

**2026 Leadership Summit  
Breakout Sessions**

***Beyond Black & White: How to Lead When Ethics Get Messy***

***Presenter: Thomas Johnstone***

2:40 – 3:20 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2263

This program utilizes pre-designed ethical scenarios to move leadership development from abstract theory to practical application. These scenarios, specifically targeted for college students, are drawn from real-life campus dilemmas involving academics, student organizations, and peer conflicts.

In facilitated sessions, participants analyze these nuanced situations, debate potential courses of action, and defend their choices. This process forces them to confront ambiguity, apply ethical frameworks, and consider the consequences of their decisions. By grappling with these realistic challenges, students actively develop critical thinking, moral reasoning, and the practical skills necessary for ethical leadership."

***Beyond Letters: Building Chapter Cultures That Last***

***Presenter: Kassandra Swiftney***

2:40 – 3:20 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2259

Creating a genuine sense of belonging is fundamental, especially within fraternity and sorority life. Experiences of exclusion, division, or conflict can significantly undermine a chapter's culture. By actively promoting the values and unity of a Greek chapter, we can enhance member engagement, improve retention, and foster inclusivity. The strength of Greek communities hinges on the vitality of their individual chapters, and this vital journey starts at home by prioritizing the bonds of siblinghood. Let us commit to building a thriving culture where every member feels valued and connected.

***Conflict Happens: Strategies and Skills for Managing Conflict as Student Leaders***

***Presenters: Mitch Eastlick & Anna Tollefson***

2:40 – 3:20 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2270

Conflict is sometimes a dirty word, but it is not always a bad thing. Learn what conflict is, why it is going to happen and how student leaders can embrace conflict to learn, develop and grow along their leadership journey. We will define conflict, talk about the elements of it and learn skills that can be used by leaders to embrace conflict and achieve positive outcomes.

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***Leading From the Middle: Turning Peer Influence into Real Impact***

***Presenters: Evan Jackson & Ty Vanlerberghe***

2:40 – 3:20 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2266

You don't need a title—or a magic wand—to lead, but you do need people willing to move with you. This session reflects on our experience leading Student Senate and what it taught us about influence, ownership, and building momentum without authority. We'll share how leading from the middle forced us to rethink accountability, communication, and culture—and why trust mattered more than any formal power we had. This is a candid look at leadership as it actually happens: imperfect, relational, and built over time. Join us as we look behind the curtain and examine the cogwheels that actually move an organization forward.

***Survival on the Moon: Navigating Leadership Under Pressure***

***Presenters: Abby Sachs***

2:40 – 3:20 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2215/2216

This workshop gives participants a fun, low-pressure way to practice leadership by diving into a creative team challenge that gets everyone thinking, talking, and problem-solving together. Instead of lecturing about leadership, we jump right into an activity that sparks curiosity, cooperation, and a little friendly debate.

A guided group debrief will tie the experience to real-world leadership situations, helping participants identify strengths, uncover growth areas, and take away practical strategies they can use in both personal and professional situations. This session is perfect for anyone looking to strengthen their communication skills, build confidence navigating uncertain situations, and enhance their leadership in a fun, memorable way.

***BE-LONG-ING: Exploring and Uncovering Identity***

***Presenters: Megan Bravo***

3:30 – 4:10 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2259

An interactive session focused on identity exploration and belonging, inspired by Kim Dabbs' framework of Loved, Learned, Lived, and Lingering Identities from her 2024 book, *You Belong Here: The Power of Being Seen, Heard, and Valued on Your Own Terms*. Through guided small-group conversations and reflection, participants will explore how identity shapes how we see ourselves, how we are perceived, and our sense of belonging within our campus community and beyond.

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### ***Getting Uncomfortable: A journey to leadership***

***Presenters: Erica Herwig***

3:30 – 4:10 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2215/2216

Being a leader isn't something you can learn in a book, it's something you learn through life experiences, usually the uncomfortable ones. My leadership journey began during the life and death of my first daughter. I was a young 21 year old working an order entry phone line and was thrust into a world full of medical terminology and quick decisions. The week my daughter died, I was suppose to be training for a new position with a colleague, instead, I had to teach it to myself the week after I buried my daughter. I put all of that hardship into my work and it was that experience that kicked off my leadership career. I want to share with you how I was able to overcome the uncomfortable and the hard and have found myself exactly where I never thought I would be.

### ***Navigating Peer Leadership: Leading People Your Own Age***

***Presenters: Malia Rodolico & Izzy Zdanowski***

3:30 – 4:10 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2201

Leading peers often blurs the line between friendship and authority, creating unique challenges that traditional leadership models don't fully address. This proposal highlights approaches for establishing credibility, nurturing trust, and communicating with impact in settings where leadership can feel informal or ambiguous. Through a focus on relational leadership and emotional intelligence, the presentation prepares emerging leaders to influence and support peers while preserving positive, productive connections.

### ***Puzzle Club: Unintended Consequences in the World of Technology***

***Presenters: Julia Toomey & Megan Van Orsdel***

3:30 – 4:10 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2263

In these times of smartphones, AI, gaming, and social media, there is a noticeably timid freshman class. The Grand Valley State University Puzzle Club, established in 2024, seems to provide an antidote. The new club attracted large crowds in its first year, notably the first meeting of 2025 had 84 attendees, a testament to the appeal of old-fashioned puzzling even amid younger generations. The lead authors noticed the club becoming a social hotspot where people would create new relationships and gather to maintain existing ones. A survey administered at the end of the first puzzle club meeting of 2025 gathered data on the topic. Members report that they feel exceptionally comfortable socializing during club meetings. 50.8% of members feel strongly that working on the puzzles made conversation easier, 88.9% collaborated with at least 1 new person, and 58.7% did not use their phones at all throughout the meeting. The findings suggest that puzzle club being a social hotspot did not happen by chance, but certain factors combined to create a prospering club. In-person community interaction is lacking for

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many college students making it more important than ever to understand how to create effective social clubs.

***Social Justice Burnout: How Advocates and Leaders Can Sustain Their Work***

***Presenters: Grayson Rodgers***

3:30 – 4:10 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2266

This presentation will explore the impact of social justice burnout on individuals in leadership and advocacy roles. It will define social justice burnout, discuss why student leaders are particularly susceptible, outline common signs and symptoms, and offer strategies for leaders and advocates to maintain their well-being while sustaining their efforts for change. Additionally, attendees will have the opportunity to develop a personalized sustainability plan to enhance their effectiveness and resilience as leaders.

***The Art & Science of Feedback***

***Presenters: Kristen Evans, Emily McGavin, Kolby Williamson***

3:30 – 4:10 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2270

What happens in our brains and to our bodies when we receive feedback? What's the best way to deliver feedback? How can I be more open to receiving feedback? We will explore these questions and more in this fast-paced workshop designed to provide insights and skill-building around the giving and receiving of feedback in the workplace. Come prepared to engage in equal parts self-reflection and fun.

***Leadership Is A Human Experience***

***Presenters: Brian Zemba***

4:20 – 5:00 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2215/2216

Leadership is often seen as a skill set that one may grow in and master. The world may tell you that it is all about you and how you can impact those around you. Leadership at its core is about how you influence others. During this presentation, we will walk through the disciplines of leadership, what does real impact look like, and who is your target audience. You may be closer to the answer than you even know.

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***Self Devoted Leadership as Inner Architecture: The Museums, Temples, and Mansions Within You***

***Presenters: Destyni Davis***

4:20 – 5:00 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2201

Chasing someone else's dreams can give you nightmares. Our dreams are as unique as our fingerprints. What are your dreams that feel natural, effortless, and peaceful for your true, authentic self? How can you begin to make your dreams a reality?

This session introduces "Museums, Temples, Mansions," an emerging leadership philosophy and devotion ethos by inspirational thinker Destyni Davis, which offers participants a brave space to understand themselves as dynamic, layered, and ever-evolving structures. Participants will be encouraged to think outside the box, then beyond shapes, as this framework centers identity, meaning-making, and personal architecture as the foundation for authentic leadership.

Participants will explore how their internal "museums" house the stories, identities, and lessons that inform their leadership. They will learn how their "temples" represent their values, alignment, and purpose, while their "mansions" symbolize their potential, possibilities, and future rooms they have yet to unlock. Through guided reflection, interactive prompts, and practical application, participants will lovingly see who they are, what they stand for, and how to lead from self-honoring rather than external pressure. This session is designed for participants eager to love themselves, devote themselves to their destiny, and honor themselves because our quality of life depends on it.

***Story-Driven Leadership: Using Narrative to Guide Culture and Change***

***Presenters: DL McKinney***

4:20 – 5:00 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2263

My leadership practice is grounded in a simple but transformative belief: stories are evidence, and narrative is one of the most powerful tools we have for disrupting harmful systems and practices. Across my work in LGBTQ+ student life and abolitionist teaching I use narrative to expose cognitive inertia (the patterned ways institutions cling to old norms even when they no longer serve our communities).

This session introduces story-driven leadership as an equity-centered framework for shifting culture and leading change. Drawing from my work in intersectionality, belonging, anti-bias practice, trauma-informed leadership, and narrative-based applied ethics teaching, I show how lived experiences and community memory reveal truths that traditional data often misses. In the end, stories help us see who is burdened by our systems, who is missing from decision-making, and what possibilities emerge when we lead with relational accountability.

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#### ***The Cost of Poor Communication***

***Presenters: Robert Heath***

4:20 – 5:00 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2266

What if the biggest obstacle to your success isn't competition but communication? Studies show that poor workplace communication costs businesses an average of \$12,506 per employee annually and accounts for over \$1.2 trillion in losses across U.S. companies every year. But it doesn't have to be this way.

In this compelling keynote, Robert Heath, Sr. reveals how communication isn't just a soft skill—it's a hard driver of productivity, profitability, and organizational growth. Through real-world examples and actionable insights, he'll help you uncover the hidden costs of poor communication and transform it into a powerful tool for competitive advantage.

Because communication is central to every great leader's influence, this session shows how mastering it can shape one's ability to lead effectively—strengthening confidence, clarity, and connection in every interaction. As part of the experience, participants will engage in a dynamic group activity that brings to light common communication challenges and equips them with practical tools to improve their leadership impact.

Whether you're leading a team, a project, or your own career, this session will challenge your thinking, inspire action, and show you how to elevate your impact by mastering the art of communication.

#### ***The Innovator's Compass: A Creative Problem Solving Tool***

***Presenters: David Coffey & Lyndsey Smeyers***

4:20 – 5:00 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2259

When faced with difficult situations it is easy to get overwhelmed and shut down. How do we instead open the creative pathways needed for problem solving? In this session, participants will be introduced to the Innovator's Compass - a framework for navigating through unfamiliar territory. In particular, this tool supports the user in finding new ways forward through divergent and convergent thinking.

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***Workplace Dynamics: Navigating Work Relationships and Professionalism at the Start of Your Career***

***Presenters: Kristen Evans, Kaitlyn Boyko, & Joseph VanArendonk***

4:20 – 5:00 p.m.

Kirkhof Center 2270

As a new professional entering the workforce, there will be a number of new workforce dynamics you will encounter. This session will share insights on how to best prepare yourself for success at your organization and in your career. We'll discuss available opportunities/tools for self-discovery and self-reflection on your personal work style, professional best practices, and ways to take control and start your career on a positive note.