

CEO COMMUNICATION AND THE FUTURE COMMUNICATIONS ADVISOR

MANAGING THE PARADOXICAL RELATIONSHIP

Gitte Gravengaard
Anders Monrad Rendtorff
Kristian Eiberg



WHY INVESTIGATE THE RELATIONSHIP?

From the very outset of this research project, we have been curious to understand the relationship between the CEO and his or her advisor, which we propose is key to successful advising. Having analysed the data, we have identified this relationship as one of the three most important meta-themes in this study.

The successful relationship is built on trust, honesty, and transparency and develops over time to become quite close. It is both professional and personal but never crosses the line into private territory. Nevertheless, in our interviews we have observed that, unlike so many other professional processes in an organisation, the relationship between the CEO and his or her advisor seems to be relatively unmanaged.

Since publishing our first white paper (Gravengaard et al. 2018), we have conducted interviews with board chairmen and top managers at executive management level. While these talks reinforced some of the conclusions we drew from our discussions with the communications advisors, they also uncovered nuances of this professional and personal relationship that can help us to further understand it.

For example, whereas the advisors in our analysis are very focused on getting access to, and face time with, the top managers to establish and nurture a relationship, the top managers seem much less concerned about this. Crucial to understanding these different perspectives is the fact that the top managers describe how they have several competent people advising them in a range of fields, including communication. A head of communication is just one of many advisors to a CEO.

In this white paper we explore the data to investigate how the CEO and his or her advisor manage their relationship, since it is so central to the successful practice of CEO communication. We are particularly interested in understanding how the relationship evolves over time. And how the communications advisor can in fact strategically manage this in order to deliver tangible results better and faster, thus enhancing the relationship.

“It is important to understand the context of management communication. If you look at the top manager, there are many advisors. There is an HR advisor, an IT advisor, a communications advisor, an executive assistant, and a personal assistant. Yes, really many advisors ... So, I think it is [necessary to] establish alliances.”

Experienced communications advisor, financial sector



MANAGING THE UNMANAGEABLE

The communications advisor's relationship with the CEO is unmanaged. This is a paradoxical finding considering the importance of a well-functioning relationship between the top manager and the communications advisor. On the one hand, the advisors in our interviews unanimously agree that without trust, confidence and transparency they could not do their jobs. On the other hand, they find it very difficult to identify what methods and tools they use to build and nurture the relationship to demonstrate the value of their advisory services.

However, when analysing the 37 interviews it becomes clear to us that these practitioners possess a huge amount of tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1983) on how to manage the relationship with the CEO. Thus, we can pinpoint action patterns, best practice and valuable perspectives that could prove useful to advisors when contemplating their relationship with the CEO.

Occasion management

What do we mean by an 'occasion'? In this context, an occasion is a situation – a personal encounter or a written deliverable – where the communications advisor can demonstrate his or her professional experience to the CEO. It could be anything from writing a simple press release, drafting an email or putting together three PowerPoint slides on behalf of the CEO participating in a management meeting where complex business issues are discussed.

In our interviews, the advisors have emphasized that it is important for them to identify and position themselves in situations where they can demonstrate their competencies to their top manager. However, instead of having a formal plan for CEO communication, the advisors rely on opportunities that may arise during the working day.

REACTIVE OR PROACTIVE

We suggest that occasions be viewed from a reactive or a proactive perspective and managed accordingly. When applying a reactive approach, the advisor handles a task quickly and efficiently but does not consider whether it has the potential to position him or her closer to the CEO. For example, he/she delivers a PowerPoint presentation to the CEO's secretary according to the briefing and ahead of the deadline. Meanwhile, an optimal external media trainer is booked to prepare the CEO for an important interview.

On the other hand, if a proactive approach is taken, the advisor turns an occasion into an opportunity with the potential to further develop and consolidate the relationship with the CEO. He/she delivers the PowerPoint presentation directly to the CEO; and, on the journey to the facility in Jutland where the meeting is to take place, briefly explains the thoughts behind it. The advisor also decides to play a leading role in the media training session, reducing the external media trainer to a person who merely asks the questions.

This is not to suggest that the communications advisor should – or even could – take the proactive route on all occasions. We merely point out that the advisor can benefit from reflecting on the potential that different occasions may represent. Deciding whether to go with the flow or take a more proactive approach will, in practice, require careful judgement.

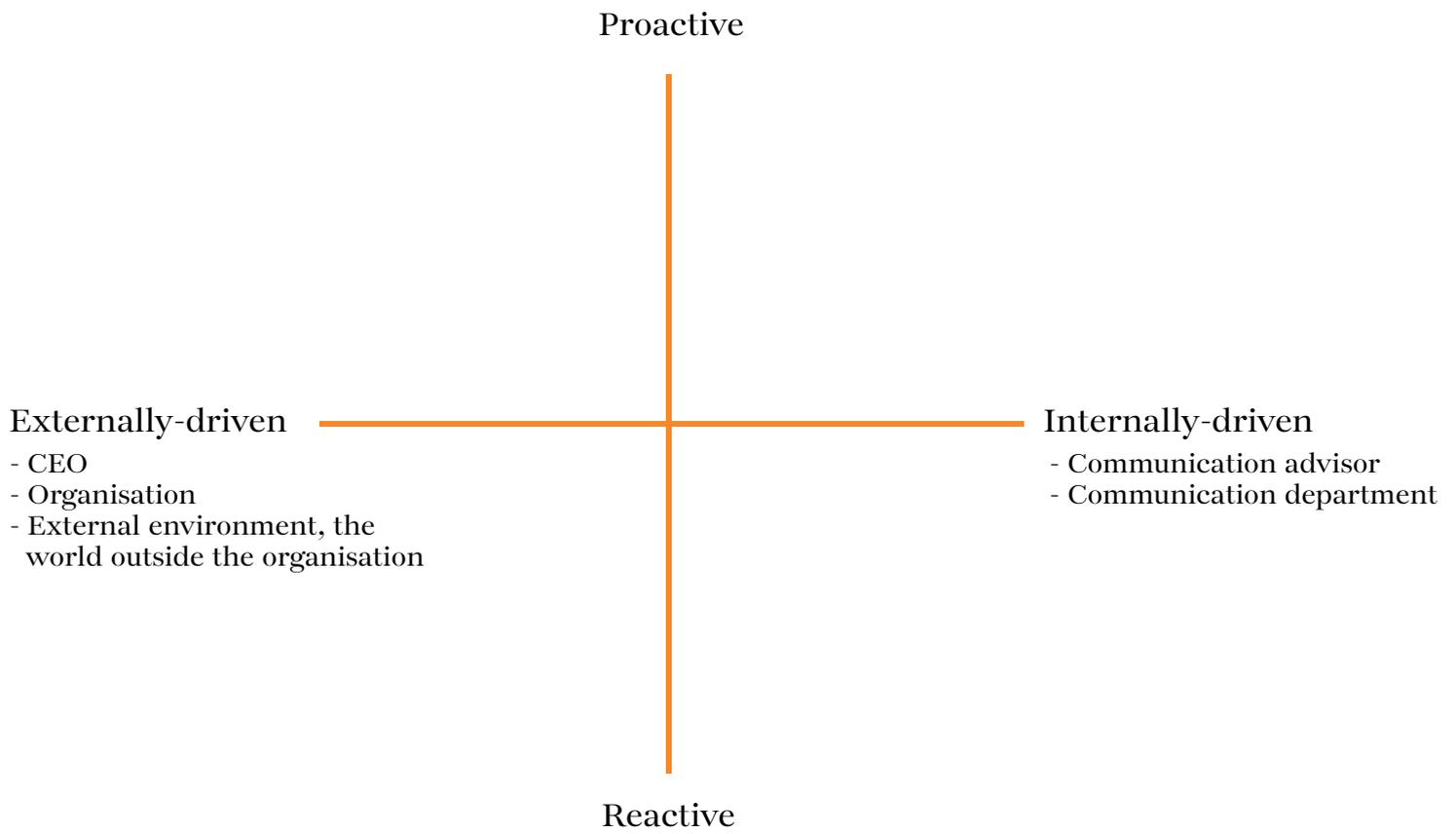
Thus, we see the management of occasions as crucial in relationship-building and suggest that a proactive approach can, to a large extent, accelerate the development of a close relationship between the CEO and the trusted advisor.

EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL IMPETUS DRIVERS

We distinguish between two types of occasions: those with external and internal drivers. Externally-driven occasions originate from the CEO, the organisation or the outside world. Occasions of this sort with good potential for advisors to demonstrate their competencies are: senior management conferences, mergers & acquisitions, the launch of a new strategy, the onboarding of a new CEO, presentations to the board of directors, financial statements and major lay-offs. Internally-driven occasions originate from the advisor or the communications department. These can include events such as town hall meetings, a CEO communication plan or key media pitch and a 100-day speech from the new CEO.

When – as a result of planned action or coincidence – the communications advisor manages to turn an occasion into a situation that accelerates the development of the relationship with the CEO, we call it a *defining moment*. The advisor with a proactive mindset will seek to identify or create occasions that can be turned into defining moments. The more passive advisor, on the other hand, will be looking at *missed opportunities*.

FIGURE 1: OCCASION MANAGEMENT



Creating defining moments

Many of the experienced advisors in our analysis recall one or several defining moments. Typically, they experience a significant breakthrough in their relationship with the CEO as a result of how they have handled a certain task or situation. The occasion has often entailed an element of risk and demanded rapid decisions concerning complex matters.

One example of a defining moment is when a newly hired head of communications needed to step in to resolve a media crisis because the media relations manager was on a vacation. The advisor's successful handling of a task outside his formal area of responsibility turned into a defining moment, as he had the opportunity to demonstrate his professional competence to the CEO.

Another example is when a newly hired head of communications was put on the spot in a senior management meeting. After the rest of the management team had presented their recommendations regarding the particular situation, the CEO asked the new advisor for his analysis. The advisor took a deep breath before presenting a quite opposite point of view. The CEO considered both analyses for a few seconds and decided to follow the new recruit's recommendation. For the advisor, this became a defining moment that for years played a significant part in his subsequent level of authority in the organisation.

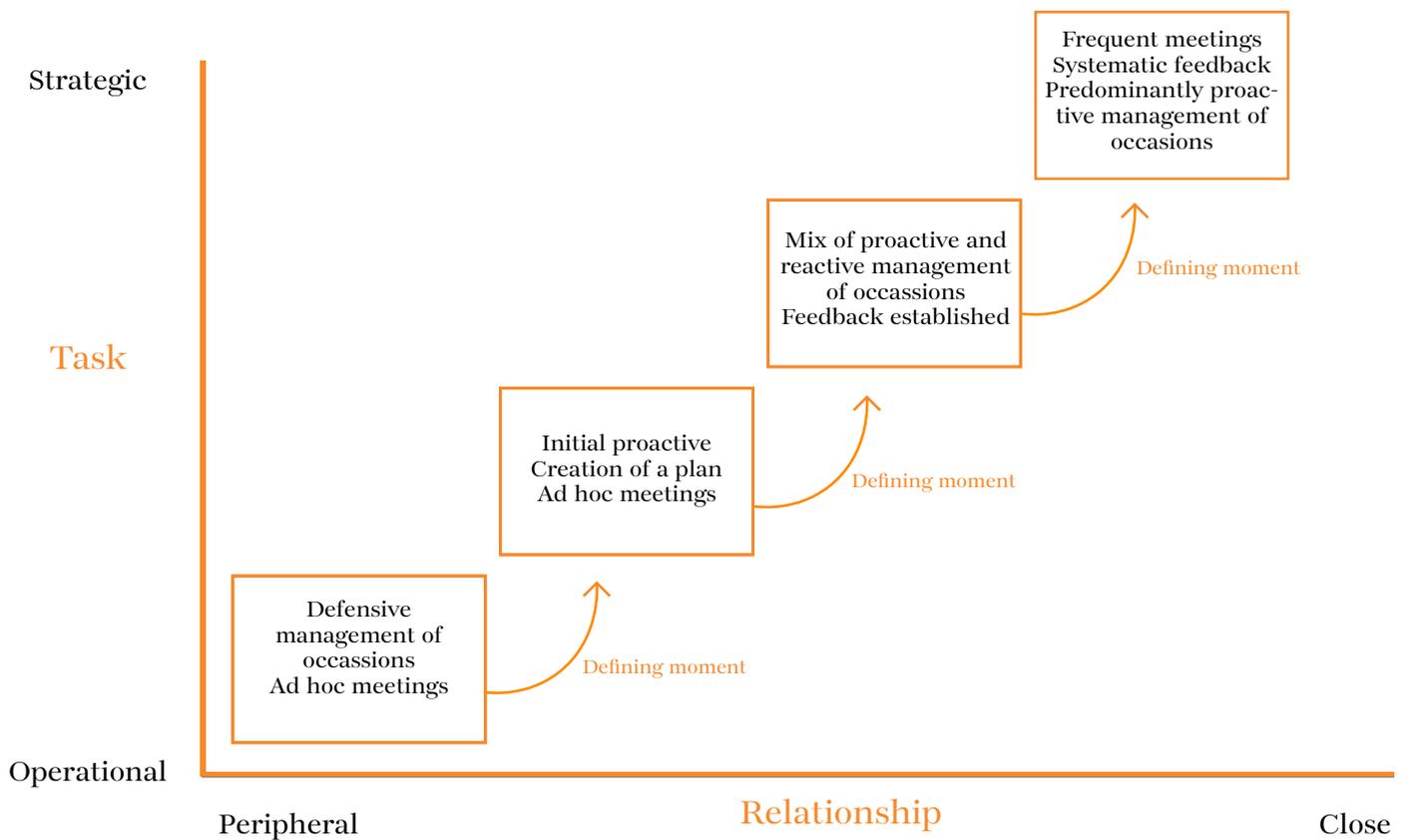
Taking a substantial risk was also part of the equation for another newly appointed communications manager, who booked the entire management team for a leadership kick-off to mark the development of a new strategy. In retrospect, she describes she wanted to prove her worth to the CEO:

“I was scared to death ... If it turned out to be a ‘flat’ day the CEO would think ‘OK, I cannot spend a lot of time on this or on her because it won’t make a difference’. But it ended up being the most fantastic day and the CEO invited all his managers to join him in a circle where he gave an Al Pacino-like speech and people were just so high all evening.”

Experienced communications advisor, high tech company

In every example, the relationship between the advisor and the CEO is accelerated because of the former's proactive management of an occasion. Turning occasions into defining moments requires risk-taking based on a certain readiness – in terms of having done one's basic analysis of the situation – combined with personal courage and resilience. Along with timing, these elements are essential if an advisor is to make sure that a potentially defining moment does not end up as a missed opportunity.

FIGURE 2: DEFINING MOMENTS AS DRIVERS FOR RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING



A comeback to the plan

In our 37 interviews with communications advisors, we only found two advisors who already had a dedicated plan with objectives and activities for CEO communication. These cases are the exceptions which confirms the rule. The absence of plans for CEO communication is part of the paradox that characterizes the relationship between the CEO and his or her communications advisor. In most professional spheres you would devise a plan for something you consider this important.

Many of the advisors have overall corporate communication plans or strategies; some also have a plan for management communication in general. This ties in with the previous discussion about the occasion-driven relationship between the CEO and the advisor. The advisors explain the absence of plans with, “My CEO does not demand a plan” or, “A plan is difficult to create, and it is very likely to fail”. Despite these statements, it seems that a plan for CEO communication could have many advantages for the communications advisor when aiming to establish and nurture the relationship with the CEO.

THE PLAN IS AN OCCASION

First and foremost, a plan increases the likelihood of success regarding CEO communication because the advisor is forced to perform a thorough initial analysis. With clear objectives, the plan enables measurement and evaluation. However, the development of a plan can also be viewed as one of the above-mentioned occasions when an advisor contrives to further develop his or her relationship with the top manager. It may even turn out to be a defining moment. Other than that, even if all the activities in the plan might not be executed, the plan itself is a very valuable tool for setting the scene, putting CEO communication on the agenda and for creating and staging future occasions. From this point of view, a plan is a procedural tool with strategic potential and not necessarily the end product.

The best examples of the use of a plan as a process tool is when the advisor ‘connects the dots’. For example, the advisor uses the plan to provide a perspective on interrelationships and interdependencies between key projects in the organisation, together with an outline of timings. Especially when organisations undergo transformational change, often very few people are capable of establishing a 360-degree overview of what is going on.

”For many years I have experienced that a lot of knowledge happens to be located with, and in the vicinity of, a communications manager and the department managed by the communications manager. [This is] because they are not specialists but have a more holistic approach.”

CEO

The effective advisor provides easy-to-understand plans in visually strong formats on key topics for the CEO. Thus, seen from the point of view of the communications advisor, a plan can be essential for the CEO’s understanding of where to focus leadership attention.

So far, we have discussed the desirability of developing a relationship with the top manager and what the advisor can do to promote this. However, our findings from the interviews have also pointed to the importance of timing. Therefore, we will describe the communications advisors’ journey when it comes to developing a relationship with the CEO.

The positioning journey

The relationship between the communications advisor and the CEO is dynamic and constantly evolving over time. As we have previously described, the speed of development and the quality of this relationship depend to a high degree on the communications advisor and his or her ability to turn occasions into defining moments. Inspired by the concept of the service journey (Stickdorn 2012; Zomerdijk et al. 2010) we term this development a positioning journey, and within it we find three important touchpoints or phases.

GETTING OFF TO A POSITIVE START

During the first period, the communications advisors' primary goal is to establish the foundation upon which a relationship can be built. Many advisors describe how they strategically seek out opportunities to demonstrate their professional capabilities and the impact their work has on what is important to the CEO, the business and the organisation in general. During this period, they take on more operational tasks than are in their job description in order to demonstrate to the CEO their professional communication competence.

Furthermore, the communications advisors try to spend as much face time with the CEO as possible both in informal settings – in conversations during the course of the working day, at lunchtime or on journeys – as well as in more formal settings like meetings. This can be insightful not only in terms of talking professionally about the business, but also in terms of understanding the role of the CEO, how the advisors themselves work; and finally, in terms of getting to know what the CEO is really like as a person.

“As an academic graduate and perhaps also as a young, blonde woman you should be cautious to [approach a top manager] and state, ‘I think you should smile more here and if you could say this or that instead of...’. To give advice about communication is very personal and you have to be invited to do so in one way or another.”

Experienced communications advisor, financial sector

If the communications advisor is new to the organisation, the task is both to familiarize him or herself with the business as well as the organisation; and at the same time establish a productive relationship with the CEO. If the CEO is new and the communications advisor has worked in the organisation for a longer period, the advisor can allocate much more time to focus on building a relationship with the CEO.

ESTABLISHING AND CONSOLIDATING THE RELATIONSHIP

The overall aim for the communications advisor in this phase is to shift from a peripheral to a closer relationship with the CEO. The advisors in our study describe this process as very hard work. It involves striving to demonstrate their professional competence, understanding what the CEO thinks and acts and helping him or her to solve issues he or she finds important; while simultaneously establishing a more personal relationship between the two of them.

This phase is dominated by the advisors' ambition to expand their field of operation and take it to the next level: a 'seat at the table'. Once installed, they can position themselves as indispensable helpers that make a difference to the CEO, the business and the bottom line.

Some strategies to reach this next level are:

- Being honest, trustworthy and daring to challenge the CEO
- Professionalizing the working relationship between the advisor and the CEO
- Offering solutions to the CEO instead of just pointing out problems
- Delivering visible and significant results and making sure that the CEO is aware of them

While advisors regard communication skills as their license to operate, they underline that these alone are not enough. They earn their place at the table only if they understand the business, the organisation and the context.

“I graduated [from my MBA] with a 12 – the top grade. It goes without saying that I immediately jumped several steps up in the internal hierarchy.”

Experienced communications advisor, public sector

THE CLOSE RELATIONSHIP

After they have worked closely together for a sustained period, the relationship between the communications advisor and the CEO often develops into a close relationship. The advisors describe this relationship as professional and personal – not private. The communications advisor has access to the CEO, he or she has earned the CEO's trust and a seat at the table and is now frequently involved in strategic tasks.

“The most important [thing] for me is that I have 110 per cent trust ... That means that feedback is also seamless (...) Somebody at the same level as the CFO who without any hesitation pushes me and says, ‘Wait a minute, now we need to think carefully (...) I realized how important it was to have somebody that close.”

CEO

The relationship is characterized by a high degree of mutual respect and trust accompanied by an open and honest dialogue about important issues. Sometimes these are issues that the CEO cannot discuss with others in the organisation and that the advisor cannot share with anyone in the communications department.

The downside of having earned the full confidence of the CEO is the risk that the advisor can become isolated in the organisation when it comes to information. Colleagues may act tactically when conveying information to the advisor; and he or she can lose the informal channels of communication that help him or her to see around corners and spot opportunities or mitigate risks. Caught up in a catch-22, it is difficult for the advisor to navigate through these contradictory conditions.

The development of the close relationship is not the final destination on the positioning journey and the advisor cannot rest on his or her laurels. The close relationship must be maintained and consciously developed by the communications advisor and often the demands on the advisor just continue to rise.

The advisors in our study who have been successful in developing a close relationship with their CEOs have continuously and proactively identified occasions and turned them into defining moments. However, it is also clear from our data that different types of CEOs create different possibilities for the communications advisors. “You can only take your CEO this far”, states one of our interviewees, underlining that the ‘CEO material’ available to the advisor constitutes specific possibilities and constraints.

IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES

We found there was considerable variety in the duration of the phases. For some of the less experienced communications advisors, the first phase could last several months; whereas others could almost skip this phase owing to their prior experience in other organisations. Also, structural phenomena dictated by the maturity of the organisation can make a big difference. An organisation might, for example, confine the communications advisor to the early phases while time and resources are spent building up a communications department and infrastructure.

Not all advisors reach the final phase and establish a close relationship with their CEO. This can be because too many occasions have turned into missed opportunities; and/or the CEO and the organisation have not been ready for, or interested in, having a communications advisor playing this role.

SHOW ME THE VALUE

The relationship between the CEO and their communications advisor is characterized by several paradoxes and seems unmanageable in practice. Therefore, the experienced communications advisors we have interviewed in this research project have not developed formal objectives and plans for CEO communications. It is also clear that communications advisors are more preoccupied with building and nurturing the relationship with the CEO than are the CEOs themselves, who seek advice from numerous internal advisors.

In this white paper we argue that the future communications advisor can establish governance by proactively using occasions to demonstrate professional value to the CEO rather than just 'go with the flow'. It requires a certain mindset to turn formal and informal occasions driven by internal or external factors into defining moments in the relationship.

It must be acknowledged that it takes time to earn the trust of the CEO. The best way to navigate this learning curve is to make a start. Create and execute proofs of concept – the CEO speech, the corporate anniversary booklet or the CEO statement in the annual report – and refine them as you go. This is the case when the advisor is new to the job. Later in the positioning journey – if the advisor has been successful in demonstrating his or her value to the CEO – the relationship becomes closer, based on mutual trust, respect and transparency. Because the CEO seeks advice from many advisors, he or she may not always reflect back the value of the communications advisor; but as the need for, and importance of, CEO communication grows, the opportunities for the communications advisor should follow suit.

“The idea came from my advisor. It is all about being pushed. I see her role as pushing me a little all the time. Of course, I should also push myself, but I need somebody to push me and say, ‘We can do this’ or, ‘I think it would be a good idea if you went down to Customer Service and talked to them.’”

CEO

ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT

CEO Communication and the Future Communications Advisor is the title of a research project currently being conducted by a team from the University of Copenhagen and the Danish communication consulting company RelationsPeople.

For our interview study, we have chosen two groups of respondents: experienced communications advisors and top managers (CEOs or equivalent). We aim to achieve new insights into their views on CEO communication and on the relationship between the trusted communications advisor and the CEO. We can then identify possibilities, dilemmas and best practices in their professional lives.

Desk research and interviews with 37 experienced Danish communications advisors took place in the second half of 2018. In late 2018 and early 2019, interviews with top managers have been conducted. The latter part of the data collection is still ongoing.

In this research project, we apply a system of co-creation for research, through which we aim to actively collaborate with practitioners, create new knowledge and expand our understanding together. Our goal is to establish a knowledge-creating relationship where both practitioners and researchers are engaged in a joint endeavor to identify, analyze and develop solutions for relevant real-world problems and dilemmas. The co-creation research process is explained in greater detail in our first white paper (Gravengaard et al. 2018).



JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Contact the authors

Gitte Gravengaard. Ph.d., Associate Professor, University of Copenhagen

gravengaard@hum.ku.dk

Anders Monrad Rendtorff, Associate Partner, RelationsPeople

amr@relationspeople.dk

Kristian Eiberg, Managing Director, Partner, RelationsPeople

kue@relationspeople.dk

NOTES

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ABOUT THE DEPARTMENT OF NORDIC STUDIES AND LINGUISTICS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN

The Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics has research, education and communication as its primary purpose. It is home to 1600 students and 160 members of staff comprising teachers, researchers, librarians, student assistants and administrative staff. The Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics provides the setting for international research and education from BA to Ph.d. studies within language, literature, media, culture and gender studies.

ABOUT RELATIONSPeOPLE

RelationsPeople is a Danish, partner-owned communications consultancy. It works with clients in the private and public sector to improve their reputation, win market shares or change their organization. One of RelationsPeople's core competencies is leadership communication and over the past 10 years senior consultants have provided a broad portfolio of advisory services within leadership communication to top managers and management teams in Danish and international organizations.