

Men of CMCP Forum: Leading with Intention: Lessons from the Inside Seat (Conversation with Che Chang)

California Minority Counsel Program

2026 Men of CMCP Summit

Date and time: Wednesday, April 22, 2026 - 11:15 am - 12:45 pm

Title: Men of CMCP Forum: Leading with Intention: Lessons from the Inside Seat - A Conversation with Che Chang

Session Description: This program examines how attorneys develop from legal practitioners into trusted advisors and leaders. Through a conversation with Che Chang, the session will explore how lawyers build credibility with executives, influence decisions without formal authority, communicate legal risk in high-stakes environments, and exercise judgment where business urgency, innovation, and legal uncertainty intersect. Attendees will gain practical insight into leadership skills relevant to the practice of law, including executive communication, strategic counseling, decision-making under pressure, and professional development within legal organizations.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this program, participants will be able to:

1. Identify behaviors that help attorneys build credibility with executives, clients, and colleagues.
2. Recognize ways lawyers can influence decisions without formal authority.
3. Analyze approaches to communicating legal risk and practical advice in high-stakes environments.
4. Distinguish between technical legal issue-spotting and strategic legal counseling.
5. Apply mentorship and sponsorship concepts to professional growth in the legal profession.

Moderator: Eric Casher (Redwood Public Law)

Speaker: Che Chang (OpenAI)

CA MCLE: 1.0 HR in General Credit

Outline

Topic 1 – The Leadership Journey: From Lawyer to Trusted Advisor

Trusted advisors tend to:

- understand the organization's or client's goals;
- provide clear, actionable advice rather than abstract issue-spotting;
- distinguish between legal risk, business risk, reputational risk, and operational risk;
- communicate with judgment, candor, and perspective;
- earn confidence over time through consistency and reliability.

For attorneys, this shift requires moving beyond the question, "What is legally possible?" to also address, "What is the best course of action under the circumstances?"

Practice Point

A lawyer becomes more valuable when advice is not limited to identifying problems, but also includes practical options, likely consequences, and a recommended path forward.

Topic 2 – Building Credibility Early

Credibility is often built through repeated demonstrations of preparation, judgment, responsiveness, and professionalism. Junior lawyers may assume credibility comes primarily from expertise, but in practice it often comes from a combination of competence and trustworthiness.

Behaviors that tend to build credibility early include:

- being consistently prepared;
- meeting deadlines and following through on commitments;
- presenting advice clearly and concisely;
- understanding the audience before communicating;
- demonstrating sound judgment about what matters most;
- admitting uncertainty when necessary and resolving it promptly.

Common mistakes that weaken influence include:

- overemphasizing legal complexity without offering practical guidance;
- speaking in a way that is too technical for the audience;
- treating every issue as equally urgent;
- confusing visibility with value;
- defaulting to “no” without exploring lawful alternatives.

Practice Point

Executives and clients often remember whether a lawyer was clear, practical, and reliable more than whether the lawyer offered the most exhaustive analysis.

Topic 3 – Leadership Without Title

Leadership in legal practice does not depend entirely on title. Attorneys often lead by shaping analysis, improving decision-making, identifying risk, coordinating stakeholders, and modeling professionalism.

Lawyers without formal authority can lead by:

- framing issues clearly for decision-makers;
- improving the quality of the conversation;
- identifying options and tradeoffs;
- building alignment across teams;
- remaining calm and credible under pressure;
- mentoring more junior colleagues.

Influence without authority is especially important in legal settings, where attorneys may advise business leaders, clients, or internal teams but do not make the final decision themselves. In those situations, influence depends on trust, clarity, timing, and judgment.

Practice Point

A lawyer can lead a matter, a client relationship, or a strategic discussion long before holding a managerial title.

Topic 4 – Navigating High-Stakes Environments

Attorneys are often called upon to advise in situations involving incomplete facts, compressed timelines, conflicting stakeholder interests, and significant legal or reputational risk. In these settings, good lawyering requires both analysis and composure.

A practical framework for high-stakes legal advising includes:

1. **Clarify the decision.** Identify exactly what decision must be made and by whom.
2. **Identify the legal and non-legal risks.** Distinguish legal exposure from business, regulatory, operational, and reputational concerns.
3. **Assess what is known and unknown.** Be explicit about uncertainty, factual gaps, and assumptions.
4. **Present realistic options.** Avoid binary framing when lawful alternatives exist.
5. **Recommend a path forward.** Lawyers add value when they provide judgment, not just a menu of concerns.
6. **Communicate with discipline.** In high-pressure environments, concise and calm communication builds confidence.

Practice Point

In difficult moments, decision-makers often need a lawyer who can reduce confusion, identify the true pressure points, and explain the implications of each available option.

Topic 5 – Executive Presence and Influence

Executive presence for lawyers is not merely a matter of style or confidence. In professional terms, it reflects whether an attorney communicates with clarity, composure, and judgment in ways that inspire confidence from clients, executives, judges, or colleagues.

For attorneys, executive presence often includes:

- speaking with precision and restraint;
- listening carefully before reacting;
- tailoring advice to the audience;
- knowing when to escalate concerns and when to continue gathering facts;
- maintaining steadiness in difficult conversations;
- projecting credibility without overstating certainty.

Strategic influence also requires understanding the difference between a legal gatekeeper and a strategic advisor. A gatekeeper may focus only on identifying barriers. A strategic advisor identifies legal concerns while also helping others navigate toward an informed and workable solution.

Practice Point

Influence increases when a lawyer is known for helping people make better decisions, not simply for pointing out what cannot be done.

Topic 6 – Authenticity, Identity, and Leadership

Lawyers often navigate questions of identity, authenticity, and belonging throughout their careers. For diverse attorneys in particular, leadership development can involve deciding how to remain authentic while meeting the expectations of professional environments.

Authenticity in leadership does not require sharing every personal view or style preference. Rather, it involves acting in a manner that is consistent, principled, and credible. Attorneys who lead effectively are often those who understand their values, communicate with integrity, and avoid imitating leadership styles that do not fit them.

At the same time, professional judgment matters. Lawyers must adapt to audience, context, and responsibility. The challenge is not choosing between authenticity and professionalism, but learning how to integrate them.

Practice Point

Authenticity is most effective when paired with self-awareness, discipline, and a clear sense of professional purpose.

Topic 7 – Leading Through Innovation and Uncertainty

Attorneys working in emerging industries or rapidly evolving environments are often required to advise where the facts are changing quickly and legal frameworks may be unsettled. In such circumstances, lawyers must be especially skilled at navigating ambiguity.

Important capabilities include:

- issue spotting in novel situations;
- distinguishing settled law from unresolved questions;
- advising with appropriate caution while enabling responsible innovation;
- collaborating across legal, policy, compliance, and business teams;
- updating advice as facts and legal standards evolve.

When rules are unsettled, lawyers should avoid false certainty. Instead, strong legal advisors explain the current landscape, identify possible developments, and help decision-makers understand the range of risk.

Practice Point

In uncertain environments, the most effective lawyers are not those who pretend certainty exists, but those who can guide action responsibly despite uncertainty.

Topic 8 – Mentorship, Sponsorship and Paying It Forward

Mentorship and sponsorship both matter in the legal profession, but they serve different functions.

- Mentorship typically involves guidance, feedback, perspective, and support.
- Sponsorship involves advocacy—using one’s credibility or influence to create opportunities for another attorney.

Career advancement often depends on both. Lawyers should seek mentors who will provide honest guidance and sponsors who are willing to advocate for them in meaningful professional settings.

Attorneys can build these relationships by:

- seeking feedback from respected professionals;

- maintaining relationships over time rather than only when help is needed;
- demonstrating reliability and readiness for opportunity;
- being clear about goals and development areas;
- reciprocating through preparation, gratitude, and strong performance.

Leaders also have an important role in developing others. Supporting the next generation of attorneys strengthens teams, organizations, and the profession as a whole.

Practice Point

Mentors talk with you; sponsors talk about you in rooms you are not in.

Suggested Resources

These materials support the program's focus on attorney leadership, strategic counseling, executive communication, legal judgment, and professional development within the practice of law.

1. David Maister, *The Trusted Advisor*
2. Bloomberg Law, "Building Executive Presence Is a Learnable Skill for Lawyers"
3. Herminia Ibarra, *Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader*
4. Association of Corporate Counsel, *A Lawyer's Guide to Leadership: Ten Ways to Boost Your Strategic Contribution*
5. ABA Law Practice, *Lawyer Leadership Resource Center*
6. Chip Heath & Dan Heath, *Decisive*
7. Harvard Law School Executive Education, leadership materials
8. McKinsey, "The Future of Legal: Skills Lawyers Need in a Changing Industry"
9. Coqual, *The Sponsor Effect*
10. Harvard Business Review, "Why Sponsorship Is Key to Career Advancement"
11. California Lawyers Association, leadership and professional development resources