. The Equestrian Center asked them to stay coachable under pressure.

What connected them was the decision to take leaders out of situations where they already knew exactly what to do.



The lessons were not delivered as another list of leadership qualities. Fellows had to feel what it was like to lose the familiar rules, learn something from scratch or rely on fundamentals when the conditions changed.

That was the value of learning by doing.

Sometimes adaptability makes more sense after you have bowled with the wrong hand. Focus feels different when the only thing in front of you is the piece you are trying to make. And coachability means a little more when even the expert still has someone telling her to adjust. The setting may not have looked like traditional executive education.

That was exactly the point.



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SUPPORTING FEATURES

What Leadership Looks Like Now

**EXPERIENCE MATTERS.
STAYING COACHABLE, ADAPTABLE AND
OPEN MAY BE WHAT KEEPS A LEADER
MOVING FORWARD.**

A leader can have the title, the experience, and the track record. None of that makes her learning complete.

That idea came up repeatedly during the CEW × SCAD Executive Leadership Fellowship, especially when the conversation turned to coachability. It is a word usually associated with someone earlier in her career, when being taught and guided is expected. The fellowship flipped that idea around: the higher someone moves the more important it is to become a lifelong learner.

The clearest example can be drawn from collegiate equestrian competition. Even highly accomplished riders cannot depend on familiar conditions. They may compete on a horse they do not normally ride or without the equipment they are used to. What may work perfectly in one setting may not work the same way the next time around.

Talent matters, but so does the ability to adjust.

That lesson translated quickly to business. Beauty leaders are working in an industry where the conditions around them keep changing. Consumer expectations shift. Teams change. Technology changes.

CEW President Elana Drell Szyfer described agility as one of the qualities she believes strong leaders need most.

"The best leaders are agile," she told fellows. "They don't get stuck, and they can move when they need to."



For Drell Szyfer, that does not mean changing direction every time something new appears. Leadership still requires a vision and a roadmap. The difference is staying aware enough to recognize when the team is on course and when it is time to recalibrate.

That distinction surfaced throughout the fellowship. During communication workshops, fellows received feedback on how they presented themselves and showed up in front of a camera. Creative exercises pushed them to work through ideas without knowing exactly where they would land.

The expectation was never to know everything immediately. It was to pay attention and respond.

Colleen Martorano, Vice President of Global Education at Olaplex, saw a direct connection to the way leaders develop their own teams.

"You can see direct correlations of how things you can use for your team," Martorano said. "Like how do you manage a team? How do you upskill a team?"

Coachability is part of that equation on both sides. Leaders want employees who can hear feedback, adjust, and keep improving. The fellowship raised another question: Are leaders willing to do the same?

Drell Szyfer spoke openly about learning that lesson in her own career. When she first became a CEO, she believed she needed to understand how to do nearly every job around her. She thought being a strong CEO meant also knowing how to be the CFO, the head of sales, the head of marketing, and the expert in every other function.

Eventually, she realized that trying to know everything was not making her a better leader. It was exhausting her.

"Good ideas come from anywhere," Drell Szyfer told fellows. "And while leaders need to set a vision and keep the team on course, they do not need to have all the answers."

Letting go of that expectation gave her more room to focus on the work only she could do: set the vision, build the roadmap, and put the right people around her.

Resilience was another piece of the conversation, but not simply in the familiar sense of bouncing back.

At the Equestrian Center, fellows heard about what happens when an athlete believes she gave her best ride and still loses. She can be disappointed. She can take a moment. But the competition is not over for everyone else. The rest of the team still has to perform.

The workplace version is easy to recognize. A pitch does not land. Someone else gets the promotion. A project misses the mark. A strategy has to be reconsidered after months of work. Leaders are not expected to be unaffected by those moments, but the way they respond can shape what happens around them next.

Sometimes leadership means recovering quickly enough to make sure your disappointment does not become everyone else's.

The Equestrian Center also introduced a simple way to deal with pressure: return to the fundamentals. For riders, those fundamentals were hands, hips and heels. When too much is happening at once, return to the things you know.

Every leader has a version of that. What are we trying to accomplish? What does the team need right now? What do we know, and what are we assuming? What needs to change, and what should stay steady?

The specifics will look different in every organization, but the ability to come back to those questions becomes even more useful as the environment gets louder.

The fellowship offered a different picture of what strength in leadership can look like. It was not the person who never needed feedback, never changed direction or always had an immediate answer.



Beyond the Generational Divide

THE WORKPLACE SPENDS PLENTY OF TIME TALKING ABOUT GENERATIONS. THE FELLOWSHIP GAVE THEM A CHANCE TO TALK TO EACH OTHER INSTEAD.

Generational conversations at work usually start with a stereotype.

This one started with a vote.

During **Gen Z in the Workplace: Bridging Generational Perspectives**, featuring speakers Rachel Huber, Social Media Influencer; Taylor Petrone, Influencer Marketing Coordinator at Patrick Ta; and Regina Perez, Director of Brand and Product Development at Bissú Cosméticos; fellows were handed yes and no cards and asked to react to a series of statements. Gen Z changes jobs too quickly. Purpose matters more than salary. Luxury brands are becoming less important. AI will make creativity more valuable.

The room did not always agree, which was exactly what made the discussion interesting. What followed was less about proving one generation right and another wrong and more about understanding what sits underneath some of the assumptions people bring into the workplace.

Take job hopping.

The familiar criticism is that younger employees lack loyalty. But the conversation introduced another way to look at it. Younger professionals may be less loyal to one company, while still being highly loyal to growth.

Changing roles can mean gaining exposure to new categories, managers, geographies and ways of doing business. If someone cannot see a path forward where she is, leaving may be less



about avoiding commitment and more about continuing to build a career.

Purpose brought out a similarly complicated answer.

Younger professionals talked about wanting to understand what a company stands for and whether those values actually show up in the way people are treated. A mission statement does not mean much if the day-to-day experience inside the organization tells a different story.

At the same time, purpose did not make salary irrelevant. People still have bills, families, and financial goals. Younger professionals want meaningful work, but they also want to be compensated fairly for the value they bring.

The conversation became even more revealing when it shifted from what Gen Z wants from companies to what younger employees want from the people leading them.

Transparency came up repeatedly.

There was less interest in a leader who appears perfect and more interest in someone willing to say when she does not have everything figured out. Hearing someone senior admit that she has struggled, made a mistake or does not have

an immediate answer can make it easier for someone earlier in her career to ask for help before a small problem becomes a larger one.

Younger professionals also talked about wanting clarity. They want to understand what is expected of them, why the work matters and where they are going. But that does not mean they want less guidance.

If anything, the conversation suggested the opposite.

There was a clear appetite for mentorship and access to people with experience. Younger professionals know they have not yet navigated every business cycle, difficult manager, major career decision or industry shift. They want the chance to learn from people who have.

What they bring in return is a different kind of experience.

Digital culture is not something younger professionals had to learn halfway through their careers. Social media, online communities and constant access to information have shaped how many of them communicate, shop and understand brands for most of their lives.

For beauty companies trying to understand younger consumers, that perspective has obvious value.

Neither side has the complete picture.

Claire Rust, Executive Director, Global Supplier Management Strategic Initiatives at The Estée Lauder Companies, saw the practical value of the discussion immediately. She runs an internship program for her department with young professionals based around the world.

"I think from this generational conversation, it's super helpful," Rust said.

She was already thinking about what she could take from the fellowship and apply to the younger professionals she works with.

Drell Szyfer went into the generational conversation unsure exactly what to expect. By

the end of the fellowship, one thing stood out to her: the divide did not feel nearly as large as people often make it sound.

"Younger people learn from older people. Older people learn from younger people," she said. "I didn't feel the generational piece at all."

That may be because the fellowship gave people something workplace debates rarely do: enough time together to get past the label.

There was plenty of overlap beneath the differences. Both groups cared about growth. Both wanted to do meaningful work. Both were trying to figure out how AI changes their jobs. Both had questions about leadership, creativity, communication and what comes next for beauty.

They simply entered those conversations with different experiences behind them.

One of the more useful ideas to come out of the discussion was that progress does not require a younger generation to erase what came before it. There is plenty worth building on.

Experienced leaders bring relationships, context and lessons earned over years in the industry. Younger professionals bring new habits, new expectations and an instinctive understanding of a world that has changed considerably since many senior leaders began their careers.

The opportunity is not deciding which perspective wins. It is creating a workplace where both are taken seriously.

For an industry trying to understand the consumer of today while preparing for the consumer of tomorrow, that is more than a nice idea.

It is an advantage.

Keeping Business Human in the Age of AI

AS AI MOVES DEEPER INTO BEAUTY AND BUSINESS, LEADERS ARE DECIDING NOT ONLY HOW TO USE IT, BUT WHERE THEY WANT TO DRAW THE LINE.

One of the more interesting questions about AI during the CEW x SCAD Executive Leadership Fellowship was not what the technology can do.

It was what leaders should let it do.

AI came into conversations about consumer behavior, creativity, leadership and the future of work. But alongside the excitement was another discussion about responsibility, trust, and the parts of business that should still feel distinctly human.

Drell Szyfer offered a simple comparison. "AI is electricity," she said.

Her point was that AI is unlikely to remain a separate tool people pull out for one specific task. It will increasingly sit behind the systems, platforms, and processes people use every day. She also described it as an amplifier. Start with the business problem, then determine where AI can actually help solve it.

Jillian Techatanalai, AVP of Fragrance Merchandising at Bath & Body Works, said curiosity around AI was already high among the fellows.

"I think a lot of us have so much curiosity around AI," Techatanalai said.

One part of the conversation caught her attention.



"What Elana was saying around the disparity between how females and males are embracing it was really eye-opening," she said.

Drell Szyfer discussed a gap in AI adoption between men and women and one possible reason behind it. Women may be more hesitant to use the technology if they believe doing so will be seen as cheating, cutting corners or not working hard enough.

That makes adoption more than a technology issue. It becomes a culture and leadership issue too.

If leaders want teams to experiment, they may have to make that expectation visible. Drell Szyfer talked about leaders modeling their own use of AI and giving employees permission to learn openly instead of treating the technology as something everyone should quietly figure out alone.

"I think people have to set examples and give people permission so they know it's okay," she said.

But encouraging people to use AI is only half of the conversation. The other half is deciding what responsible use actually looks like.

AI ethics became a major part of the fellowship discussion and the team's later debrief. Brands are increasingly facing questions about what AI should be used for internally, what consumers should know about its use externally and where companies want to draw boundaries around creative work.

Those questions carry particular weight in beauty. The industry is built on images, artistry, storytelling, influence, and personal identity. AI can make parts of that work faster, but speed does not settle questions about ownership, authenticity or trust.

At SCAD, the issue is especially relevant because students and professionals are creating the kinds of work AI systems can learn from. One example discussed was SCAD's use of a closed AI environment, where information entered into the system stays within that environment rather than being used to improve a broader model.

That raises a useful question for any brand experimenting with AI: Do we know what happens to the information we give these tools?

As AI moves from occasional experimentation into everyday work, companies may need clearer answers. A team might use it to organize research, generate ideas, summarize information or speed up routine tasks. A creative department may have a completely different set of concerns. A consumer-facing team may have questions about when AI use needs to be disclosed.

There may not be one set of rules that works for every company, but the fellowship discussion made a strong case for having rules at all. What will we use AI for? What will we not use it for? What needs human review? What will we tell consumers? What information is safe to put into a system? Where do we want a person making the final decision?

Those questions are easier to answer before a problem forces them.

The fellowship also challenged the assumption that more AI automatically means fewer human interactions. Drell Szyfer said she believes the opposite may happen in some areas. As technology becomes more embedded in everyday work and life, people may place an even higher value on opportunities to be in a room together, have a real conversation and make a meaningful connection.

That matters for an industry built on relationships.

Dana Paolucci, Head of Engagement Marketing, Social, PR & Influence, Dove US at Unilever, talked about the value of emotion in leadership and how seeing leaders show it can make them feel more powerful, not less.

"I think that also makes you a powerful leader, to not be just so robotic," Paolucci said.

That word has a different meaning when AI enters the conversation.

Technology can organize information in seconds. It can generate options, remove repetitive work and give teams more time. But leadership still requires judgment. A team still needs trust. Consumers still respond to authenticity. Creative decisions still come with questions that cannot always be answered by choosing the fastest option.

AI can make a business smarter and faster.

The challenge for leaders is deciding what they want the business to feel like once it does.

Speakers



PAUL AUSTIN

MENTOR IN RESIDENCE, SCAD
PERFUME ATELIER



ABBIE BIDDLE

SENIOR ACCOUNT LEAD,
SCADPRO



BOB CHAVEZ

FORMER PRESIDENT AND
CEO, HERMÈS AMERICAS



ELANA DRELL SZYFER

PRESIDENT, CEW



ASHLEY HENRY

DIRECTOR AND HEAD
COACH, SCAD EQUESTRIAN



RACHEL HUBER

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER



ERIC HUNICUTT

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT
STRATEGIST, SCADAMP



WIOLETA KAMINSKA

CHAIR OF DIGITAL
COMMUNICATIONS, PROFESSOR,
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MELONEY MOORE

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