

Report on “*Leading Through Complexity*” with Matt Lehrman

I attended a keynote called *Leading Through Complexity* by **Matt Lehrman**, and it focused on what it really means to lead in uncertain and high-pressure times. The session wasn’t a typical lecture. Matt is a **civic facilitator** who works with local governments, school districts, and community organizations around the country to navigate disagreement and build consensus. He made the session highly interactive and completely non-partisan.

Using live polling, he asked the entire room to respond to questions in real time from our phones. Our answers appeared instantly as word clouds on the screen, showing the ideas, values, and concerns that mattered most to us. Those audience-generated responses became the foundation for the discussion. It felt less like being talked at and more like being invited into a shared conversation about leadership, trust, and responsibility.

Matt emphasized that complexity isn’t a temporary crisis we’re trying to “get past.” It’s the normal condition of civic life. He said that real progress depends less on ideology or policy positions and more on how we engage with one another. He was very clear that he wasn’t there to represent any political side or agenda, but to **champion the process of how we talk to each other**.

He walked us through a framework he called the “**Compass for Complexity**,” with four key points: **Togetherness, Purpose, Courage, and Resolve**.

- **Togetherness** was described as our true north. Matt reminded us that public leadership carries a mutual obligation: we don’t have to agree on everything, but we do have to stay committed to one another and to the communities we serve.
- **Purpose** was about rising above division. Through the live polling exercise, we named what we believe our mission really is — things like student success, opportunity, dignity, safety, and preparing people for a meaningful future. He showed how those ideas, taken together, form a shared civic purpose.
- **Courage** was defined as the willingness to listen to someone you disagree with and say, “Tell me more.” He shared stories from his *Community Catalysts* podcast about leaders who stayed in difficult conversations long enough to understand what was really at stake for the people involved.
- **Resolve** was about staying committed and forward-focused when progress feels difficult. Matt acknowledged that division, dysfunction, and fatigue take a real toll on leadership. He described resolve as the determination to keep working together — to restore trust, unity, and focus even when challenges test our patience and optimism.

All throughout, he gave us practical questions to bring back to our own boards and communities:

- What do we value today that exists because of people's efforts a decade ago?
- What should we begin now that future generations will thank us for?
- What deserves to be protected, preserved, or treated as sacred?
- How do we expect to engage with each other even when we disagree?

Matt closed with a simple reminder: **Democracy Runs on Dialogue™**.

He said that the strength of democracy doesn't live in distant institutions — it lives in our communities, our school districts, our classrooms, and our conversations. **Disagreement isn't only natural — it's necessary.** Every act of listening, learning, and leading together is how democracy renews itself — **one courageous conversation at a time.**

Thanks for asking! Keep an eye on your inbox—I'll be sending the presentation slides soon, including the word clouds we built together.

For additional information or assistance, please contact:

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