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2026 NORTH COUNTRY LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

Beyond the Paycheck

Building Rural Workforce Resilience Through Employee Benefits

Lake Placid, New York • September 30 – October 1, 2026

Regional Partnerships for Recruitment, Retention & Workforce Wellbeing

SESSION ROADMAP

What We'll Cover Today

01 **The Rural Workforce Challenge**

Why recruitment and retention look different outside metro labor markets

02 **What Employees Want Now**

Compensation is table stakes — benefits are the differentiator

03 **Burnout in Rural Organizations**

Root causes unique to small teams and thin coverage

04 **Benefits as Strategy**

Health, mental health, flexibility, financial wellness, family support

05 **Practical Approaches**

Models rural employers and regional partners are piloting

06 **Building Your Roadmap**

Turning today's ideas into a workforce strategy

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UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

Why Rural Workforce Strategy Needs a Different Playbook

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The Rural Workforce Challenge

Recruitment

Smaller, more dispersed labor pools and long commute distances narrow the applicant funnel.

Retention

Limited local competition can mask turnover risk until a key employee is already gone.

Stretched Teams

Fewer people cover more roles, so every departure hits operations harder.

50–200%

of an employee's annual salary is the estimated cost to replace them, per SHRM — spanning direct hiring costs and lost productivity.

58%

of the rural population lives in a childcare desert (vs. 44% in urban areas) — a structural barrier to both recruitment and retention.

What Employees Want, Beyond Compensation

39%

of employees say strong benefits — especially wellness and flexibility — are the main reason they stay in their current job.

Bank of America, 2024 Workplace Benefits Report

Wellbeing

Health coverage and mental health support that's actually accessible locally.

Flexibility

Predictable schedules and control over time, even in shift-based work.

Purpose & Growth

A clear sense their role and skills matter to the community, not just the org.

Financial Security

Tools to manage today's expenses and plan for tomorrow.

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Understanding Burnout in Rural Organizations

77% of employees report experiencing burnout at their job (Deloitte). In rural organizations, thin staffing and long distances between coverage make the effects harder to absorb.

Role Overload

One person often covers what would be three roles in a larger market.

Isolation

Fewer nearby peers in the same role means less informal support.

Always-On Culture

Small teams make it hard to fully disconnect during time off.

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BENEFITS AS A WORKFORCE STRATEGY

Turning Benefits Design Into a Recruitment & Retention Advantage

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Benefits That Drive Recruitment & Retention

Affordable Health Coverage

Plans designed for the realities of rural provider networks.

Mental Health Support

Access that doesn't require a long drive or a long wait.

Flexible Work Arrangements

Schedule control where the job allows it.

Financial Wellness Programs

Budgeting, savings, and planning support.

Family-Friendly Benefits

Childcare support, parental leave, caregiving flexibility.

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Mental Health Access in Underserved Areas

Distance and provider shortages are the biggest barriers to care in rural communities. Telemedicine and virtual-first benefit design close that gap without requiring a new clinic on Main Street.

Telemedicine Visits

On-demand appointments for primary and behavioral health, no travel required.

Regional Provider Networks

Partnerships that pool patient volume across employers to attract specialists.

Virtual-First EAPs

Employee assistance programs built around phone and video, not just in-person intake.

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Supporting Caregivers & Multigenerational Teams

Rural workforces skew multigenerational — employees are often simultaneously raising children, supporting aging parents, and working full time. Benefits that flex across life stages keep experienced people from having to choose between work and family.

Caregiver Leave & Flexibility

Paid time and schedule flexibility for eldercare and childcare needs, not just parental leave.

Cross-Generational Benefit Design

Options that work for a 24-year-old and a 58-year-old on the same team — not a one-size plan.

Backup & Emergency Care

Short-notice childcare or eldercare coverage for when the regular plan falls through.

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Financial Stress & Productivity

Financially stressed employees use more healthcare benefits and show up in claims data before they show up in turnover numbers.

The link between financial wellness and retention often shows up in insurance costs well before an exit interview.

Budgeting & Savings Tools

Low-cost, high-adoption resources employees actually use.

Retirement & Savings Support

Ranked a top priority in SHRM's 2025 Employee Benefits Survey.

Emergency Savings Programs

A cushion that reduces the spillover of financial stress into work.

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Approaches Worth Piloting

Illustrative models regional employers and workforce partnerships are testing:

Shared Regional Partnerships

Neighboring employers pool volume to negotiate better benefit rates and share a wellness or EAP vendor none could afford alone.

Mobile & Pop-Up Services

Periodic on-site health screenings, financial counseling, or childcare drop-in support brought directly to the workplace.

Telehealth Stipends

A dedicated benefit line for virtual mental health and primary care, removing cost as a barrier to first use.

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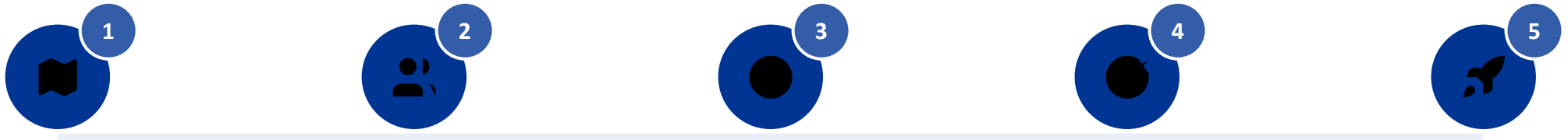
Building a Long-Term Workforce Strategy



Assess

Map current benefits against what your workforce actually values and where turnover concentrates.

Partner

Explore regional partnerships to expand what any single employer could offer alone.

Design

Prioritize 2–3 benefits changes that address your specific recruitment and burnout pressure points.

Pilot

Launch small, measure adoption and impact, and adjust before a full rollout.

Scale

Build the successful pilot into standard practice and revisit annually.

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DISCUSSION & CLOSING

What Would One Change to Your Benefits Strategy Do for Your Team?

- Where is turnover costing you the most — and is it really about pay?
- What's one benefit a regional partnership could make possible that you can't offer alone?
- What would make it easier for your team to actually use the benefits you already provide?

Thank you — 2026 North Country Leadership Summit

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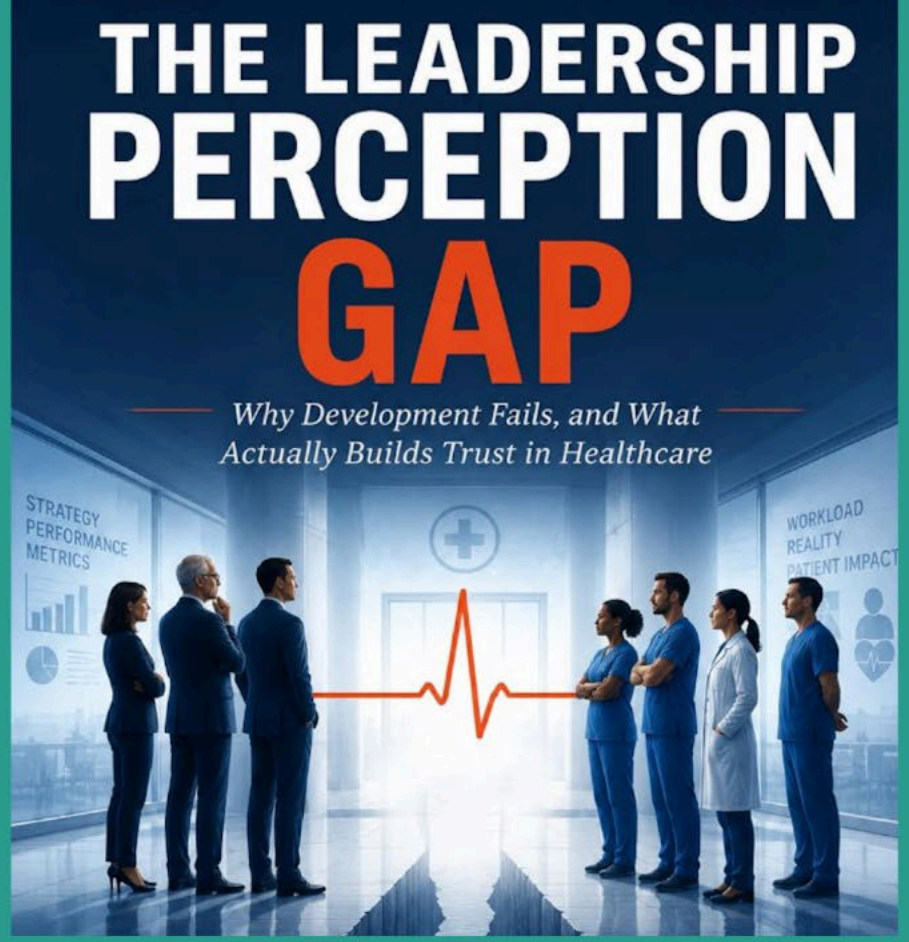

SEPTEMBER 2026 | LAKE PLACID, NY

North Country Leadership Summit

Dr. Chris Thomas, Ed.D

Learning Objectives: Bridging the Leadership Gap

Key goals for developing stronger leadership in rural healthcare

Analyze Root Causes

Identify key factors contributing to leadership perception gaps in rural healthcare organizations.

Self-Assessment

Evaluate personal leadership practices to uncover opportunities for strengthening trust and communication.

Implement Strategies

Apply evidence-based strategies to improve collaboration, workforce engagement, and retention.

Develop Action Plans

Create a practical, executable plan for closing perception gaps within your organization.

The Cost of Inaction

The Cost of Waiting: Addressing the Crisis in Rural Healthcare

Healthcare organizations are currently facing a critical inflection point characterized by persistent staffing shortages, rising turnover, and pervasive clinician burnout. The cost of inaction is quantifiable and unsustainable.

- **$60,090** — Average cost to replace a single bedside RN
- **17.6%** — National RN turnover rate in 2025 (and rising)
- **$4.6B** — Annual U.S. healthcare cost attributable to physician burnout

Sources: 2026 NSI National Health Care Retention & RN Staffing Report; Annals of Internal Medicine.

Defining the Leadership Perception Gap

Identifying the disconnect between executive intent and employee experience

- ## The Gap

  The disconnect between the behaviors leaders intend to demonstrate and what employees actually experience.

- ## Intent vs. Impact

  While leaders focus on strategic goals and knowledge, employees prioritize consistency and daily interactions.

- ## Why it goes unnoticed

  A lack of formal feedback loops creates a blind spot, often resulting in a false sense of organizational progress.

Leadership as Behavior

Moving beyond titles to build influence through action

Consistency creates the predictability required for team members to feel secure, fostering the trust necessary for sustainable collaboration.

The Research: What Actually Shapes Effectiveness

Key Findings from the Upstate NY Hospital Study

Experiential Priority

Formal training takes a backseat to learning derived from direct experience and professional relationships.

Micro-Trust

Trust is cultivated through consistent, small daily interactions rather than through large, isolated events.

Mentorship Role

Mentors accelerate professional growth by offering critical perspective on how specific behaviors are perceived by others.

Systemic Impact

Organizational structures and systems act as the ultimate framework that either empowers or sabotages leadership effectiveness.

The Translation Model: A Practical Framework

Moving from a 'Training Model' to a 'Translation Model'

Acquiring foundational knowledge and insights.

Implementing and practicing new behaviors within real-world settings.

Calibrating newly adopted behaviors against staff experience and practical outcomes.

Aligning organizational systems—such as performance reviews and senior leadership modeling—to sustain long-term change.

Closing the Gap: Call to Action

Moving from engagement metrics to measurable leadership impact

- **Conduct a Leadership Experience Audit**

  Measure what staff actually experience rather than relying solely on abstract engagement metrics.

- **Implement the Elite 9 Diagnostic**

  Make the invisible visible by tracking staff-reported effectiveness and behavioral impact.

- **Build an Action Plan**

  Define specific, measurable behavioral goals, seek continuous feedback, and prioritize trust-building habits.

Let's work together to transform your leadership development from an expense into a measurable business asset.

Dr. Chris Thomas, Ed.D.

Our motto is simple, we "address leadership challenges with ***targeted development*** that delivers ***measurable results***."

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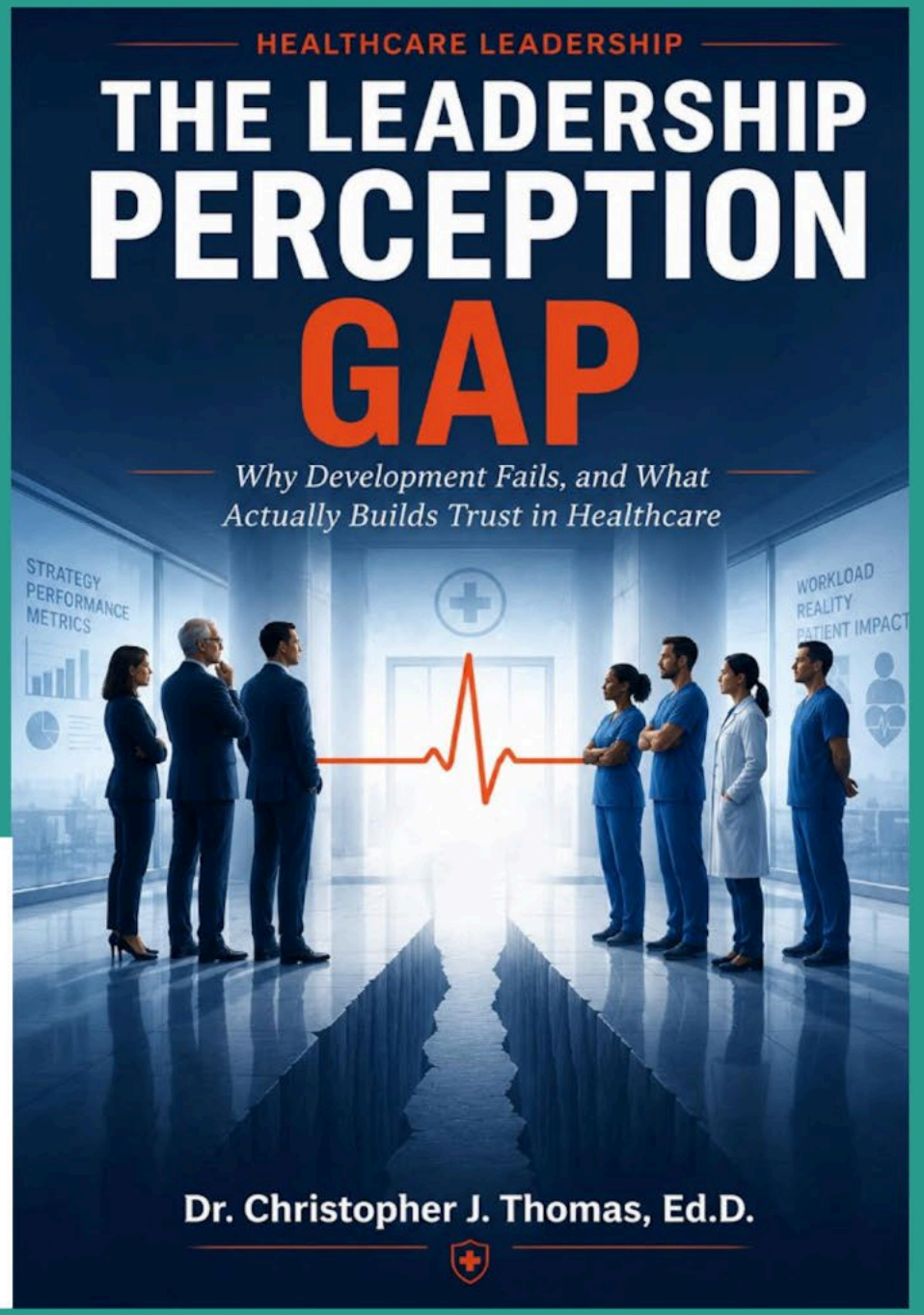
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