

Catalyst

YOU'RE INVITED

The Westgate Hotel



San Diego

Chef's Note

Every great dinner party begins before the guests arrive. The table is set with intention. The courses are chosen with care. The room is designed to help people feel welcomed, safe, curious, and ready to participate.

Catalyst is built the same way. Over three days, you will move through a carefully prepared menu of experiences that ask a simple but demanding question: how will you show up?

At Catalyst 2026, attendees are our guests and speakers are servers. Each course is designed to help water leaders practice a different kind of service: showing up early, listening before deciding, communicating with clarity, building advocates, creating belonging, and designing experiences that earn trust.

Peruse our 3-day progressive dinner party menu and prepare to come hungry for honest conversation, unexpected insight, and the kind of hospitality that might just shake up how people trust water.

August 31

Pre-course apéritifs

Venue: Westgate Hotel

Board Governance Seminar | 8:00 AM - 4:00 PM
Co-hosted by Association of Regional Water Organizations (ARWO) and Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies (AMWA)

Data Visualization Workshop:
Designing Better Charts & Graphs | 9:00 AM - 12:00 PM
Glenn Barnes, founder of Water Finance Assistance

The Art of Advocacy:
Public Speaking Workshop | 1:30 PM - 4:30 PM
Christy Harowski, Founder of HCB Strategies

September 1

A Tasting Menu

Welcome to the Catalyst Dinner Party Opening Experience

Venue: Westgate Hotel Ballroom

Time: 3:00-6 PM (180 min)

Description

Catalyst opens with an immersive menu preview that brings guests together to explore what slowing down from a fast-food work style and incorporating generous, attentive, accountable five-star service can do to shape trust. By connecting lessons from hospitality and service to the work of the water sector, the experience reinforces that communities remember how they are treated, especially during difficult moments.

Ingredients: Hospitality • Service • Presence • First impressions • Human connection

September 2

Around the Community Table

Venue: Balboa Park

Today's Menu: Understanding the communities we serve. Day Two moves from the dining room into the community, testing assumptions, listening to real people, and examining how trust is shaped before, during, and after major decisions.

Starter | Before the Message: Diagnosing Behavior

Server: Jennifer Tabanico - Founder, Action Research

Time: 8:30-10:30 AM (120 min)

Description

This immersive field lab introduces a behavioral science framework for understanding why people react in certain ways to different messages, programs, or campaigns. Through structured conversations with the public in Balboa Park, participants will test their assumptions, identify the motivations and barriers shaping behavior, and translate those insights into more effective communications and engagement strategies.

Ingredients: Behavioral science • Framing • Curiosity • Public conversations • Evidence

Chef's Special | Before the Project Begins: Showing Up When No One Owns the Problem

Server: Dr. Shalini Vajjhala, PhD - Executive Director, Pre-Collective

Time: 10:45-11:45 AM (60 min)

Description

Infrastructure professionals are often trained to solve technical problems but not to lead during the critical period before a project takes shape, when early alignment and shared ownership can determine whether trust is built or lost. Dr. Shalini Vajjhala introduces predevelopment as a way to identify unowned challenges, uncover what is stalling progress, and create the conditions for collaboration before conflict begins.

Ingredients: Vision • Capacity • Funding • Collaboration • Predevelopment

Shared Plates | No Two Communities Are Alike: Lessons from Community Engagement on Data Centers

Server: To Be Announced Soon

Time: 1:00-2:00 PM (60 min)

Description

As data center development accelerates, this provider will share how they adapt their community engagement approach to local priorities, drawing on lessons from two different case studies, and emphasizing stakeholder relationships and utility partnerships. Guests become a live audience focus group on how technology companies and utilities can improve public engagement.

Ingredients: Local context • Partnership • Listening • Adaptation • Utility relationships

Entrée | What Keeps Mayors Up at Night? A National Perspective on Local Priorities

Servers: To Be Announced Soon

Time: 2:00-2:45 PM (45 min)

Description

Water professionals can strengthen their influence by understanding the priorities driving elected officials' decisions, including housing, economic development, infrastructure, resilience, public trust, and fiscal pressure. This high-ranking official will offer a national perspective on where water fits within that agenda and what elected leaders wish utilities better understood about them.

Ingredients: Political priorities • Influence • Alignment • Local leadership





Side Dish | Earning Trust at Scale: The Pure Water Story

Server: Anna Vacchi Hill, City of San Diego
Time: 2:45-3:30 PM (45 min)

Description
San Diego’s Pure Water program overcame skepticism by consistently listening, measuring public perception, testing messages, and adapting its approach over time. Its experience shows that trust at scale is built through credibility, repetition, transparency, and opportunities for people to engage with the work firsthand.

Ingredients: Perception • Polling • Reuse • Experience • Iteration

Pairing | Leveraging Networks: Mapping Influence and Unlocking Movement

Server: George Schuler - CEO/Founder, Connecting for Change LLC
Time: 3:30-4:15 PM (45 min)

Description
When messages fail to resonate or partnerships stall, the problem may lie in the structure of the network rather than the strategy itself. George Schuler introduces a practical approach to mapping influence, identifying key connectors, and understanding how trust, information, and momentum move through communities beyond formal organizational structures.

Ingredients: Networks • Connectors • Influence • Coalition strategy • Movement

Dessert | Reflection at the Table

Server: Facilitated
Time: 4:15-4:45 PM (30 min)

Description
The day closes with guided reflection designed to help guests connect the field lab, predevelopment, data center engagement, elected leadership, perception research, and network mapping into one larger question: what does it take to earn trust before you need it? Guests will capture observations, compare insights, and identify ideas they want to build into their own recipe and carry into Day Three.

Ingredients: Reflection • Peer learning • Synthesis

September 3

The Chef’s Table

Venue: San Diego Wine and Culinary Center

Today’s Menu: Becoming intentional hosts. Day Three shifts from understanding others to designing better rooms, stronger internal alignment, trusted advocates, and hospitality experiences guests can take home and cook up themselves.

Entrée | Connecting Online: Influencers, Podcasts, and More

Server(s): Isaac Pellerin (120Water) • Kathy Bentz (Prince William Water) • Pal Hollywood (San Jose Water)

Time: 9:00-10:00 AM (60 min)

Description
Public trust increasingly forms online, where podcasts, creators, influencers, short-form video, and digital communities shape how people receive information and decide whom to believe. This live recording of 120Water’s Make Water Work podcast will explore how we can build credibility and relationships in digital spaces as part of a broader trust-building strategy.

Ingredients: Digital trust • Podcasts • Influencers • Storytelling • Reach

Shared Plates | Who Is the Room For?
The Power of Spaces Built with Purpose

Servers: Lily Lopez, founder of Latinas in Water • Nicole Brown, co-founder of Black Water Professionals Alliance

Time: 10:15-11:00 AM (45 min)

Description
Every gathering communicates who it is designed to serve, and intentional spaces can create deeper connection, leadership, and belonging. Through storytelling and discussion, participants will explore how to design purposeful gatherings that give the right people a meaningful seat at the table.

Ingredients: Belonging • Purpose • Affinity spaces • Intentional gathering

Side Dish | Selling the Work Internally: How to Gain Leadership Buy-In

Server(s): Executive Utility Leaders
Time: 11:00-11:45 AM (45 min)

Description
Although communications, customer experience, and community engagement are essential to major projects, votes, and funding decisions, they are still often undervalued by leadership. This conversation features executives who will share how to position these functions as mission-critical, demonstrate measurable strategic value, and build internal alignment needed to strengthen external trust.

Ingredients: Executive strategy • Value • Organizational alignment

Shared Plates / Earning Advocates: Building Trust Through Community Leaders

Server(s): To Be Announced Soon
Time: 1:00-1:45 AM (45 min)

Description
We can strengthen public support by working with the community leaders and local voices residents already trust. This course explores how to identify, equip, and sustain community partners, build relationships before they are needed, and move from one-way communication toward shared ownership.

Ingredients: Community • Advocacy • Partnership • Program design

Chef’s Table | The Hospitality Experience: Designing for How You Want People to Show Up

Server(s): Greg Wukasch, External Affairs Director, San Antonio Water
Time: 1:45-3:45 PM (120 min)

Description
People don’t just respond to information; they respond to environments. This hands-on workshop explores how food, space, tone, timing, and unexpected details can lower barriers, build connection, and invite people to participate more fully. Drawing from hospitality, culinary experience design, and community engagement, guests will examine how hosting itself can become an act of service. Guests will build their own hospitality framework, thinking through the ingredients needed to create better public meetings, stakeholder conversations, internal workshops, and community experiences. Each guest crafts a recipe they can take home.

Ingredients: Hospitality • Food • Space • Tone • Intentional design

Final Course | The Work Ahead: How Will You Show Up?

Server(s): Chelsea Boozer, Executive Director, Rogue Water
Time: 4:00-4:30 PM (30 min)

Description
In this closing course, guests recognize five-star service, get inducted as community chefs, and commit to a specific action they will carry back to their organization. Catalyst’s impact is not just during the event itself, but through what participants choose to do afterward.

Ingredients: Commitment • Reflection • Service • Accountability

