BRANDED/*u* PRESENTS

MAVERICKS

WE HAVE NOT BEEN TAUGHT HOW TO WORK *TOGETHER*

A white paper based on the 2026 Maverick Summit
hosted by BrandedU at Adyen in Amsterdam, 13 April 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the Netherlands, women have outnumbered men in higher education since the year 2000. Yet women hold just 17% of executive board seats, earn 32% less per year than men and the Netherlands has dropped to 43rd globally for gender equality, falling 15 places in a single year. The education and the talent are there but the career progression is not.
On 13 April 2026, BrandedU gathered male leaders from KLM, Booking.com, Accenture, Invest International and Van Lanschot Kempen for an afternoon of open discussion on gender equality and the role of men in the workplace. The Mavericks Summit (men as advocates for women in the workplace) took place at Ayden in Amsterdam and it was a conversation about masculinity, privilege, psychological safety and the practical reality of advocating for women in environments that are not always ready to hear it. Individual acts of advocacy matter — but without structural change, they are not enough. The men with the most capacity to disrupt inequitable systems are the same ones currently benefiting from them. This paper is for those willing to change that.

BACKGROUND

THE COST OF KEEPING THINGS AS THEY ARE

Countless studies confirm what many already know intuitively: diverse teams perform better, make smarter decisions and build more resilient organizations[1]. Yet the question persists, **why are there still so few women at the top?**

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index 2025, The Netherlands ranks first in the world for educational gender parity: women and men access higher education at equal rates, with women outnumbering men in Dutch universities for 23 consecutive years[2]. Yet the same index places the Netherlands 43rd overall, and 90th in the world for women's representation in senior leadership. Only 17% of executive board roles at the country's 82 listed companies are held by women[3]. In 2024, women earned on average 32% less than men[4].

We have educated women, the talent is there, but not enough of them are getting into leadership positions. And this is not a matter of just fairness, there is a huge loss in potential, innovation and growth.

17%

of C-suite roles at listed Dutch companies are held by women.

32%

lower gross annual wages for women than men in The Netherlands.

[1]Yang et al., Gender-diverse teams produce more novel and higher-impact scientific ideas, PNAS, 2022. Okatta, Ajayi & Olawale, Enhancing organizational performance through diversity and inclusion initiatives, 2024.
Wu, Richard, Triana & Zhang, The performance impact of gender diversity in the top management team and board of directors, 2022.
[2] CBS, More women than men in higher education for 23 consecutive years, 2023.
[3] Lückerath-Rovers, M., Female Board Index 2025, TIAS/Tilburg University, 2025.
[4] WomenInc & Stichting Loonwijzer, lifetime earnings gap calculation, cited in Kamerstuk 35157, nr. 3, Dutch House of Representatives, 2019.

So the question is not how much gender equity costs, but how much is lost by companies failing to unlock the full capability of female talent.

Six years ago, BrandedU received a critical piece of advice from **Maarten van Rossum, Head of Strategy at &Fluence.** To achieve gender equality, men must join the conversation and take action. As Maarten noted, men can be effective allies by engaging other men, doing nothing is often the easiest choice, but men actually listen more to other men.

This is amplified by the research done by Heather Rasinski and Alexander Czopp. They found that **people are more readily persuaded by those who resemble them**. In their study of how observers respond to confrontations about racially biased comments, white participants were more convinced by white confronters than by black ones, and rated the black confronters as more hostile for saying the same thing[5]. The messenger, shapes how the message lands. The study found that a similar mechanism applies to those who advocate for diversity in the workplace. When men advocate for change, other men listen differently. Boston Consulting Group's research confirms this: **companies where men are actively involved in gender diversity initiatives are more than three times as likely to report progress[6].**

The Mavericks program was built on this premise: a structured initiative designed to engage male leaders in large corporations as advocates for gender equity. The goal is culture change and it starts with men developing a clear understanding of their own role in either sustaining or disrupting the systems that keep talented women out of the room.

A Maverick is someone who goes beyond allyship for women in the workplace and therefore challenges the status quo. This paper talks about the power of small actions carried out by men that can lead to more Maverick behaviour in the workplace and how this can change the way things are.

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[5] Chugh, D., Use Your Everyday Privilege to Help Others, Harvard Business Review, 18 September 2018.
[6] Boston Consulting Group, *Five Ways Men Can Improve Gender Diversity at Work*, April 2017.

THE MAVERICKS, MEN AS ADVOCATES FOR WOMEN'S VISIBILITY

Since 2021, BrandedU has organised Men as Advocates events that place male leaders at the centre of a conversation that is too often left to women alone. Gender equity is not a women's issue, it is everyone's issue. And the men who currently benefit most from the status quo are the ones with the most capacity to change things.

With a desire to go deeper and reach more men in the workplace, BrandedU developed a structured, in-company training initiative. **The Mavericks program is a three-part course designed to build a diverse and inclusive workplace where everyone feels safe and genuinely belongs.**

PART 1 *Get to Know* Awareness & understanding	**PART 2** *Get to Feel* Acceptance & ownership	**PART 3** *Get to Act* Commitment & action
Get to grips with the facts, figures and real challenges around gender equality at work. This session builds the foundation that everything else rests on.	Discover how you can show up as a supportive colleague in a way that plays to your natural strengths. This session moves from understanding into personal ownership.	Build a concrete action plan for your workplace and set a clear picture of where you want to be in a year from now. This session turns intention into momentum.

ABOUT THE SUMMIT

THE 2026 MAVERICKS MANEL

On 13 April 2026, BrandedU hosted the fourth edition of the Mavericks Summit at Adyen's offices in Amsterdam. The event brought together professionals from different backgrounds for an afternoon of panel discussions, storytelling, Q&A and structured conversation on what male advocacy looks like in practice.

The 2026 edition was hosted by Nancy Poleon, founder of BrandedU, and featured a manel of five male leaders drawn from across industries:

- **Amir Attari**, Technology Delivery Lead at Accenture
- **Bas Rapati**, Chief Analytics Officer at Van Lanschot Kempen
- **Iain Duncan**, Director of Engineering, Software at Booking.com
- **Jasper Klapwijk**, Manager Business Development and Health Lead at Invest International
- **Jeffrey Liong A Kong**, Passenger Service Lead at KLM

The session was rounded out by the Maverick program coaches Heena Jethwa, Edvina Babic and Caroline Pickard and the audience participants.

SESSION ONE

REDEFINING MASCULINITY: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MAN?

Before it is possible to talk about advocacy, it is necessary to talk about where men start, what they were taught, what they absorbed from their environments and what they continue to carry into the workplace. Research shows that most men reject "real men" stereotypes. However, many go along with the expected attitudes and behaviors because they think their peers endorse them[7]. Men need to take part in the conversation because gender equity frees everyone, not only women.

The panel started with a simple question: what did it mean for you growing up, when people told you to "be a man"?

[7] Catalyst CT, Men's Mental Health and the Burden of Masculinity, 9 November 2022.

Bas Rapati described growing up in a traditional Dutch city with a highly traditional father. From an early age, he decided he did not want to replicate how his father treated women. That decision became a guiding principle throughout his career, not a moment of dramatic confrontation, but a quiet, persistent orientation toward something different. “I still have a lot to learn,” he said, “but it’s step by step”.

Jeffrey Liong A. Kong was taught by his parents to be strong, responsible and to take care of his sisters. He had to be a man.

Today, men are still struggling to break free from all these expectations in the workplace. Rapati expressed how it is often hard to tap into the emotional part. It is easy to talk about data and numbers, but not necessarily to discuss feelings, insecurities, or one’s failures. “If you are never taught to do so, it becomes very hard to tap into that”.

[8]Diversity Resources, Allyship vs. Advocacy: What's the Difference? Available at: diversityresources.com/allyship-vs-advocacy-whats-the-difference

FROM ALLYSHIP TO ADVOCACY

While often used interchangeably, allyship and advocacy have distinct roles. Allyship focuses on support; advocacy pushes for systemic change and influences decision-makers. **Advocates use their privilege to bring attention to these issues and help advocate for change**[8]. The difference is action.

An example of male advocacy is the story of Marie Curie and how her contributions to radioactive research were nearly left off the Nobel Prize announcement entirely. It was Pierre Curie who refused to accept the prize unless Marie's name was included, insisting she was not his assistant but a full collaborator. His stand forced the committee to reconsider[9]. Pierre Curie was a Maverick because he used his position of privilege to ensure that credit went where credit was due.

The same principle applies in today's organizations. Women's contributions are regularly absorbed into the mainstream without attribution. Their ideas are ignored in meetings until a man repeats them[10]. Men are nearly three times as likely to interrupt a woman as they are to interrupt another man[11]. Women speak up once, formally, during annual evaluations, while men build informal access to decision-makers throughout the year[12]. These are the quiet injustices of ordinary working life and where advocacy does its most important work.

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[8]Diversity Resources, Allyship vs. Advocacy: What's the Difference? Available at: diversityresources.com/allyship-vs-advocacy-whats-the-difference

[9]Literary Hub, When Marie Curie Was Almost Excluded from Winning the Nobel Prize.

[10] The term 'hepeating,' coined by physicist Nicole Gugliucci, describes the pattern of a woman's idea being ignored until a man repeats it. The phenomenon was documented among White House female staffers in the Obama administration, reported in The Washington Post (2016).

[11]Snyder, K., How to Get Ahead as a Woman in Tech: Interrupt Men, Slate, 2014. Confirmed directionally by Hancock et al., George Washington University, 2014.

[12] McKinsey & Company / LeanIn.Org, Women in the Workplace, 2018. See also Mickey, E., The Organization of Networking and Gender Inequality, Gender, Work & Organization, 2022.

ALLYSHIP	ADVOCACY
Passive. Showing support, agreement and solidarity. Valuable, but insufficient on its own.	Active. Using the influence and position you actually have to change something for someone who has less.

Kong offered a recent, concrete example. Four female agents on his team had fixed a GPS system failure during a major flight disruption, with no IT background. He wrote a formal email to management crediting each of them by name. They received the recognition. "It was the obvious thing to do," he said. But it is also, in many organizations, the exception rather than the norm.

UNWRITTEN RULES AND CREATING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

For a very long time, we have been told the same story. Being a leader means showing authority, strength, assertiveness. Men adhered to this narrative and built systems around it. When women started entering the workplace, they were the minority. They shrunk themselves and tried to fit in a system that wasn't built for them. **They learned there was only one way to reach the top: acting like a man.**

In the 1970s, Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes studied the "imposter phenomenon" in high achieving women[13]. Despite their success, women described persistent self-doubt and a tendency to attribute their accomplishments to luck or timing rather than ability. This concept started gaining traction and then shifted to imposter syndrome. For decades, we have been told that this *syndrome*[14] is a women's issue, but this is really about systemic barriers.

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[13]Clance, P.R. & Imes, S.A., The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women, Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice, 1978.

[14] Melbourne Business School, Imposter Syndrome Isn't Real, But the Feelings Are.

It is understandable for one to feel inadequate and feel discomfort when they are doing something new, in a room full of people who don't look like them and where they may feel unsupported. It is also especially hard to behave like yourself in an environment where it is not safe to do so and that was not built for you. This is what we are talking about, how to create that safe space.

Panelists were asked: **what have you changed in your behavior or team culture to make authenticity feel safe for others?**

Kong described starting from himself. He made himself approachable by sharing his own uncertainties with his team, naming his failures. When a black woman came to him privately to report a racist remark made by a colleague, she felt safe enough to speak because of the trust he had built. He took it to management, the situation was addressed and she was supported.

As one of the Mavericks program coaches, Edvina Babic, explained: "A lot of times we talk about raising awareness, but awareness never comes from explanation only. It actually comes from contrast". When you have been part of a system that has always worked for you, and it suddenly stops, that's when you understand unwritten rules and how they may not work the same for everyone. This contrast also shows up when, with small actions, we deliberately shed light on these dynamics.

It is not enough to build a diverse team and then assume the work is done. Inclusion requires ongoing attention and conversation. Creating a workplace where people can be themselves requires more than policy. It requires leaders who model openness and then act on what they hear. Large gestures matter, but it is the accumulation of small choices; who you redirect attention toward in a meeting, whose name you mention when recommending someone for an opportunity, whether you go back to the person who was just interrupted and invite them to finish their thought that shapes culture over time.

“One thing that organizations often get wrong, is talking about psychological safety as a concept whilst in real life it’s actually the small things, the small behaviors that we are most of the time not aware of”, said Edvina Babic. “Things like interrupting someone or dominating a room while others stay silent. Feeling safe to say things that are actually unacceptable. Or simply failing to introduce a colleague”. These small things are where culture is made and unmade, quietly every working day. To change a system, we need those who benefit from it to take action and for them to do so, we need to raise awareness.

Rapati offered a compelling illustration of what changes when those small choices accumulate. Five years ago, his team of eleven had just one woman. A male colleague challenged him directly: when does real diversity start? Rapati took it seriously. Today his department of 90 is 52% female, with a 60% female leadership team. He did not achieve this through a single policy decision. He took a more intentional approach to recruitment, promotion decisions, and the norms he modeled, aiming to ensure fairness and consistency.

This session explored what organizations routinely overlook: unwritten rules. At one company, a sponsor revealed to a woman on his team that men came to him throughout the year to discuss their achievements, projects and ambitions, while women showed up once at the formal evaluation. The system was not designed to exclude women, but it was excluding them all the same. Naming the unwritten rule is the first step toward changing it.

SESSION TWO

HEALTHY MASCULINITY IN THE WORKPLACE

The second session opened with the same question but took it a step further: It did not only ask what masculinity was, but what a healthier version of it could look like in practice in the workplace today.

For Iain Duncan, the answer begins with a single word: **vulnerability**. He described spending years performing a version of himself that felt disconnected from who he actually was, a mask worn for different environments, a different register for the office than for home. He referenced the Japanese concept of Tatemae, the public face worn in society, set against Honne, a person's true self. The gap between the two is where energy is lost and authenticity dies. When that gap closes, something shifts. "It brings freedom," he said. "And that makes me better in the office and better at home."

For Jasper Klapwijk, the distinction that shaped his thinking was between process and content. Masculinity, as he sees it, is fundamentally about process: how you behave, how you present, how you occupy space. **A healthier version of leadership prioritizes content, the ideas in the room, the contributions being made, the people who are not yet speaking.** He acknowledged that interrupting is a deeply masculine habit, one he has had to work to recognize and unlearn.

Amir Attari comes from a background in which highly masculine norms were the default. He connected the conversation to a practical argument. **Any team, any department, any company that fails to create genuine space for women is simply underperforming relative to what it could be.** The question is not whether inclusion is the right thing to do. The question is whether organizations can afford not to.

PRIVILEGE AND WHAT TO DO WITH IT

The session moved onto discussing privilege, what it means to hold it, when men first recognise it and what they choose to do when they do.

Privilege refers to the unearned advantages that come with belonging to certain social groups: advantages that are often invisible to those who have them[15]. The goal is awareness, not guilt, because privilege unused is not neutral. When you have more access, more credibility, more influence than others and choose not to use it, that is still a choice. And the consequences fall on those with less.

[15] Rider University Library, Understanding Privilege.

Attari described one time when he wanted to include a female colleague returning from maternity leave on a global delivery team. Concerns were raised relating to her period of leave and her capacity to deliver on the project at that time. He asked two questions: does she have the skills? Is she available? The answer to both was yes. She joined the team and thrived; exceeding expectations.

Having lived through apartheid-era in South Africa, in a system where people were killed for the colour of their skin, Duncan had always understood privilege in relation to racial and social inequality. When he stepped into the workplace, he started understanding privilege in terms of race and gender. "I felt I did not deserve any privilege, because I knew how privileged I was". In post-apartheid South Africa he had learned the role of affirmative action and developed an acute sensitivity to what it means to surrender privilege for a greater good. Those who had been discriminated against, were given a chance to step ahead and access opportunities. This was needed to re-establish the balance that had been lost.

If the norm is a man and lots of the time the norm is a white man, that means women need to compete with that norm everyday in the workplace. They start already five steps behind. If leadership pipelines have favoured men for decades, **restoring balance takes more than neutrality, it takes action.**

Klapwijk recalled a formative early-career moment managing activities across country operations across Europe. He asked a question to a country manager and within days an entire team had mobilized as though it were a directive. That was the moment he understood what influence actually meant. The real-time effect of his words on other people's behavior. So he also understood the importance of being more deliberate in what he says and how he presents himself.

The session invited participants to share concrete moments in which they had used their influence to open a door for a woman and invited women to share moments when a man had done that for them.

One audience member described a direct report, a talented product owner who was not investing in her own development and felt stuck. He pushed her toward a stretch assignment outside her existing role, collaborating with a commercial team and increasing her visibility across the organization. She was reluctant but he persisted. She became a team lead in a different department. The intervention was not complex: a phone call to a CIO and the willingness to vouch for someone who had not yet vouched for herself.

Attari's contribution came in the form of a talent review in which a female colleague was being assessed for promotion. When challenged as to her readiness, Amir vocally advocated for her to be promoted based on her strong track record and successes over the past years. This ensured the female colleague was made truly visible during the process and her talent was recognised.

THE MATILDA EFFECT

The Matilda Effect describes the practice of attributing women's ideas, contributions, and achievements to their male counterpart[16]. Originated in STEM fields, this has translated into other areas. An idea proposed by a woman is overlooked in a meeting, then credited to a man who repeats it twenty minutes later. A project delivered by a women team becomes a departmental win without the individuals who built it being named. It is not necessarily malicious, but it is structural and pervasive.

The panel **was** asked: **have you ever taken credit, even unintentionally, for an idea or contribution from a woman in your team and how have you handled it when you realised it?**

Klapwijk was honest: in the pace of organizational life, he has absorbed and forwarded ideas without adequately attributing them. His practice now is to name the source actively and to be specific about what he has used to the provider.

[16] Taylor's University, Herstory: The Matilda Effect on Women in STEM, 2024.

As a Director, Duncan often gets praised for the work of his team. His standard practice now is to deflect the attention to those who delivered the results. For example, by consistently naming a team member in conversations about good work, he inadvertently positioned that individual for promotion, not because the person was the only deserving candidate, but because their name became synonymous with results in the minds of senior leaders. The lesson is double-edged: consistent credit-giving creates visibility; inconsistent credit-giving perpetuates invisibility.

Nancy Poleon brought the story of two women of colour, both senior managers at a well-known consultancy firm, spent more than twenty years giving their best work and ideas to partners who never credited them. When they finally left, both moved directly into C-suite roles at other companies. The loss was the consultancy's because the talent had always been there but it was not recognized.

CORRECTING BEHAVIOR IN HOSTILE ENVIRONMENTS

What would make more men say yes to become advocates in the workplace?

For Duncan, the question brought two words to mind: vulnerability and environment. The two are inseparable. More men would step up, he argued, if the environment made it the norm to do so and the environment only shifts when men model the behaviors themselves. Showing up to a room like this one and opening up. Being the same person here as they are at home. This is not about performing the right language or calling people out. It is about something quieter and more durable: enough men deciding to go first that going first stops feeling exceptional.

For Rapati, the most powerful intervention is direct experience. When a friend called to tell him he had hired a woman, Bas did not offer congratulations. He asked: do you see the benefit on your team? The friend said yes. They spent the rest of the call talking about KPIs. The goal is to create the conditions in which people see for themselves the impact. It would be naive, however, to present this as straightforward.

What about men who feel uncomfortable taking a public stance?

Heena Jethwa, one of the Mavericks program coaches, explained an important concept: "We have to get uncomfortable to have these conversations. And uncomfortable does not have to be to go shout and be on a stage or at a rally. It could be something small, like giving visibility to someone, sponsoring somebody as in advocating for them when they are not in the room, open the door, use your connections. That's not scary". Doing the right thing rarely feels comfortable. That is not a reason to wait until it does. As this paper has shown, the most consequential acts of advocacy are often small, a name mentioned in a meeting, a question asked in a talent review, a colleague invited to finish a sentence. Small, repeated, deliberate; that is what moves the needle.
Gender attitudes are polarising at a pace that is difficult to ignore[17] and the environments in which we operate are not always receptive, safe, or fair. A difficult question came from the audience: what do you do when you see inequitable behavior in an environment that is not safe, not open, and not already receptive?

Duncan has confronted colleagues, above and below him, about behavior that falls short. Not in public, but privately, calling them out on the impact of their actions. "Almost 100% of the time, they say: you're right, I should have known and done better." He said, "In this sense you have to be a man, you have to stand up and consistently show correctional behavior over time". His rule is three strikes, because change takes repetition and accountability requires consistency.

Attari shared a parallel example. A woman colleague was spoken about dismissively in a meeting. He addressed it privately with the colleague responsible, explained the effect of the comments made and turned the moment into a positive learning opportunity.

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[17]Ipsos & Global Institute for Women's Leadership, King's College London, Progress and Polarisation: Global Attitudes Toward Gender Equality in 2025, 8 March 2025.

Correcting behavior does not require making someone a villain. **“It’s not about putting one group against another, it is about making sure that we all rise”** said Caroline Pickard, Maverick program coach.

As Nancy explained, “It starts from awareness and recognizing the mistake. **We have not been taught how to work together”.** The premise for this is having the courage to be vulnerable.
Many who perpetuate inequitable patterns are doing so habitually, because the habit has never been named. The role of the advocate is to name it, create the contrast and give the person the chance to do something different.
Nancy Poleon highlighted an example from Google, where reverse evaluation processes have created structures that make certain kinds of behavior harder to sustain. When a team evaluates its leader, the leaders who thrive are the ones whose behavior holds up to scrutiny from all directions.

CONCLUSIONS

The conversations at the 2026 Mavericks Summit started with a question: **what did it mean, growing up, when someone told you to be a man?** What both sessions showed is that the distance between knowing something needs to change and actually changing it is shorter than most people think. It is not about grand gestures, organisations need the accumulation of small, deliberate choices, made by people who already have the influence and who have decided to use it.

Session One showed that behavior which has never been interrogated cannot be changed. That allyship without action is sympathy and that it doesn't create real change without advocacy. Culture is made and unmade quietly, in the ordinary working life. It is about who you credit, who you redirect attention toward, whose name you say when an opportunity opens. And that none of it is possible without psychological safety: environments where people can show up as themselves, built by leaders willing to model what that looks like.

Session Two made it concrete. Privilege is only useful if you act with it. Credit-giving is a leadership practice, not a courtesy. Correcting inequitable behaviour does not require making someone a villain, it requires naming the habit and giving the person the chance to do something different. So that we all rise together. Advocacy, in its most powerful form, happens in a talent review, in a phone call, in a conversation where someone's name gets said when it might otherwise have been left out.

The panelists in this room described specific moments where they chose to act differently. Those moments suggest a handful of behaviors that any leader can start practicing.

Name the source. When you repeat, forward or build on an idea, say where it came from. In emails, in meetings, in conversations with senior stakeholders.

Say the name. Sponsorship does not require a formal process. It requires mentioning someone in a conversation where their name might not otherwise appear, a promotion discussion, a project allocation, a casual exchange with a decision-maker. And doing this consistently creates visibility.

Go back to the person who was interrupted. When someone is cut off in a meeting, returning to them *"I'd like to hear the rest of what you were saying"* is one of the smallest and most powerful signals a leader can send about whose voice counts.

Ask the uncomfortable question. In talent reviews, in team meetings, in one-to-ones: challenge assumptions and question decision-making processes. Questions create the contrast that makes invisible patterns visible.

Name the habit, not the person. When you witness inequitable behavior, address it. Not to shame, but to name. Most people are not acting maliciously, they are acting habitually. Giving someone the chance to do something different is itself an act of advocacy.

Model the behavior, starting with vulnerability. The environment shifts when enough men decide to go first. Show up as yourself, name your failures alongside your wins. When you close the gap between your public and private self, you signal to everyone around you that it is safe to do the same. Vulnerability, when modeled, is contagious.

We need to realise that **there is a cost to inaction**. Every year that passes without change represents potential that goes unrealised, talent that walks out the door, and innovation that never arrives. The Maverick Program exists because the alternative is unacceptable and because the men who are willing to act, supported by a community of peers, can make a difference that goes far beyond what any of them could achieve alone. Even when these acts are small, they accumulate and create a ripple effect.

"Many small people in many small places doing many small things can alter the face of an organization." That is the Maverick proposition said Nancy Poleon.

— Quote from the Berlin wall

Based on the conversations in this room, it is already proving true.

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Nancy Poleon
Founder BrandedU
May, 2026.

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