Real estate leaders gear up for radical meeting in the desert

On Monday a set of curious, smart and influential real estate people from around the country will ditch their office for the desert and the chance to make history at Disconnect in Palm Springs.

Together almost 200 attendees reflect the diverse and dynamic industry they serve, with startup entrepreneurs; disruptive company founders; top-producing practitioners; owners of brokerages big and small; coaches; executives across new and old franchisors; MLS and association leaders; big data experts; and technology giants all in the mix.

Industry faces both familiar and fresh will be challenged by real estate outsiders including a military officer, a Netflix executive, an educator, three activist religious leaders, three world-class investors and the Golden State Warriors general manager who will share new ways of thinking about leadership in business and in the world.

Despite their varied and colorful backgrounds, these leaders come to the desert with essential common ground: the inability to settle for the way things are, the desire to act decisively and enact change, and something to contribute to a conversation about changing the industry.

“Together, across divides, these people can alter the course of the industry,” said Brad Inman, publisher of Inman. “Competitors, disruptors, disrupted, old guard and new guard with a purpose, all in one place, rallying around changes that most folks in the industry want.”

This is a purpose-driven gathering, a first of its kind, where sitting back half-listening isn’t the point. Neither are title or position. There will be no name badges.

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“Leaders must be focused business people but we must also be more purposeful and play a bigger role in our communities and in the world,” said Sherry Chris, CEO and president of Better Homes and Gardens Real Estate. “Inman has designed a purposeful conference, the timing is perfect for this new-styled leadership gathering.”

The ideas to be discussed came from Inman readers who responded to a comprehensive survey on leadership, posted comments to stories on the subject, engaged on social platforms and wrote Inman publisher Inman more than 1,000 emails on issues they were passionate about.

“There is an end game. We’re trading ballrooms, presentations and notebooks for hikes, spirited outdoor discussions and a manifesto for change. Leaders will get the chance to speak up and argue for the issues that they believe the industry must unite behind,” said Inman.

“Despite attracting many of the industry’s playmakers, Disconnect isn’t about status or showboating,” said RealScout’s Andrew Flachner on why he’s coming to the desert. “It’s a forum to strategize about real estate’s key issues with the people who can influence them … the setting of Disconnect breaks the monotony of rapid-fire meetings, rather, there’s an opportunity to connect with people on a much deeper level.”

“This is my passion and purpose,” said attendee Colette Ching, an Operating Principal for Keller Williams, who’s looking forward to sharing her personal experiences and perspective as a leader of 11 years. Accelerating diverse women to leadership positions is one of the critical issues on her list.

“I think the single biggest opportunity is if companies started developing a relentless focus on removing the pain points of the client’s experience in the transaction,” said real estate coach and 29-year industry veteran Tom Ferry. “Someone taking an Amazon approach from the top of the funnel through the end of the transaction … putting that into a platform and making it available for every agent. I think whoever does that first is going to transform the industry.”

The event all kicks off Monday with a call to action from publisher Inman to craft a “Declaration of Freedom from the Old Ways,” to forge a consensus together over three days to do what is best for the consumer and the industry. Then the former chief talent officer of Netflix will inspire leaders to live their best, bold and only life.

On Tuesday groups will divide and conquer — some on horseback, others by foot — to talk through what great leaders are made of; leading across cultural divides; transforming a legacy company; appreciating the old, new and modern; quick decision-making and radical transparency. Later, a series of conversations on the lawn will spark discussion on open data, affordable housing, great service, climate change, agent quality and association reform.

Starting on Monday, attendees who are passionate about a particular issue will sport a specifically colored wristband. They then have two days to get others to wear that color in support of their issue.

“One of the critical challenges facing real estate, I believe, is the lack of young, educated management talent to repopulate the countless senior positions as baby boomers approach retirement,” said retired real estate industry top-producer and legend John Aaroe. “I would like to see professional real estate be just that. Professional.”

And Wednesday the real work begins. Attendees will debate the ideas put forth over two days and craft a real estate leadership manifesto documenting a set of principles to ignite change. The manifesto will extend far beyond the desert to brokerages, associations and tech companies for adoption. Not everyone will agree on the principles but may find a way to join forces for a greater mission: a pact to change the real estate industry for the better, together.

“These folks are emissaries for change, I am counting on them to be bold,” said Inman.

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