



Q1 2026 Leadership Summits | Key Takeaways

› **Six cities, 10 lessons:**

What business leaders
are seeing... and saying

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March 2026 — Abby Lindenberg has a habit that tends to unsettle people. Before every leadership summit, before every panel, before the coffee goes cold and the networking turns to attentive listening, she asks a room full of 250-plus industry leaders a question most conference organizers shy away from: What are the hills still left to climb?

Lindenberg, the founder and CEO of B2B multimedia outlet caa, has built a decade-long business on the conviction that the most valuable thing you can do for a business community is tell the truth, about where it's thriving, where it's stalling, and what it's going to take to close the gap.

In the first quarter of 2026, Lindenberg tested that conviction across metros from sunshine-soaked Palm Beach County to the northern reaches of New Jersey. Back-to-back summits, each one drawing hundreds of executives, civic leaders, developers, healthcare executives, and educators into the same room to do the thing Lindenberg believes the business world has quietly stopped doing enough of: talk to each other, face to face, about what's actually happening. In effect, bringing the human element back to decision-making.

“At caa, we don't just report on the economics of a region,” Lindenberg said. “We report on the humans behind it. Because we know those two things are inseparable.”

In 2025 alone, CAA hosted hundreds of speakers across more than 50 panels and welcomed over 3,000 attendees across 18 markets. The organization's research consistently shows that executives who attend its events are more engaged in their local communities, make more economic impact, and carry what Lindenberg calls a growth mindset — “not only for themselves but for their companies and their communities.”

When it comes to the “hills left to climb,” here are 10 things those communities said out loud this past quarter, as voiced by the people on the leadership panels across numerous cities, and the data that explains why they matter.



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Abby Lindenberg

Founder & President
caa

1 Infrastructure is a quality-of-life investment, not just a capital expense

John Vardaman, advanced technology core market co-leader at DPR Construction, which builds data centers, hospitals, and commercial projects across the Southeast, did not mince words at the Nashville summit. “If there is no infrastructure, projects fail, especially at scale where there is no predictability in terms of availability and timelines,” Vardaman said. “Connectivity is now vital infrastructure.”

He was describing, in real time, what the American Society of Civil Engineers had quantified in its 2025 Infrastructure Report Card. A nation that has improved its overall infrastructure grade for the first time in decades — from a C- to a C — but remains exposed by a \$3.7 trillion investment gap over the next decade, with federal funding authorizations from the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) set to expire in 2026. The energy sector, meanwhile, was downgraded, from a C- to a D+, citing capacity constraints and surging demand that investment has not kept pace with.

2 Energy demand is outpacing supply, and the window to act is now

Chris Jones, president of Middle Tennessee Electric, didn’t hedge. “Tennessee has the opportunity to lead the world in nuclear energy, data centers, AI, quantum computing, and quantum networks,” Jones said. “We shouldn’t be satisfied with just ‘enough’ power, we want an abundance mindset.”

U.S. data centers consumed 183 terawatt-hours of electricity in 2024 — more than 4% of total national consumption. By 2030, the International Energy Agency projects that figure to grow 133%, to 426 terawatt-hours, with data centers alone accounting for nearly half of all new electricity demand growth in the United States over that period. Goldman Sachs estimates that grid upgrades alone will require approximately \$720 billion through 2030.

In some parts of the country, that pressure is already arriving faster than the infrastructure can absorb it. In Middle Tennessee, the panelists weren’t discussing whether the demand was coming. They were gauging whether anyone in the room was moving fast enough to meet it.

3 The old hiring model is obsolete. The replacement is being built but not fast enough

Westmoreland County Commissioner Doug Chew described, with some precision, what a functioning workforce pipeline looks like when it’s actually working. Chew highlighted coordinated K–12 pathways, employer-shaped curriculum, credentials earnable in four to 12 weeks, and direct employer engagement at every stage.



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Chris Jones

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“When an employer hires a student from Westmoreland County, they know what that credential represents,” he said at the Pittsburgh summit. “It represents technical competence, workplace readiness, and immediate impact.”

The national baseline against which that model stands is not flattering. Cengage Group’s 2025 Graduate Employability Report found that only 30% of this year’s graduates found jobs in their field, while 48% said they felt unprepared to apply for entry-level positions. The World Economic Forum, in its 2025 Future of Jobs Report, identified skill gaps as “categorically the biggest barrier to business transformation,” ahead of investment capital, ahead of regulation. A separate Global Talent Shortage survey found that 72% of U.S. employers report difficulty finding skilled workers, with direct consequences for revenue and project timelines.

4 Mental health is a workforce issue, and the workplace is where it has to be addressed

At the Pittsburgh summit, David Ballard, vice president at One Mind at Work, a mental health nonprofit, explained his organization’s presence on an economic development panel with characteristic directness. “If you want to address mental health, where do you go? The workplace, because that’s where the people are.”

Gallup’s 2025 research puts global employee engagement at 21%, with the cost of lost productivity from disengagement at \$438 billion. Employees with unresolved depression experience a 35% drop in productivity, costing U.S. organizations an estimated \$210.5 billion annually in absenteeism, medical expenses, and reduced output. Nearly half (48%) of American employees have left a job for reasons tied to their mental health, with two-thirds of those departures voluntary, according to Mind Share Partners.



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David Ballard
Vice President
One Mind at Work

5 Research institutions don’t just produce talent, they anchor it

Coming to Philadelphia as a postdoc 26 years ago, Ben Smith, of the Monell Chemical Senses Center, built a career elsewhere before returning. His point wasn’t autobiographical. “Having a strong research community and research opportunities here in Philadelphia anchors people, ideas, innovation, and IP,” Smith said.

The Philadelphia panel Smith was participating in agreed that talent and capital are mobile in ways that research infrastructure is not, and that cities that have invested in research ecosystems have built something that can survive the cycles that chase mobile capital away. The World Economic Forum projects that technology will transform 1.1 billion jobs over the next decade — nearly three times the current U.S. population. In that environment, the regions that can anchor innovation rather than simply attract it are in a categorically different competitive position.

6 AI adoption is real, but interoperability is the bottleneck nobody wants to talk about

Hackensack Meridian Health’s Ken Sable got a laugh at the New Jersey summit with a line that was only funny because it was true. Healthcare, he noted, is still largely running on fax machines. The bigger problem, he said, isn’t the fax but what the fax represents. “We still have disparate data systems; they don’t talk to each other,” he said. “Even if we’re all on Epic, they have a different instance of Epic than I have.”

Despite 85% of healthcare organizations having explored AI, only 18% are actually ready to deploy it in care delivery, according to HIMSS, as cited by Healthcare IT News — with 77% citing lack of AI tool maturity as the primary barrier.

7 AI is a tool. Data literacy is the skill that makes it useful

“We need to be careful because AI is not perfect,” Amy Murtha, dean of the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, highlighted in New Jersey. “Sometimes there’s hallucinations and sometimes we depend on tools that actually will not give us the correct information. So there’s a lot of concern about those things, and I think it is really important for us to keep that in mind as well.”

At the Palm Beach summit, EisnerAmper’s Paul Gabriele put the governance version of the same concern more bluntly: “A lot of the questions we get is not how can we use AI, but how can I not get in trouble?” The World Economic Forum’s 2025 Future of Jobs Report found that employers expect 39% of workers’ core skills to change by 2030, with AI fluency and data literacy emerging as the defining differentiators between growing and declining job categories. The gap between organizations deploying AI and organizations deploying it well is already measurable, and widening.



We need to be careful because AI is not perfect...”

Amy Murtha

Dean
Robert Wood Johnson Medical School

8 Downtown revitalization only works when people actually live there

Shaneel Lalani, CEO, Lalani Ventures and owner of Underground Atlanta, has 2 million square feet of real estate in Atlanta’s downtown core. Lalani is not sentimental about what it takes to make a city center work. “What’s missing is people living in downtown,” he said at the Focus Atlanta summit. “We are working on building apartments so we can have people staying in downtown to make it a true 24-hour destination.”

Between 2019 and 2024, median home sale prices rose 60%, with single-family homes hitting a median of \$412,500 and more than half of all U.S. renters now cost-burdened, according to Harvard’s Joint Center for Housing Studies. A median-income family today

needs either an 18% drop in housing costs or a 2% or more interest rate reduction just to qualify for a typical home purchase. The apartment buildings going up around Centennial Yards and Underground Atlanta are not solving the national affordability crisis. But the panel’s underlying argument that residential density is the precondition for everything else downtown economies are trying to do holds across every market.

9 Growth without equity is a short-term strategy

“Atlanta’s competitive advantage is our culture,” said Clyde Higgs, CEO of the Atlanta Beltline, who has watched \$900 million in public infrastructure investment catalyze more than \$9 billion in private follow-on — a return ratio that few public spending programs in any sector can match. “If we don’t protect our culture, we’re basically Austin, Texas. Companies move here for the culture, not a beach. It is a tug-of-war between growth and keeping the city affordable.”

The National Low-Income Housing Coalition’s 2025 Gap Report documents a shortage of roughly 7.1 million affordable and available homes for the nation’s lowest-income renter households. The Beltline’s response in part is a legacy resident retention fund that literally pays the property tax bills of longtime residents as surrounding investment pushes their assessments higher. It is one of the more concrete equity mechanisms on display.



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Clyde Higgs

CEO
Atlanta Beltline

10 Government has to come in first

Eloisa Klementich, president and CEO of Invest Atlanta, put the math on the table. “Since 2013, our investments have driven over \$18 billion of economic impact,” Klementich said. “Total investments were around \$7 billion, and Invest Atlanta invested about a million dollars.”

That ratio, roughly \$1 of public investment generating \$18 of economic impact, appeared in different forms across all six summits. The American Society of Civil Engineers’ “Bridging the Gap” economic analysis found that sustaining IJA-level federal infrastructure investment would protect more than \$1 trillion in gross output by 2033 and save 237,000 jobs. The alternative, a return to pre-2022 funding levels, would leave a gap exceeding \$3.7 trillion.

The lesson from Atlanta, from Nashville, from Pittsburgh, from every city on this round of caa leadership conferences, is the same in that private capital does not typically lead, it follows. The question is whether the public investment that would unlock it is coming, or whether the private sector leaders in these rooms are on their own.