



2025 CONFERENCE SESSIONS

OPENING KEYNOTE

Motivation: Embrace Your Awesomeness – Encouragement as a Strategy for Performance and Purpose

Brad Montgomery – Brad Montgomery Productions

Knowing that people are your most valuable asset isn't enough – real results come when you know how to empower them. This high-energy, interactive session explores encouragement as a performance tool and a leadership strategy. Through humor, storytelling, and audience engagement, nationally touring speaker Brad Montgomery will show you how to create purpose, positivity, and buy-in among staff, peers, and even yourself. Attendees will walk away with actionable tools to boost morale, enhance retention, and spark meaningful motivation in their teams – all while having a genuinely great time.

CLOSING KEYNOTE

No Plan B: Redefining Risk, Fear, and What It Takes to Chase a Dream

Shawn Neer – Yeti-Fox Factory Athlete, Cofounder of Traction

This keynote is a raw, behind-the-scenes look at what it really takes to chase an unconventional dream—from professional mountain biking to entrepreneurship. Through stories of missed opportunities, calculated risk, and full-throttle commitment, Shawn Neer unpacks how fear is often misunderstood—and how risk, hard work, and clarity of purpose can completely reshape a life. With lessons drawn from world-stage competition, van life in Whistler, and launching multiple businesses, this session will leave attendees with a new framework for action, courage, and follow-through.



GENERAL SESSIONS

Young Professionals: Find Your Why

Adam Acoba – City of Lakewood

Step into a transformative journey where you'll uncover the 'why' that fuels your leadership and ignites your passion for parks and recreation. In this session, we'll explore the power of discovering your purpose, and how that 'why' shapes your impact and empowers you to create lasting change. Through interactive activities and meaningful reflections, you'll unlock the potential to lead, inspire, and build communities filled with joy and possibility. Anyone can be a leader—this session will show you how to step into that power, embrace your 'why,' and make an extraordinary difference in the world around you.

Managing Conflict: Exploring the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument

Becca Mack – City of Greeley

This presentation will delve into the Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), a widely recognized tool designed to assess how individuals handle conflict in various situations. The session will explore the five distinct conflict resolution styles outlined in the TKI framework—Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Avoiding, and Accommodating. Attendees will gain an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each style and learn how to identify their own conflict-handling preferences. Through interactive discussions, real-world examples, and case studies, the presentation will highlight how these modes can be applied effectively in both personal and professional contexts. We will also cover strategies for adapting conflict management styles based on the situation at hand and the people involved. By the end of the session, participants will be equipped with practical tools for navigating conflicts more successfully, improving communication, and fostering better relationships in diverse environments.

Planning Better Parks: A New Methodology for Evaluating Park Performance

Brian Wethington – Sasaki

Urban parks are vital to public health, environmental resilience, and community connection. Traditionally, park evaluations have focused on asset condition, often neglecting design quality and functional completeness due to challenges in developing measurable metrics. In collaboration with Denver Parks and Recreation (DPR), Sasaki developed an innovative methodology to assess and prioritize urban parks for capital and design planning, applying it to analyze Denver's park system. This methodology integrates three core metrics—Asset Condition, Park Design, and Park Completeness—offering a comprehensive view of park performance. Rigorous statistical modeling and data analysis ensure reliable, actionable results. Supporting this effort is Dashi, a dynamic online tool developed by Sasaki to visualize and organize data, aligning planning goals with Denver Parks' guiding document, the Game Plan for a Healthy City. This session explores the methodology, data collection, statistical analysis, and practical application of these tools in capital planning and park design for any city. Attendees will gain insights into how this innovative framework can inform investments while addressing growth, equity, accessibility, and resilience in urban park systems.

Teen Programming: The Foundation of a Program from Mid to Main Character Energy

Britton Barrett, Jacob Rippey, Youth Leadership Team – Gilpin County Parks & Recreation

Our presentation will be to demonstrate to others our foundation of a teens program in a rural community with steady growth. We'll be discussing how this program presented itself with CSU Extension, grant involvement, program engagement, field trips and partnerships. The lasting aspect to our presentation is we'll plan on having our Youth Leadership Team discuss their involvement in program planning. The session will give those a better understanding of how our teens program developed over the past 6 years and where we'd like to continue to go.

Mic Check: Amplifying Your Stories Through the Power of Podcasting

Cara Myers – National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA)

Podcasting is a powerful tool for storytelling, community engagement and advocacy in the park and recreation industry. Whether you're looking to launch a podcast for your organization or improve an existing one, this session will share insights from NRPA's Open Space Radio and Apex's Apex Activated, as well as key takeaways from the Podcast Movement Evolutions Conference. We'll explore the latest trends, best practices and creative strategies to help you amplify your message, connect with your audience, and make an impact through podcasting.

The Art of Dealing With Difficult People in Youth Sports

Chris Stevenson – The Empower Group

People can be challenging, especially when it comes to youth sports. Managing difficult situations involving the athletic triangle – coach, athlete, and parent – is crucial for ensuring a good experience. Dealing with difficult people is a skill that can be learned and, when mastered, creates a great environment. In this engaging and interactive session, attendees will learn methods of effectively communicating expectations, the art of having crucial conversations, and other skills for dealing with challenging situations.

It's All About the Experience

Chris Stevenson – The Empower Group

In parks and recreation, every role matters—and so does every interaction. This engaging and interactive lecture explores how customer experience applies to every position, from front desk to leadership. Through real-world scenarios, group discussions, and shared insights, you'll gain practical tools, fresh perspectives, and a renewed sense of purpose. Leave feeling empowered to create memorable experiences that build pride, connection, and joy—for yourself, your team, and the community you serve.

Making the Safer Youth Sports Act Easier to Act On

Christa Watson – Ankored

Training, Background Checks, and Prohibited Conduct policies are now a requirement in Colorado. Actually executing all of these policies, especially when bringing on volunteers, can be incredibly time consuming. This session will cover ways to make following the act easier, and faster, ultimately creating a safer environment for your community.

Motivating Young Staff through Purpose, Mastery and Autonomy

Coleen Wheeler – City of Lakewood

As the Youth Sports Coordinator for the City of Lakewood, most of the staff I oversee are between the ages of 16 and 20. Trying to keep these young staff members engaged and motivated is always a struggle. I started using these 3 questions to improve the staff's interest and commitment: 1. Why are we doing this (purpose)? 2. Are we making any progress or growing (mastery)? 3. Do we have any say or control (autonomy)?

Talkin \$hit

Cory Vander Veen, Jarred Lilyhorn – Evergreen Park & Recreation District

This is an in-depth look at bathrooms in parks and how to provide quality of positive bathroom experiences. Our team lives by the motto “see it clean helps keep it clean”. Our teams are flipping the norm of bathrooms are always dirt and that they can be clean but that it takes everyone. How Evergreen had no affordable options for bathrooms in parks. Lessons learned and how a parks team turns \$hit into money to help build a team through pride and tough dirt jobs with its own teams vs contracting it out.

Enhancing Recreation Programming for Community Engagement and Success

Courtney Bakos – Town of Castle Rock Parks and Recreation

This session will present a strategic framework for designing, implementing and evaluating recreation programs that are not only responsive to community needs but also encourage long-term engagement. Drawing on extensive experience in research and the development of a comprehensive Recreation Programming Plan, the session will provide actionable insights on how parks and recreation departments can develop dynamic, sustainable programming strategies that drive success. The framework discussed ensures that parks and recreation programs evolve with community needs while directly supporting the pursuit of CAPRA (Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies) Accreditation. Specifically, it addresses nine of the CAPRA standards, making it an invaluable tool for agencies seeking accreditation or re-accreditation. Key topics will include aligning programs with community goals, creating inclusive opportunities for all ages and abilities, and implementing a data-driven cost-recovery strategy. Participants will learn how to integrate community feedback, track and analyze trends, and continuously improve programs to adapt to the shifting demands of their communities. Whether your agency is in the early stages of program development or seeking to elevate its existing efforts, the session will equip you with the tools and strategies to enhance your department's program offerings and overall impact.

Sustaining Success: A Panel Discussion on How Aging Recreation Centers Continue to Serve and Evolve

Craig Bouck – Barker Rinker Seacat Architecture

As Recreation Professionals, we know that keeping a facility fresh and programs engaging isn't just about new paint or hot yoga. With aging buildings, shifting community needs, and evolving recreation trends, how do long-standing facilities stay relevant and continue to thrive? In this dynamic panel discussion, professionals from Colorado recreation centers—each serving their communities for over 20 years—will share their experiences, lessons learned, and forward-thinking strategies. They'll share how they've adapted over time, tackled the challenges of aging infrastructure, and implemented innovative solutions to keep their facilities vibrant and their communities engaged.

Inclusive Play Matters: Evidence-Based Design Best Practices for Play and Recreation Destinations

David Hill – GameTime

Thoughtfully break down physical and social barriers to create a welcoming atmosphere and ensure parks intentionally support the developmental benefits of inclusive, intergenerational play! Research findings and new data offer unique insights to demonstrate the positive impact of designing outdoor destinations to address the diverse needs of the whole child, the whole environment, and the whole community!

From Angry to Playful: New Ways of Engaging the Public in a Controversial Process to Reimagine Recreation Centers

Deryn Ruth Wagner – City of Boulder - Parks and Recreation

Most of us know the feeling. Emails to staff and city council are flying in. A community is stirred up and not willing to explore change. Media stories are exacerbating the problem. All the while, staff are working nights just to get the story straight. This session explores an innovative engagement strategy that City of Boulder staff and consultants used to shift public conversations about city rec centers and break the logjam. By game-ifying the process, the project team diffused tensions and invited a spirit of playful, constructive dialogue about competing interests and limited budgets. After all, parks and recreation agencies are all about having fun, right? Come learn, play and share your own ideas – and as a bonus, see how this engagement has led to conceptual design for what will become the city's greenest recreation center, as well as a long-term vision for other rec centers.

Hard Conversations with Young People

Eric Golden – The Flourish Lab

Navigating tough conversations with young people can be challenging, especially when strong emotions are involved. This session explores practical strategies for approaching difficult moments with empathy, confidence, and clarity—ensuring that youth feel heard, valued, and supported. Participants will learn how to prepare for and respond to emotional conversations, avoid common pitfalls, and build trust through active listening and validation. The session will also provide tools for self-awareness and emotional regulation, helping professionals manage their own reactions in high-stress moments. Whether you're guiding youth through conflict, big emotions, or sensitive topics, this workshop will leave you with actionable techniques to create meaningful, productive conversations. Expect a session that's interactive, reflective, and grounded in real-world experiences—plus at least one strategy you can use right away!

Winning the Day, Every Day!

Farrell Buller – 110%

Working in parks and recreation is unpredictable. We've all had those days when things are going as planned, then all of a sudden we're thrown a curveball that throws the whole day off course. And despite our best efforts, our responses to these adversities and resetting your mind to get back on track can be extremely challenging. "Winning the Day, Every Day!" is an interactive and engaging session where we will explore the strategies and mindset shifts needed to regain control, get back on track, and win the day!

Design it Right: Real-World Facility Expansion and Design

Giuliana (Jules) Sheldon, Ken Greenberg – Fraser Valley Recreation District, Commercial Fitness Solutions

In December 2024, Fraser Valley Recreation completed a 3,500-square-foot facility expansion and solar energy project. This complex initiative required seamless collaboration among key project leaders to ensure success. Learn firsthand from those involved about the challenges, strategies, and lessons that can help you navigate facility expansions effectively.

Take it to the Bank! 5 Top Tips and Trends to Maximize Value and Minimize Cost

James Braam, Leslie Pickard – HDR Architecture, City and County of Denver, Parks and Recreation

Construction costs are escalating and funds are limited, in this session attendees will learn top tips from industry leaders on how they can maximize programming, safety, wellness, and the impact on their community all with smart ways to reduce cost.

Mastering the Art of Persuasion: Championing Parks and Recreation in a Changing World

James Moore – Athletify, Inc.

In today's dynamic landscape, effectively communicating the value of parks and recreation to teammates and politicians is paramount. This session equips professionals with essential skills to craft powerful arguments, understand diverse perspectives, and foster meaningful community and team engagement. Through practical examples tailored to the parks and recreation field, you'll learn to articulate benefits, analyze persuasive techniques, develop communication strategies, navigate challenging conversations, and inspire action in your team and the community. Amplify your voice and become a more persuasive leader on your teams and advocate for the vital role of parks and recreation in enhancing quality of life.

Take Control of Your Online Presence: Create and Utilize Your Digital Footprint to Boost Participation in Your Community

Jared Moore — Athletify, Inc.

Building and managing a strong digital presence is vital for boosting community participation, but it doesn't have to drain your resources. This session explores free and paid tools from Google, Facebook, and Instagram to help you effectively engage with your audience. Learn the key differences between having a social media presence and an advertising presence, and discover best practices for maximizing your impact online for your parks and recreation department. You'll gain insights into essential "must-do" strategies, as well as pitfalls to avoid when navigating the digital landscape. From understanding the power of targeted ads to knowing which platforms offer the best return on investment, this session equips you with actionable knowledge to create a more efficient and impactful online presence.

The Privilege of Privilege

Jason Elissalde — Next Practice Partners

Inclusion has never been about policy or process—it has always been about people. As DEI initiatives face new challenges, the work of equity, inclusion, and belonging remains as critical as ever. This session explores how privilege shapes access and influence—and how it can be leveraged to amplify voices that are often unheard. Participants will gain actionable strategies to shift power dynamics, foster inclusivity, and create meaningful change in their communities.

Advocacy in Action: Empowering Legislative Efforts of Young Professionals

Jeff Achee — Pflugerville Parks and Recreation (TX)

Young professionals are the future of the parks and recreation industry, but many feel unprepared to navigate the world of legislative advocacy. Understanding how policy decisions impact funding, parkland dedication, and community development is essential for emerging leaders. This interactive session will demystify the advocacy process and equip young professionals with the tools they need to make a real impact at the local, state, and federal levels. Participants will explore the fundamentals of advocacy, learn how to build relationships with decision-makers, and develop strategies for influencing policies that affect parks and recreation. Through real-world case studies, practical engagement techniques, and hands-on activities, attendees will leave with an actionable advocacy plan tailored to their career goals. Whether you're a first-time advocate or looking to strengthen your skills, this session will provide the confidence and knowledge to step into the rooms where decisions happen—and make your voice heard.

Fast-tracked to Supervisor! Now what?

Jeffrey Rau — Town of Erie

Congratulations — you've stepped into a supervisory role! Now comes the real adventure. This interactive session is designed for newly promoted (or soon-to-be) supervisors who are ready to lead with clarity, confidence, and impact. We'll explore the critical mindset shifts from peer to leader, cover foundational leadership expectations in government and parks settings, and walk through real-world strategies for building trust, managing performance, and navigating tricky conversations. Whether you're leading one team member or an entire division, this session will help you answer the big question: What kind of supervisor do I want to be — and how do I get there?

Cultivating Commitment: Fostering Retention in Recreation Staff

Jenna Katsaros — Barker Rinker Seacat Architecture

Dive into the heart of employee satisfaction! We explore the nexus of retention, wages, and culture, sharing strategies to attract and retain top talent in community recreation centers. Discover the magic wage increase amount that spurs job-hopping, the power of perks like wellness programs, how a well-designed environment can support long-term career goals, and more. Real-world studies provide actionable insights for designing environments where staff choose to stay!

Disconnect to Re-connect?!?

Jo Burns — Jo Burns Connects LLC

Let's get outside, disconnect from our devices to reconnect with your fellow humans. How do we do that again? We're five years out from the pandemic and the long term impacts are still being uncovered. Do we even remember how to connect on deeply personal level and go beyond basic? Using tools and research from the Science of People, we'll shut off the phones, leave the slide decks behind, spruce up our engagement skills and connect together in nature. This will be a session you can re-create in your community.

Building Vibrant Communities: The Role of Parks & Recreation in Arts & Culture

Jonathan Wheatley — City of Grand Junction

Parks and Recreation agencies have increasingly embraced the role of fostering arts and culture initiatives, recognizing their profound impact on community well-being and economic vitality. By integrating arts and cultural programs into public spaces, these agencies create accessible platforms that celebrate local heritage, encourage community engagement, and stimulate economic growth. Using Grand Junction as a case study, we'll examine key programs like the Grand Junction Commission on Arts & Culture, the 1% for the Arts Program, and the Annual Grant Program—which have generated over \$28 million annually in local economic impact. Learn how structured funding, strategic planning, and innovative partnerships create thriving creative ecosystems. Attendees will gain practical insights into sustainable funding, community collaborations, and emerging trends in public art. Walk away with tools to advocate for arts and culture in your community through effective government leadership and Parks and Recreation initiatives.

The Other AI: Allyship and Inclusion

Josh Gainey — City of Colorado Springs

How can we ensure that everyone feels included, supported, and heard in our spaces, programs, and workplaces? In this session you will learn tips for creating a more inclusive environment and for being a better ally.

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We are ONE: Building an Inclusion Program to Support Participants, Parents, and Staff in Summer Camps

Katie Just – City of Fort Collins

When considering summer camp options, most campers look forward to making friendships while most parents consider finding quality, affordable childcare. Often, recreation programmers react to the seasonal hiring challenges and budgetary limitations of program planning when we should be proactively prioritizing “inclusion” in our summer camp planning. As challenging child behaviors have increased in our post-pandemic society, managing those behaviors becomes even more challenging when most summer camp staff are seasonal and have varying levels of experience. With the creation of a Behavioral Specialist position, the Recreation Department with the City of Fort Collins has transformed their summer camp into a fully inclusive program, equipping participants, caregivers, and staff for successful participation. This success includes provision of specific de-escalation and sensory support training for seasonal staff, allowing their confidence to grow in managing behaviors for both neurodivergent and neurotypical campers. In this session, we will outline the Inclusion Aide Program and Camp FunQuest Collaboration, prepare personal sensory friendly supports to take back for use in programming, and hear success stories that have come about because of this collaboration.

Recreation without Reservation: Tackling Unconscious Bias Head-On

Katy French, Amanda Aburto – City of Brighton

Exploring Unconscious Bias in the workplace and how we can learn from it. Also touching upon conscious bias and the implications that both of these can have.

Baby Boomers to Zoomers: The New Digital Age

Kevin Stay – Kaizen Labs

In today’s multigenerational workforce, understanding and addressing the differences between Gen Z, Millennials, and older generations is critical for the success of parks and recreation organizations. “Bridging The Generational Gap” is a dynamic educational session designed to explore how generational values, communication styles, and work expectations impact staffing, retention, and workplace culture. Through insightful discussions and actionable strategies, this session will equip leaders with the tools to foster a more cohesive and productive work environment. One of the biggest challenges in managing a multigenerational workforce is the shift in how different generations approach work, communication, and technology. While Baby Boomers and Gen X employees may have adapted to traditional, process-heavy systems, Millennials and Gen Z have grown up in a world of smartphones, apps, and instant access to information. This creates a natural gap in how employees expect to communicate, complete tasks, and engage with their work. Technology plays a pivotal role in closing this gap – not just as a tool for efficiency, but as a means of creating a more engaging and satisfying work experience for younger employees, while supporting the comfort and needs of older staff. Modern, user-friendly technology can help parks and recreation organizations address this generational divide in several ways.

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Parks That Matter: Designing for Community, Sustainability, and Lasting Impact

Kurt Friesen – Dig Studio

Parks today must do more than ever before. They need to be welcoming to all ages—from teens to older adults—while fostering social connections, promoting health, and providing authentic experiences in nature. At the same time, they must be water-efficient, low-maintenance, and often built in phases on tight budgets. So, how do you determine what truly matters? What are the key features every new or renovated park should include to meet evolving community expectations? In Colorado, residents demand innovative and engaging outdoor spaces that reflect their values—whether it's sustainability, inclusivity, or modern amenities. This session will uncover the must-have elements in park design today. We'll go beyond sports fields and playgrounds to explore strategies for creating vibrant, memorable parks that balance ecological responsibility with user experience. From maximizing every dollar to designing spaces that keep visitors coming back, you'll gain insights to make your parks more impactful, resilient, and beloved by the community.

Find Your People!

Kyle Parker – Prospect Recreation & Park District

Do you know everything? If you said yes, then this isn't the session for you. If you are always looking for that go-to person, then this is the right session for you! It is OK to ask for help. You are the driver of your own career, but it is always helpful to have a map and maybe even a copilot. In our personal and professional life, it is ever important to find the people that can help you succeed. Mentors, consultants, subordinate staff, and supervisors all play a role to help you navigate through your career, but connecting with the right trusted people is paramount. Making connections inside and outside your organization will help you grow outside your comfort zone and be prepared for challenges as you advance in your career. You gotta find your people!

Don't Let Rec Sports Become a Wreck - Setting Standards and Enforcing Requirements

Lisa Licata – National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS)

Today, the majority of facility providers (primarily public entity park and recreation departments/districts) administer and conduct youth sports programs internally but many also allow external groups to use their facilities. And while these external groups may have good intentions, oftentimes there is high turn-over of their volunteer leadership (league boards for example) and they simply may not have all the information necessary to conduct safe and healthy sports experiences. Regardless of who executes programs at the local level, recreations sports provide an invaluable community service – providing youth and adults with an opportunity to interact physically and socially. It is crucial that every person associated with the organization is on the same page (staff, volunteer coaches, parents, league leaders, etc.). Today's youth sports landscape is complicated and can be problematic if an accident, incident or injury occurs. This session will provide an overview of the current environment, review industry recognized standards, and will outline simple steps to ensure consistent, predictable and high-quality youth sports.

Challenging Conversations Don't Have to Weigh you Down: Elevating Team Success through Effective Communication

Lori A. Hoffner – Supporting CommUnity, Inc.

In every workplace, challenging conversations are inevitable. However, the way you approach and navigate these discussions can significantly impact not only your personal success but also the overall effectiveness of your team. Positive communication is a cornerstone of staff motivation and retention, both of which are essential to delivering exceptional service and programs. In this session, we'll explore five powerful communication strategies that are essential for resolving workplace conflicts with confidence and skill. By mastering these techniques, you'll be better equipped to foster a collaborative environment where challenges are addressed constructively, and your team is empowered to thrive. Join us to transform difficult conversations into opportunities for growth and success.

Purpose-Based Recognition: Recognizing, Rewarding and Retaining Staff

Lori A. Hoffner – Supporting CommUnity, Inc.

Did you know that turnover costs the U.S. economy a staggering \$5 trillion? How does this impact your organization's bottom line? In this session, you'll learn how a Purpose-Based Recognition program can significantly reduce turnover, foster employee buy-in, and create an inclusive environment that celebrates the diversity of personalities and perspectives. Lori will guide you in identifying leadership goals and responsibilities within a recognition program designed to retain your most valuable asset: your employees. Embrace the unique strengths of your team to cultivate support, enthusiasm, and a lasting commitment to your organization.

Helping Teens Understand the Value of Leadership

Lori A. Hoffner – Supporting CommUnity, Inc.

Leadership begins with personal insight, a movement toward and a commitment to continuous improvement of yourself. If your organization has teens in leadership roles through employment or advisory boards, Lori will guide participants to create teen leadership training inspiring teamwork, productivity and positive communication. Participants will be able to demonstrate how teen leadership thrives when young people know who they are, who the adults are supporting them and how to embrace what they stand for.

People Don't Come with Warning Labels: Dealing with Difficult People

Lori Klinka – Dramatic Impact

This program is entertaining and highly informative. Lori uses humorous characterizations to help people learn to resolve conflict and create a more productive work environment. We all have to deal with difficult people. Lori's goal is to have the audience leave with specific skills they can use immediately.

Snapshots to Success

Lori Klinka – Dramatic Impact

Our life is made up of snapshots, significant moments which give us meaning. We're all moving at the speed of life and as Park & Rec professionals you may feel stressed. Lori creates a fun and interactive learning experience to demonstrate her Focus- Capture- Frame approach to feel more energized and inspired. Drawing on her twenty years as a professional actress, Lori portrays a humorous and insightful cast of characters, to help you see how the power of perspective, adjusting your expectations and living in the moment can improve your personal and professional life.

Future-Proof Your Leadership: A Hands-On Guide to Succession Planning

Luke Bolinger – Town of Erie

In this session, you'll learn about how you can identify and work with individuals in your organization and effectively enable them to step into their next role – while maintaining your high performance in your current roles. Succession planning isn't something to think about when someone is planning on leaving; like learning, it is continuous. As a leader in any role, you should be taking a strategic approach for avoiding an undersupply of talent, enhancing your organization's current talent pool, and meeting the organization's future needs. If you aspire to climb the ladder, we'll show how taking a proactive approach by building the skills, relationships, and experiences prepare you for the next role. We'll examine cornerstones like sharing of knowledge, establishing trust, being comfortable with being uncomfortable, and mutual accountability. Finally, we'll walk through a recent scenario of succession planning in practice at the Town of Erie—showcasing what worked well, what didn't, and the challenges we overcame. By the end of this session, you'll have both the mindset and the practical strategies to future-proof your organization's leadership pipeline.

Mentorship Matters: Shaping the Future of Young Professionals

Maggie Sherrill

As the field of Parks & Recreation continues to evolve, it's crucial for both experienced and emerging professionals to engage in meaningful mentorship relationships. This session will explore the dynamic role that mentoring plays in shaping the future of young professionals, and how these relationships foster growth, skill development, and career success. In this interactive presentation, we will discuss practical strategies for more experienced professionals to support and guide the next generation, from providing constructive feedback and career advice to fostering confidence and offering networking opportunities. We will also delve into how young professionals can excel in their careers by seeking out mentors, setting clear career goals, and building a strong professional foundation. Join us for a conversation on the importance of mentoring for both new and seasoned professionals and learn how these relationships are vital to thriving in today's competitive work environment. Whether you're looking to become a mentor or seeking mentorship, this session will provide valuable insights and practical tools for fostering a culture of continuous learning and support in your professional journey.

AI in Aquatics: Your Secret Weapon for Success

Maggie Sherrill

Artificial intelligence (AI) is making waves in the parks and recreation industry, including the world of aquatics. But how can professionals leverage AI effectively while maintaining authenticity and quality in their work? This session will explore the dos and don'ts of using AI in aquatics, from streamlining administrative tasks to enhancing communication, program development and training. Learn the best ways to utilize AI as a tool that complements—rather than replaces—your expertise, and discover strategies to ensure AI-generated content doesn't feel robotic or artificial. Whether you're tech-savvy or new to AI, this session will provide practical, easy-to-implement solutions for integrating AI into your daily operations. Join us to navigate this emerging technology with confidence and make AI work for you—not against you.

Atlas Was a Middle Manager

Mark Snow – Parks, Recreation & Cultural Services City of Colorado Springs

The Greek God Atlas carried the weight of the world on his shoulders - much like middle managers in Parks and Recreation. Serving as the vital link between frontline staff and leadership, middle managers are responsible for translating organizational vision, navigating mid-level decision-making, and fostering communication in both directions. In this session, two experienced middle managers will share their unique journeys into this role, along with the challenges, joys, and lessons they've learned along the way. Through candid discussions, they'll outline the squiggly path that led them to this role, the daily frustrations and joys that come with the position, how they define (and find!) success in this role, and maintaining motivation in this demanding position. Whether you're a current middle manager, aspiring to be one, or looking to better support those in this role, you'll walk away with practical strategies to strengthen leadership, collaboration, and workplace culture.

The Blurry Supervisor

Mark Snow – City of Colorado Springs Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services

Why is supervising so hard? Most supervisors and managers take their marching orders and do their best. Why can't our staff do the same? Why does it feel like our staff challenge us at every turn and our higher-ups ask more of us every day? This session will investigate the blurry employee-manager/supervisor relationship, including expectations, explanations, hopes, and needs. We'll look at how supervisors/managers are a little bit of everything (front line staff, visionaries, therapists, cheerleaders, parents, and friends) and how to set boundaries and be firm. We'll investigate the importance of 'the why' and look at how to coach staff to be successful. Attendees will leave with a better understanding of how to be better employees and supervisor/managers.

The Power of Partnerships in Trail and Bike Park Development

Marty Caivano – International Mountain Bicycling Association

Natural surface trails and bike parks are popular amenities being developed by municipalities all over the country, bringing valuable health, economic and quality of life benefits to their communities. But the best part is that these cities rarely have to do this work alone. Local nonprofit trail organizations, user groups, youth groups and other key partners are often motivated to invest time and money into seeing these projects come to life, from assistance with visioning, planning, fundraising, construction, and even stewardship and maintenance. In addition, qualified trail professionals can offer technical support and contractor services from start to finish, including key community engagement efforts. This session will offer advice on the best ways to leverage these partnerships to create high quality assets that your community will value for years to come.

Accessibility Action Plan: Fostering Inclusivity for Autistic and Sensory-Sensitive Individuals in Parks and Recreation

Meredith Tekin – IBCCES

What can you do to cultivate an atmosphere of inclusivity? One in six individuals has a sensory need or disorder, and one in 36 children are diagnosed with autism, with millions of adults undiagnosed. Discover how to better understand these visitors and community members to ensure your programs and public spaces are welcoming and accessible. This session will explore data, needs, and strategies to understand how to leverage programs and partners for lasting impact.

Laughter & Leadership: Building Resiliency with Positive Psychology

Michael A. Bork – City of Laramie, Wyoming

Leadership is tough sometimes, especially when there is low morale, uncertainty, or organizational change. Understanding the basic tenets of strengths-based positive psychology is one proven pathway to building resiliency in your organization, and learning to lead more effectively with compassion, optimism, and purpose. Join Michael "Mr. Mirth" Bork as he takes you on an experiential journey of discovery, where you will learn about positive psychology and how you can practically use elements of it to become resilient, optimistic, and full of laughter. You will have the chance to gain first-hand experience in non-humor-based laughter exercises, understand how to build resiliency in your organization, and walk away with practical tools to create a more dynamic and optimistic workplace.

Leading Leaders – Setting Extroverts, Introverts & Ambiverts Up for Success

Michelle Stout – Apex Park & Recreation District

Leadership comes in many forms, and the unique personalities of those we lead can significantly impact organizational success. In this session, we'll explore different managerial leadership styles and discuss strategies for building and supporting diverse teams. Learn how to harness your leadership style to enhance decision-making, foster collaboration, and drive innovation within your organization and team. This session is for all extroverts, ambiverts and especially you introverts!

Managing Community Mental Health Crises in Public Recreation Spaces

Paula Stephens, M.A.

This session provides basic, yet essential crisis response and de-escalation skills, helping staff navigate challenging interactions with confidence and compassion. Attendees will learn active listening techniques, behavioral indicators of distress, and suicide awareness strategies, all tailored to public settings. Participants will gain practical tools to enhance safety, build community trust, and ensure staff preparedness when faced with crisis situations. This session is ideal for parks & rec leaders and front-line staff looking to enhance their and their staff's confidence to navigate mental health challenges while maintaining a welcoming and safe environment.

Your Work Matters: How Park & Recreation Professionals Create Lasting Impact

Russ Carson – Community Impact Collaborative

Park and recreation professionals do more than maintain spaces and deliver programs - they build thriving communities. This session will explore how professionals in the field can position themselves as key leaders in creating communities where residents experience health and economic benefits. By blending the latest evidence with real-world examples, attendees will be inspired and ready to drive, real measurable impact in their community.

Parks and Recreation Marketing with AI

Sam Lunt – GovTech Innovators, Inc.

Unlock the potential of Artificial Intelligence in your Parks and Recreation marketing with our AI training course tailored for Parks and Recreation. Dive deep into Large Language Models (LLMs), explore cutting-edge AI tools, and master AI-driven marketing techniques to transform your community engagement and marketing strategies.

Public Engagement - Parks, Trails, & Open Space

Sarah Brooks – KLJ Engineering

Understanding community recreation needs through the public engagement process. Public engagement practices used during the Poncha Springs Parks & Recreation Master Plan and the Mesa County Riverfront Trail Route Alternative Study.

Designing Inclusive Playgrounds that Bring Communities Together in Play

Suzanne Quinn – KOMPAN Play and Fitness

Inclusive playgrounds are an important asset for every community. Learn about the research in inclusive all abilities play on playgrounds and how to design spaces so that all ages and all abilities will want to stay and play. Learn how to design for functionality, fun and equity.

40 from 40 - Lessons. Ideas and Tips From Four Decades in the Profession

Tom Hoby – Jefferson County

Yes, it's a play on ESPN's 30 for 30! We'll cover 40 or more lessons, ideas and tips that have been learned (sometimes the hard way) over forty years in our incredible profession. You may find some of these reinforced your own practices, some that you love and some that you toss. One of the tips is learning something from everyone and every experience you encounter, even if it's something you don't want to incorporate into your professional or personal life. There will be stories and examples and hopefully group support and pushback. Hecklers will be tossed by Bruno and Bertha bouncers from the Garden State.

How to Speak Up: It's Even For Introverts

Tonya Lehman — Joy Lab

Have you ever noticed that certain people do all the talking? You may be thinking to yourself that is a good thing: If other people talk, then I don't have to! But not speaking up keeps you from getting your ideas heard, your values understood, and your needs met. What if there was a solution? In today's interactive presentation you will pick up three tools to help you speak up, even if you are an introvert.

Millennial Parents: Shaping Future Recreation Trends

William Owens — Amilia

Millennial parents are transforming local recreation by driving demand for innovative, accessible, and family-focused programs. This panel, including a Michigan Parks & Recreation Director and a Marketing Expert from Amilia, a leading SaaS provider in the recreation sector, will showcase findings from an exclusive survey and provide actionable strategies for Parks & Recreation agencies to adapt and thrive amidst the ever-evolving preferences and expectations for recreation programming. Discover what millennial parents value most and how these priorities shape their engagement with local programs. Nearly 94% of respondents stated that recreational programs are a core factor in their family's quality of life, underscoring the vital role these services play in fostering stronger community connections. Why this matters now: with 73% of parents planning to increase involvement in recreation activities, this session equips agencies with tools to meet this demand.

Community Friendly & Sports Lighting Trends

Marcelina Marvelli, Chad Menke — Musco

Sports lighting technology is rapidly changing and staying informed will lead to better playing experiences, increased time efficiency, safer communities and a better fan experience. Sports lighting has advanced into the world of LED, color lights, music and shows! The attendee will walk away learning the principles necessary to lessen the environmental impact when lighting your sports facilities while maintaining safe play and protecting their neighbors.

Positive Motivation: Getting the Most Out of Staff Members by Leading with Empathy

Positive Coaching Alliance (via NRPA)

Creating a positive, safe and motivating environment for your staff and volunteers starts with leaders and managers within your park and recreation agency. This highly interactive workshop led by Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA) provides attendees with the tools to build meaningful, understanding relationships with and amongst their team – and unlock the many benefits that a positive culture can provide. Attendees of this research-based workshop will learn how to seamlessly integrate empathy and positive motivation into everyday management by creating strong connections, listening to employees and understanding how individuals' experiences impact how they show up to work everyday. Attendees will take away tangible tools and tips to create a positive, empathetic environment with their staff, so all members feel safe, seen, heard and valued. The tools taught in PCA courses are researched-based behavioral concepts honed over the past three decades and can help make your organization and team members more productive, more positive and more aligned in their goals. With the cultural and emotional challenges that individuals have faced over the last few years, the need to create a positive work environment that promotes mental well-being has never been more important.

