

Leading Through the AI Shift: Building Wellington's Leadership Community with Sparked



Overview

Grant Verhoeven is the founder of Sparked, a Wellington-based leadership coaching and facilitation practice dedicated to helping leaders and organisations navigate the human side of technological change. Through initiatives such as AI on the Go, Sparked is helping futureproof Wellington's leadership community by creating practical, peer-driven learning experiences that encourage collaboration, knowledge sharing, and real-world problem-solving.

With that mission in mind, Sparked set out to host 'Leading Through the AI Shift' - an event designed to bring together leaders from across government, business, and the not-for-profit sector to discuss one of the most pressing challenges facing organisations today: how to lead people well through the rapid adoption of AI.

Creative HQ supported the event as a community partner, fostering innovation, leadership capability and cross-sector connections across Wellington.

What happened exceeded expectations.

On 25 June 2026, 22 leaders gathered at Cliftons Wellington for a highly interactive roundtable event. Over 90 minutes, participants shared experiences, explored leadership challenges, and built valuable new connections while discussing the future of leadership in an AI-enabled world.

The event received an impressive satisfaction rating, with attendees praising both the quality of the conversations and the collaborative environment created throughout the evening.

One participant described it simply:

"This was the best event I've been to in a long time."

Another reflected on the depth of discussion:

"The richness of the conversations really stunned me (in a positive way)."



"The quality of the space set the standard for the evening. The catering, the space, and the service were outstanding. Justin and the Cliftons Wellington team were exceptional throughout."

– Grant Verhoeven, Founder of Sparked

The Challenge

Leaders across sectors are facing increasing pressure to navigate technological change while continuing to support and develop their people.

While there is no shortage of discussion about AI technologies, Sparked identified a gap in the market: leaders needed a trusted environment where they could openly discuss the human, organisational, and strategic implications of AI adoption with their peers.

The vision was to create an event that moved beyond presentations and theory, focusing instead on practical conversations, shared learning, and authentic connection.

To achieve that, the event needed a venue and partner capable of creating the right atmosphere from the moment guests arrived.

The Solution

Cliftons Wellington partnered with Sparked to deliver an experience designed around connection, collaboration, and leadership development.

Leaders were welcomed with refreshments and networking opportunities before joining facilitated table discussions. The format included:

- Structured networking
- Facilitated roundtable discussions
- Peer-to-peer knowledge sharing
- Real-world leadership challenges
- Cross-sector participation from business, government, and not-for-profit organisations

The Cliftons team worked closely with Sparked throughout the planning process, ensuring the venue setup, catering, technology, and event flow supported meaningful engagement.

According to the event organiser, the quality of the environment played a key role in the evening's success.

The Impact

The event generated immediate value for attendees and strengthened a growing community of leaders committed to navigating change together.

Strong attendee feedback

- High engagement throughout the evening
- Positive feedback on networking and discussion quality
- Conversations that continued online and through LinkedIn after the event

Building a leadership community

The event forms part of Sparked's broader AI on the Go initiative, which Cliftons Wellington has supported since late 2025.

Over that time:

- Regular events have attracted 20–30 attendees per session
- The community has grown to more than 140 Wellington leaders and professionals
- Members span government, private sector, and not-for-profit organisations
- Discussions focus on leading through technological and organisational transformation

Together, Sparked and Cliftons have helped create a space where Wellington leaders can learn from each other, test ideas, and build confidence in an increasingly complex environment.





Why the Partnership Matters

For Sparked, the relationship with Cliftons goes beyond venue support.

The partnership reflects a shared commitment to helping local initiatives succeed, strengthening the Wellington business community, and supporting leaders through significant change.

"It has been special dealing with a partner that is keen to see local initiatives succeed and support Wellington. Cliftons has also been progressive in helping leaders navigate the changing technology and organisational landscape." - Grant Verhoeven, Founder of Sparked

By supporting events like Leading Through the AI Shift and the wider AI on the Go community, Cliftons is helping create opportunities for meaningful dialogue, leadership development, and cross-sector collaboration.



Looking Ahead

The success of *Leading Through the AI Shift* has created momentum for future events.

Sparked is continuing to build a network of leaders, managers, and decision-makers who are committed to leading effectively through change. Future events will expand participation across government, not-for-profit, and business communities while creating new opportunities for Cliftons clients and connections to join the conversation.

As Wellington organisations continue to adapt to the AI era, the partnership between Sparked and Cliftons demonstrates the value of creating environments where leaders can come together, learn from each other, and shape the future collectively.



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CONNECT WITH US



 **AU:** 1800 629 088
(FREE CALL IN AUSTRALIA)
NZ: 0800 629 088
(FREE CALL IN NEW ZEALAND)

HK: +852 2159 9999
SG: +65 3106 4699
US: +1 855 738 6714
UK: +44 845 528 0524



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