Association for Project Management

Project influence: Earning a seat at the C-Suite table

Because when projects succeed, society benefits

Introduction

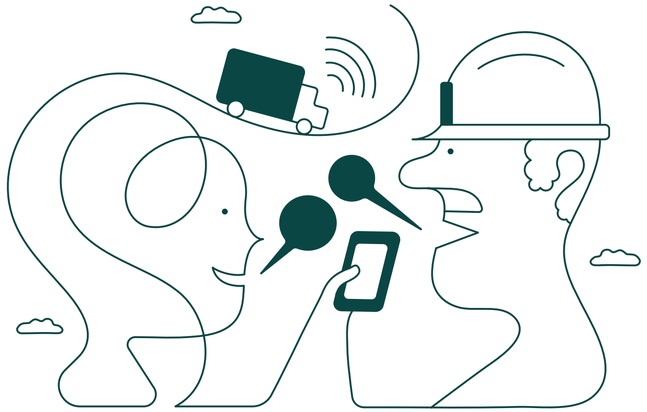
Is project management still perceived as delivery-only, or can it shape corporate strategy?

Research by APM has found that more than half (51%) of business leaders describe the function of project management in their organisation as operational, while only 16% say it's strategic. However, businesses that rate their ability to deliver project objectives on time and within budget as 'very good' are more likely to describe their project management function as strategic.

Furthermore, business leaders who integrate projects and project management principles into their strategies all report benefits from doing so. The most commonly reported benefits of this approach are:

- clearer understanding of roles and responsibilities
- increased adaptability
- better risk management

This paper explores the evolving perception of project professionals at the executive level and how project leaders can influence at boardroom level. It is based on conversations that took place at the Association for Project Management (APM) Project Summit at Windsor Castle in autumn 2025. Senior project experts, leaders and C-Suite-level executives attended to share ideas and examine this topic in new and creative ways.



Contributors

Professor Eddie Obeng PhD, MBA

Eddie Obeng is a Professor at the School of Entrepreneurship and Innovation at the Henley Business School, founder and Learning Director of Pentacle, The Virtual Business School, and a leading business theorist, innovator and educator.

Donna Sinnick, Chief Delivery Officer at Babcock International Group

Donna is responsible for Babcock's operating and delivery functions spanning programme management, engineering and technology, procurement and supply chain, IT, facilities management, quality and business transformation.

She joined Babcock in November 2021, with the remit of professionalising project management across Babcock where she enabled the design, delivery and roll out of its global framework. Prior to joining Babcock, Donna's career centred in engineering aerospace and defence where she held various senior leadership positions, including Vice President of Programme Management.

Pete Russell, Head of PMO and Head of Function at Leonardo UK

Pete is Vice President Project Controls and Project Management for a line of business whilst also the Head of PMO and Project Management within Leonardo UK, a large international electronics defence company. He joined the company in 2019 after completing an Executive MBA and the Leading Complex Projects and Programmes course at Cranfield University (2016-2018). He has held various roles in defence-related companies since leaving the UK Armed Forces in 2006 (over 20 years' full-time service plus another 20 years Reserve Army service). He ran his own building renovation company for three years and built a consultancy providing project and programme management services back to the UK Ministry of Defence.

Pete started his career as an engineer before moving into project management. He is a Chartered Project Professional, Chartered Manager and Chartered Engineer.

Nick Smallwood CBE, Programme Development and Assurance Director at Great British Energy – Nuclear

Nick spent 37 years with Shell and has extensive experience of managing complex global portfolios as well as multi-billion pound projects in senior leadership roles. After retiring from Shell he took the role of CEO for the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) in the UK Central Government. The IPA was the centre of excellence for project management and assurance for the Government's major projects. After five years in that role, Nick pursued a new challenge in supporting Great British Nuclear develop Small Modular Reactor opportunities to commercial production.

Nick is a Chartered Mechanical Engineer, a Chartered Project Professional, a Fellow of the Institution of Civil Engineers and a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering.

The value of project leadership in the C-Suite

Projects span all industries and locations, fulfilling countless industrial, commercial and societal needs. However, organisations today face many risks and potential pitfalls they wouldn't have just a few years ago. Against this backdrop, integrating project leadership at C-Suite or Board level to drive strategic transformation may be advantageous to businesses, depending on their circumstances.

The value that project leadership can bring to the C-Suite or Board reflects the project community's core strengths:

- **Governance** - Sound running of a company or enterprise requires not just good governance but compliance with standards and legislation.
- **Assurance** – Project leaders provide evidence-based assessment that instils confidence in the design and operation of controls, governance, and risk management. Assurance supports effective oversight and informed, decision-making, helping ensure successful delivery of key activities.
- **Business case and value analysis** – All spending by project professionals is trackable and measured against the benefits realised. They provide the right inputs – scope and opportunity – to realise tangible benefits, with a dual focus on immediate/short-term impacts and legacy.
- **Performance** – Project leaders shape opportunities with stakeholders, measure (and understand) system performance and identify new business opportunities.

These abilities (and others) serve to elevate projects and programme management from operational function to strategic changemaker.

Donna Sinnick explained: "How do you get an organisation moving in a strategic direction of travel? That's your A to B…The skill that [project professionals] bring to the C-Suite and to the organisation is the ability to join the dots.

"We talk an awful lot about outcomes from programmes, but the lessons learned are what get us thinking about the facts that underpin strategic decision-making."

"The reality is that if [project leaders] are not at the table, the business isn't likely to be as successful as it could be."

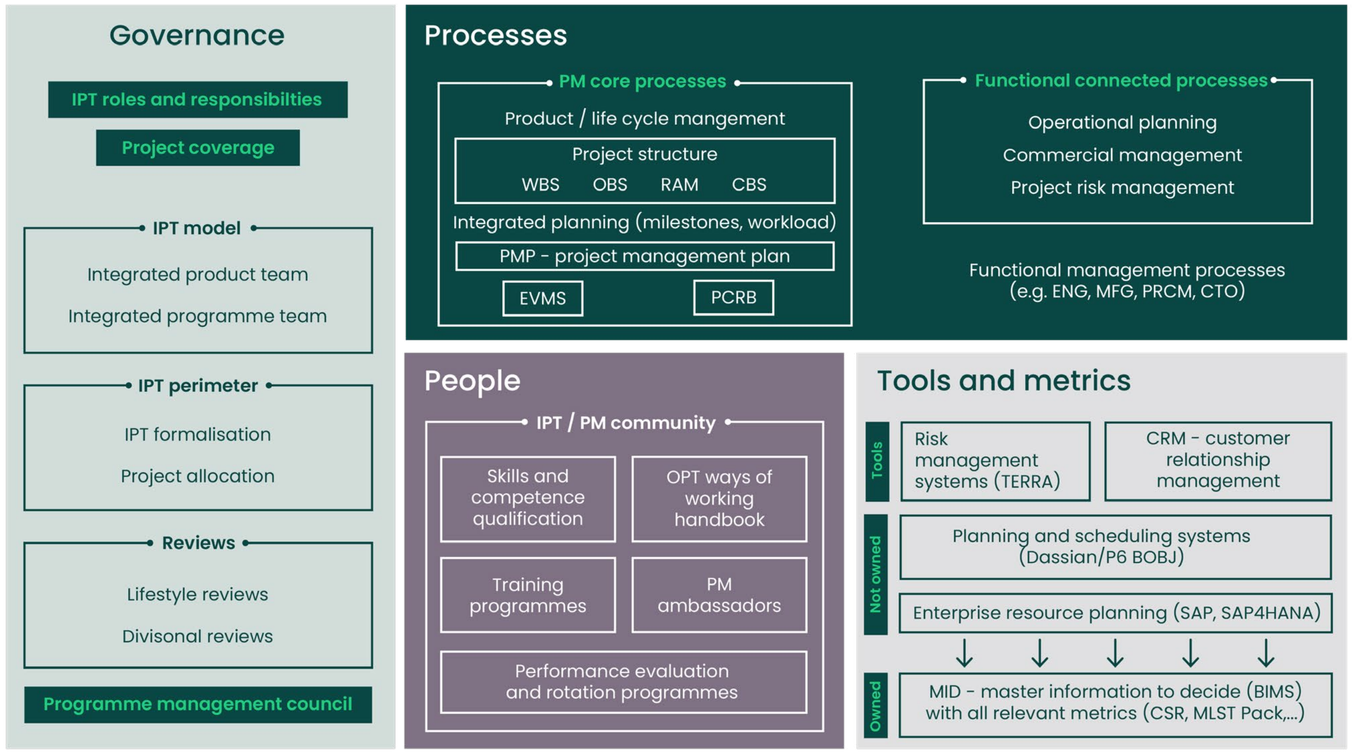
Nick Smallwood

How to get project management into the C-Suite?

Establish project management as a strategic asset

Pete Russell shared how Leonardo has established a project management framework that has evolved project management in the organisation from delivery function to strategic business asset.

This framework is illustrated below:



How to get project management into the C-Suite? (continued)

Develop future talent

Investment in training and development is pivotal to ensuring a healthy talent pipeline, from entry-level to C-Suite.

- Use a graduated approach whereby project professionals can prove their skills and abilities on a smaller project before taking on bigger ones. Programme managers can review their programmes with their sector Vice President (VP) to identify opportunities to progress younger/less senior project professionals up to the next level.
- Have senior leaders in a project team meet with their junior counterparts at the outset of a project, to make sure they understand goals and embrace ownership. Also, remind and reassure junior project managers that they have access to the knowledge and support of their senior colleagues and leadership team.
- Know which competences to look for. Different types of leadership require different competences. There is no definitive checklist, but the following qualities can be good indicators of project professionals with leadership capability.
    - They're collaborative. They can work cross-departmentally and with diverse stakeholder groups, influencing at all levels and resolving conflict.
    - They're natural planners. Planning is a cornerstone of leadership. Project leaders have the ability to plan not only budgets and schedules but also capacity, risk management and change control.
    - They learn from experience – their own and other professionals'. Project leaders will consolidate knowledge and expertise to provide overall orchestration for project planning. They will ensure lessons learned from other projects are applied at the outset.
    - They're storytellers. They're able to provide not only facts and data, but to explain their context and real-world significance. This supports business cases, stakeholder communication and team management.

Pete Russell explained that Leonardo has set up an internal development programme to identify and train potential future VPs and C-Suite members. This includes a collaboration with Cranfield University to deliver a four-month project management programme.

He said: "We're ingraining in our young project managers that they need to think strategically at an early stage. They start to understand, at a very early stage, some of the key issues and business-speak at Board level."

Mature the sponsorship role

Leaders need to understand how projects are effectively supervised. APM research has found that the concept of project sponsorship is not consistently understood among business leaders in non-project roles however. This presents a double opportunity for leaders to become sponsors, and for project professionals to work closely alongside them to explain their roles and demonstrate value.

Introducing and/or developing an organisation's sponsorship capability not only increases mutual understanding but also leads to:

- Stronger, more robust business cases that can withstand scrutiny and adapt quickly when needed.
- More informed decision-making, with financial and non-financial considerations taken into account.
- Better ownership of outcomes.

Donna Sinnick said: "Project sponsorship is a fantastic translation between the executive level and programme level.

"For my organisation's senior programme directors and executive committee, we now have them sponsor one of our major complex programmes because it gives them the ability to see what's truly going on in one area of the organisation, and the ability to help in that translation."

Nick Smallwood added: "Ownership of outcomes is really important…When you have tough choices to make, you have to make the choice that doesn't affect the overarching objective."

How can the project profession connect with the C-Suite?

While responsibilities are highly context dependent, the key attributes of a good sponsor are:

- Leadership – including credibility and authenticity.
- The ability to operate in volatile, uncertain, complex and/or ambiguous environments.
- An appreciation of change management and business-as-usual (BAU) activity, and how the two need to interact.

Other key functions for the sponsor to undertake include:

- ensuring that appropriate governance exists
- ensuring strategic alignment
- focusing on benefits
- driving key decision-making
- providing assurance to the Board
- championing the project with key stakeholders
- owning the business case

"If you don't have project sponsors truly embedded, working across your major complex programmes, that would be a strong addition."

Donna Sinnick

About APM

The Association for Project Management (APM) is a professional membership organisation that sets the standards for the project profession and raises its profile. APM is the only chartered organisation representing the project profession in the world. As a registered charity, APM delivers learning and networking opportunities, qualifications, research, resources, events, and best practice guidance for the project community, helping the profession deliver better.

APM currently has over 42,000 members and more than 470 corporate partners based across 140 countries.

Further resources

- *White paper – The Chief Project Officer: An Essential Part of the Future C-Suite*
- *White paper – Project Management: How Recognised is it by the C-Suite?*
- *Blog - What will it take for the C-Suite to embrace project management?*
- *What is project sponsorship?*

Register your interest for the Windsor Project Summit 2026

Building on the continued success of previous Windsor Project Summits, we'll be returning to St George's House, Windsor Castle in 2026 for the next gathering of senior leaders from across the project profession.

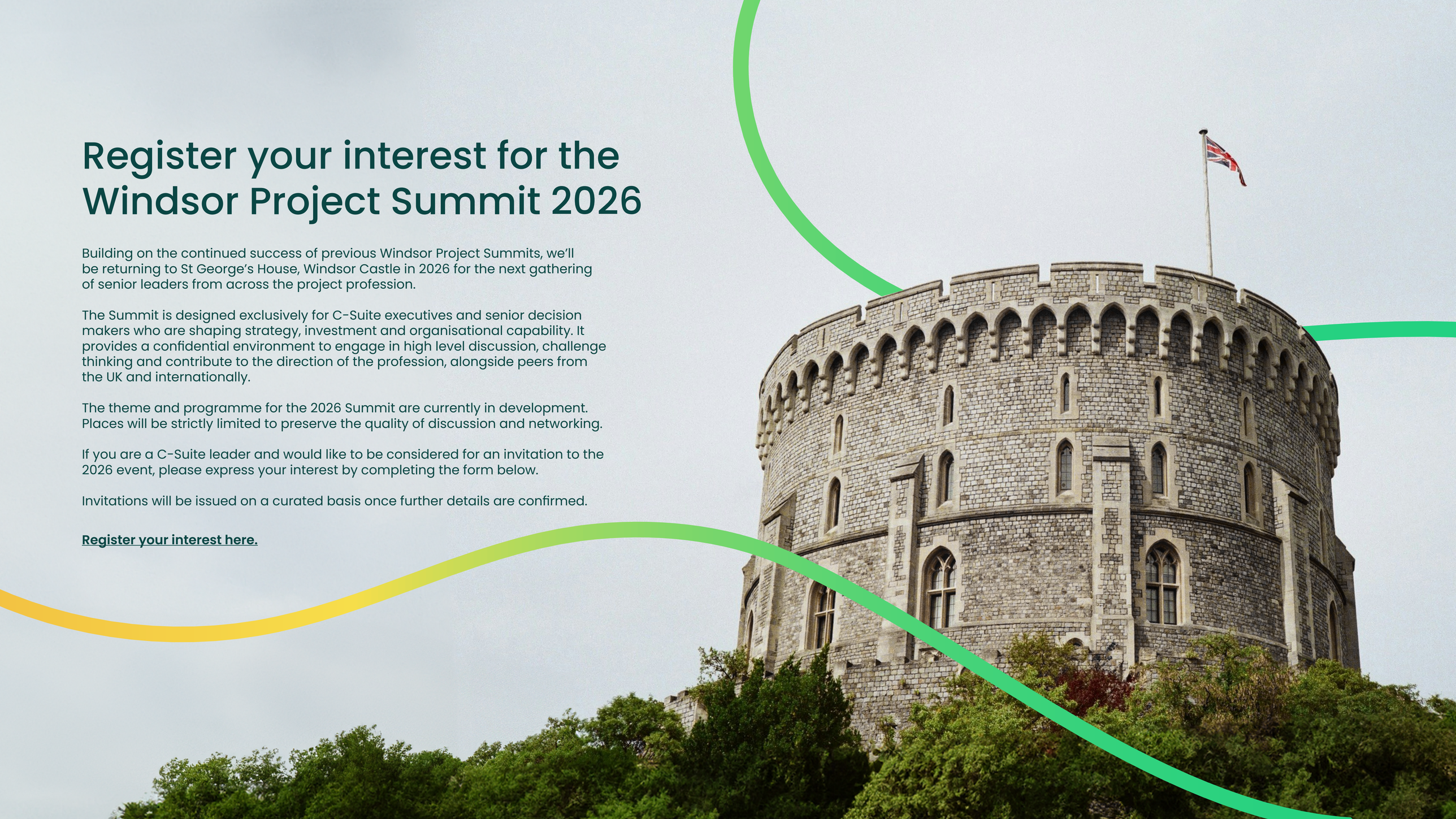
The Summit is designed exclusively for C-Suite executives and senior decision makers who are shaping strategy, investment and organisational capability. It provides a confidential environment to engage in high level discussion, challenge thinking and contribute to the direction of the profession, alongside peers from the UK and internationally.

The theme and programme for the 2026 Summit are currently in development. Places will be strictly limited to preserve the quality of discussion and networking.

If you are a C-Suite leader and would like to be considered for an invitation to the 2026 event, please express your interest by completing the form below.

Invitations will be issued on a curated basis once further details are confirmed.

Register your interest here.



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