

Case Study

Engineering & Infrastructure



COMPANY OVERVIEW

VHB is a 100% employee-owned engineering, science, and planning firm with offices across the eastern United States. The firm operates across six markets — transportation, built environment, energy, institutions, real estate, and both public and private sectors — serving clients from port authorities and state DOTs to healthcare systems and commercial developers.

CHALLENGE

VHB's incoming President was unveiling a 2035 vision at the firm's marquee annual event. The keynote needed to build excitement around Human+AI collaboration among 450 employee-owners — some of whom quietly feared AI would devalue their professional expertise.

SOLUTION

A bespoke 90-minute interactive keynote and workshop — "SuperCollaboration: Cyborgs, Centaurs and the Rise of Human+AI Collaboration" — customised around the incoming President's 2035 strategic vision.

AUDIENCE

450 employee-owners including engineers, planners, scientists, designers, and senior leadership.

LOCATION

Convene at Field Place, New York City.

RESULTS

The keynote directly supported the CEO succession moment, equipped employee-owners with practical AI collaboration frameworks, and generated table-level strategic ideas that leadership subsequently incorporated into the firm's 2035 planning process.



James Taylor delivers bespoke SuperCollaboration keynote at VHB's Annual Partners Event during pivotal CEO succession in New York City

ABOUT THE ENGAGEMENT

VHB held its Annual Partners Event in New York City at a moment of significant transition. The firm's incoming President was stepping into the role with an ambitious 2035 vision centred on the intersection of human intelligence and artificial intelligence — and the annual gathering of 450 employee-owners would be the platform to share that vision for the first time. The challenge was more specific than a standard AI keynote. VHB's engineers, scientists, and planners had already adopted AI tools in their daily work. The task was to accelerate adoption among the roughly 25% who remained hesitant, and to position VHB as a sector leader in an industry that traditionally moves slowly on technology — all while aligning precisely with the incoming President's message.

The Preparation

James conducted an extensive customisation process designed to serve the succession moment as much as the content itself.

- Stakeholder Interviews: Following an initial briefing with the event planning team, James conducted one-on-one interviews with VHB's incoming President and his executive team — uncovering both the 2035 strategic ambitions and the unspoken tensions in the room, particularly the fear among longer-tenured employees that AI would diminish the value of their hard-won expertise.
- Psychometric Audience Analysis: James used AI tools to profile the attendee group, identifying a room that prizes evidence, practicality, and real-world application. This shaped the decision to anchor the session in engineering-sector case studies from comparable firms rather than generic tech-industry examples.
- Content Alignment: James worked with the event team to ensure his session dovetailed with the President's and COO's remarks earlier in the day — reinforcing the central theme of "Transforming Tomorrow, Today" without overlap.

The Delivery

The 90-minute session followed James's 4P framework — Position, Problem, Possibilities, Proposal — building from where VHB and the industry stand today, through the specific barriers slowing adoption, to cross-industry case studies from comparable firms, and closing with practical frameworks for immediate action.

A central section addressed the Competency Penalty — research showing that employees, particularly women and older workers, avoid using AI for fear colleagues will judge them as less competent. For an employee-owned firm where professional reputation is currency, this struck a nerve. James delivered a three-step framework for breaking the penalty: mapping adoption hotspots, spotlighting role models who demonstrate that AI use and professional excellence coexist, and removing "AI-assisted" labels from internal work products.

The keynote transitioned into a workshop built around VHB-specific OUTrageous Statements — ten provocative "what if" scenarios written specifically for the firm:

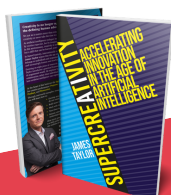
Sample OUTrageous Statements — VHB 2035

- What if VHB gave every client a single AI concierge for the entire lifecycle of a project?"
- What if VHB trained AI on its top-performing planners and used it to coach the rest?"

Working at 35 round tables, employee-owners debated which outrageous ideas might contain the seed of a real strategic initiative. Several of these ideas were subsequently taken forward by VHB's leadership team into the firm's 2035 planning process.

The Conclusion

The engagement concluded by connecting VHB's employee-ownership culture to the collaboration thesis. In an industry where the instinct is to protect individual expertise, the keynote reframed AI as a tool that amplifies rather than replaces professional judgement. The closing tied directly to the incoming President's vision: VHB's competitive advantage in 2035 won't be the technology itself — it will be what 450 employee-owners build when they collaborate, with each other and with AI, across disciplines and markets.



SuperCreativity:
Accelerating Innovation in the Age of
Artificial Intelligence

**Creativity is no longer optional. It
is fast becoming the defining
human advantage.**



James
Taylor
KEYNOTE SPEAKER

About James Taylor

James Taylor is an award-winning entrepreneur, author, host, and inspiring keynote speaker on a global mission to unlock creativity, increase productivity and accelerate innovation.