



The CEO and the future adviser

More than ever, the CEO is perceived not only as the voice of the organisation, but also as its face, its identity and its embodiment.

This calls for a deeper understanding of CEO communication, the what nature of communications advice needed by CEOs – and the characteristics essential for future communications advisers working with top management.

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The CEO is the organisation's centre of attention. Internally, the CEO must set a clear direction and enable optimum engagement at a time when most companies and organisations are experiencing radical transformation. Externally, the CEO needs to navigate the increasing demands of social responsibility and corporate transparency, and meet the growing requirements of stakeholders and media. The rise of digitization and the proliferation of platforms and channels have enabled a variety of stakeholder groups to be more active and engaged, both internally and externally.

Despite this, the area of CEO communication is characterised by a lack of knowledge. Although research has found CEO communication to be extremely important, the collaboration between CEO and adviser is not a well-established field of research, and very little empirical study has been carried out in this field. In addition, much of the remaining literature written in this field is anecdotal, based on experienced advisers' professional practice with a predominantly 'how to' perspective. Moreover, the focus is often directed towards management and business consultancy and not on communication consultancy specifically.

Faced with this, we have launched a multi-year research project into CEO communications advisers. We have interviewed trusted communications advisers and top managers (CEOs or equivalent); in this article, we will focus on the perspectives of communications advisers.

We have interviewed 37 experienced advisers with an average of 15 years' experience in advising top managers on matters of communication. The preliminary analysis sheds light on the practice of CEO communication and the working relationship between C-level executives and their trusted communications advisers. Three meta-themes have emerged: they encapsulate essential perspectives that the communications professionals have put forward in the interviews.

Theme 1: Understanding the business context

According to our findings, the trusted communications adviser will only become so if he or she demonstrates a thorough understanding of the business (public or private). Particularly when the relationship is new, an adviser must position him or herself as worthy of trust by demonstrating in practice that he or she understands the business and what the CEO needs. By producing timely and relevant communication deliverables that reflect a profound understanding of what is needed, the communication professional will gradually position him or herself as a trusted adviser or get to the table where strategic decisions are made.

Navigate the organisational context: One way for the communications professional to get this far is by demonstrating stakeholder management in practice. It is evident from our interviews that the trusted communications adviser is seldom the only adviser to the CEO. Heads of human resources or business development have equal access to advise the CEO on communication issues, as do executive assistants, PAs or chiefs of staff. In practice, the communication professional must be adept at operating in this organisational context and build coalitions with other advisers.

High-paced and complex: According to our findings there is no doubt that CEO communication is business critical and growing in importance. The external communication of the CEO is scrutinised by media, business analysts, customers, citizens, government representatives and numerous stakeholders. This is not new, but according to our findings the pace of CEO communication has increased and the practice has become more complex because of the widespread use of social media. The latter has made the channel mix and communication processes much more dynamic and demanding, which poses new challenges and tasks for the trusted communications adviser.

Need for clear direction: Internally, the speed and frequency of transformative changes faced by most organisations in both the private and public sector make CEO communication more important than ever. CEO communication plays an important role when setting strategic directions, explaining the implications of change and showing the way for the next level of managers. According to our findings, internal perspectives on CEO communication display significant differences in levels of professional maturity with the advisers we have interviewed.

“You must demonstrate your communication skills. Then you have entered the room. But when you are in, you will fail fast if you are too persistent in your communication dogmatism. You must be pragmatic... The most important skill is business understanding. That you show you really understand what it takes for the company to become a success”

Director of Communications, leading Danish public sector organisation

Another perspective is that the pressure from the board on most top executives to deliver results is rising and, perhaps as a result of that, CEO tenure has been dropping significantly over the years. Today, more must be done in a shorter period of time and, from the communications adviser's point of view, the CEO is in practice a transitional asset. The communications professional must therefore demonstrate the ability to quickly understand the agenda of the CEO and the need to deliver tangible short-term results.

Complex stakeholder arena: But there's more. CEO communication must also address issues outside the borders of the organisation. Corporate responsibility and corporate political activism require that CEOs communicate about new subjects. Assisting these leaders to communicate passionately and authentically about subjects such as inequality, migration or climate change raises the bar for the trusted adviser and adds to the increasing complexity of the role.

Theme 2: Managing the relationship

What characterizes the relationship between the CEO and the trusted communications adviser? In short, the relationship is both professional and personal, but not private. The adviser's license to operate is subject to his or her possession of the required communication capabilities. Working closely over several years through multiple situations where much is at stake eventually results in a close relationship between the CEO and the adviser. It is a relationship built on the need for the CEO to constantly develop his or her communication skills and for the adviser to help the CEO develop this competence in practice.

Personality matters: According to our findings, the relationship very often evolves over time to become more personal in character. Shared values – or good personal chemistry – make it easier for both parties to understand each other, communicate

effectively with little preparation time, and allow for the trusted communications adviser in practice to act on behalf of the CEO. He or she may be the person in the organisation who knows the CEO best and can alert the CEO to oncoming opportunities as well as dangers.

Trust and confidence: Trust, honesty and transparency are some of the words that the communication professionals in our study use to characterise their relationship with their CEO. There is, however, a distinction between personal and private that goes beyond semantics. For example, in one of the interviews, the trusted communications adviser explains clearly his conscious consideration of whether or not he should cross this apparently thin line and become friends with his CEO.

The relationship between the top manager and the adviser is often – and should be – close.

Despite that – or perhaps because of it – the relationship is not managed like other organisational processes. It is in many ways an unmanaged relationship. It is also incident-driven. The CEO reaches out to the adviser when he or she finds him or herself in a situation where communication is critical.

Incidents as a driving force: These situations include media interviews, meetings with analysts, the presentation of financial results, the launch of major organisational changes or new strategies, or quarterly town hall meetings where the CEO addresses all employees. These occasions are all excellent opportunities for the trusted communications adviser to demonstrate his or her value to the CEO. According to the findings, these occasions create “defining moments” where the CEO realizes the value of having a trusted communications adviser. Moreover, some of the interviewees describe how they actively attempt to create events in which they can position themselves as valuable advisers.

Unmanaged management of the relation: The unmanaged relationship described above is characterised

“(The CEO) asked me how I perceived the company. I asked him if he wanted the diplomatic or the rough version. I told him about the challenges I saw in the company and it was on this occasion that he asked if I would help him with his internal and external communication and the change process... He said, ‘What I like about you is that you dare to disagree with me’.”

Head of Communications, Danish-based world-leading building material supplier

by an absence of measurable goals, plans or strategies for top management communication. Only one of our interviewees demonstrated that she had developed a formal plan with goals, activities and key performance indicators. From our perspective this is particularly interesting in the light of the growing importance of CEO communication for both public and private organisations. It is also in sharp contrast to the widespread practice of performance-based business processes with measurable goals and planned activities. Despite the absence of plans, goals and key performance indicators, the communications professionals we interviewed have a perception that they are successful in their advisory role.

Theme 3: Developing competencies

What is required to become a trusted adviser within the field of CEO communication? It is no surprise that communication competencies give the trusted communications adviser a license to operate and access to the table where strategic decisions are made.

However, the interviewed advisers emphasize that, in their experience, the requirements for CEO communication go beyond communication skills. The need to understand the business as discussed in Theme 1: competencies in organisational development, business economics and management are a requisite. The communications adviser is expected to join the conversation.

Trusted adviser and effective operator: Communication practitioners have for decades discussed the transition from the role of communication producer to that of communications adviser. There is an underlying perception that the latter would be a desired career destination of most communication specialists. Yet our findings strongly challenge this perception and indicate that, on the contrary, many

“We are communications professionals and from time to time you have... to be able to contribute differently. (Your) business understanding ... should be demonstrated outside (your) own area. If you can do that ... if you are capable of saying, ‘We may have to look less at this and more at that because I think it would be valuable in this and this way’, then people listen to you in a different way than if you speak merely from your own professional area.”

Senior Vice President, Communications,
listed company at the Danish C25-index

of the services that the trusted adviser provides for the CEO are very practical in nature.

They could include producing a PowerPoint presentation for an internal town hall meeting, writing a speech for an external audience or the Q&A before a media interview. These are all quite 'low-tech' deliverables, but they are nevertheless key to building the relationship between the CEO and the adviser; and they can eventually position the adviser in a situation where the CEO reaches out for strategic advice rather than tangible communications tasks. Efficient execution today paves the way for a strategic advisory role tomorrow.

Relational skills: Another strong finding is that people skills are essential to the success of an adviser. We have previously discussed the importance to the adviser of understanding the agenda and objectives of the CEO and developing their professional and personal relationship. But what has become apparent in the interviews is that the adviser's deep understanding of the CEO is in fact a prerequisite to successfully advising him or her.

Relational leadership is key here, as advising the CEO often becomes quite personal: getting rid of bad communication habits, training the CEO in new communication skills and emphasizing the need for good communication in tense situations. It is essential for an adviser to know when to insist and when to bend. As we have discovered, a formal plan or strategy does not govern CEO communication. The trusted communication adviser must therefore draw on personal priorities, values and experience to demonstrate resilience in these critical situations. The pressure on CEOs to deliver tangible results fast inevitably spills over onto the adviser.

In sum, these three meta-themes tell us that the future top adviser needs to be fluent in business-contexts, a thorough relationship-builder and, perhaps most importantly, they cannot rely solely on classic communications competences. Are you ready for the challenge? ●

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