

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 14

The Chief Communications Officer

Leading strategic communications

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The profile of corporate communications has risen over the last decade. Yet, while value creation may sit at the top of most CXOs agendas, the communications people are certainly not driving it in most companies. So what *should* the CCO be doing?

CCOs of large, international companies should be integrating communications in whatever way fits best. Involving senior management. Taking a broad perspective. Gaining personal credibility. Honing their understanding of the company's business.

The CCO's job? Orchestrate the instruments in the company's communication battery (written, digital and spoken media, symbols, and behaviour of members) to build competitive advantage for the firm. Align company communication with company strategy to enhance its strategic positioning and thereby better serve its customers.

The heart of the job? Integrate and manage the communication system. Offer the best in-house communications expertise. Manage projects. Analyse. Conceptualize. Master the function. Understand strategy. Make sense of change. Wield influence. Execute, execute, execute.

The key challenges: crafting a sustainable corporate story, integrating the various communications functions to serve that story, building a communications plan to make it all happen, and mastering the right personal capabilities to bring it all to fruition.

The CCO as Conductor

In many companies the output of communications specialists and managers (marketing communications, press relations, investor relations, and employee

communication) results in a mish-mash of messages – a cacophony of improvised voices, images and messages. The CCO's brief is simple to understand: make sure the company says the right things to the right people at the right time. CCOs figure out which messages have to get to which ears, for which purposes, by which channels in which vehicles, throughout the company and to key targets outside, including government agencies and regulatory authorities. Harmonize the message to all constituencies. Make sure every message a company sends sound as if it is spoken by the same 'voice'. All the time!

The CCO as Master Tactician

The CCO has many jobs at once. The (im)balance of these jobs shifts daily. Effective CCOs take a long-term strategic view and a short-term view. Short-term, effective CCOs take tactical approaches to communication—react to crises, write press releases, prepare top management speeches and presentations. Function as editors and writers. Even ghost writers. They monitor short-term legal and financial angles. Keep investors and financial editors informed.

The CCO as Partner to Top Management

Effective CCOs are partners to top management. Mainly the CEO. They work closely with senior executives to ensure that communication practices fuel the company's implementation of strategy. They keep colleagues on the CXO from saying the wrong things, especially in a public setting, to protect the company and its top managers. By taking a long-term view, CCOs can ensure that the company has a sustainable, harmonious 'story'. CCOs also consider their role in 'risk management' and coordinate with the CGO.

The CCO as Chief Company Narrator

As Chief Narrator, the CCO pushes the CXO members to view the company as having its own 'story'. The company story must convey originality, or uniqueness; it is often built around the ideals of a great founder or a strong sense of purpose, business, social or otherwise. Great companies are distinguished by stories as idiosyncratic as they are. Companies that communicate well know their stories. They're 'on message'. An effective CCO knows the company story. Or works to create it. Even when everyone is struggling to figure out what it is. Tells it. Refines it.

The CCO as Master of the Communication Plan

The communications plan is the heart of the work of company communication. It is the roadmap by which the CCO orchestrates the communication of key messages, through defined channels to specified audiences for a clearly articulated purpose. The communications plan supports—may even drive—the company's overall communications goals, and helps spread the company story. In order to judge how effectively the company is executing the plan, the communication goals need to be measurable.

The central challenge of a communication plan is execution. The difficulty is not so much articulating the purpose, messages, audiences and channels, but clarifying who does what, who says what and how, and how things will be done.

The New CCO: Skills for Web 3.0 and Beyond

The CCO as Advocate for Professional Communication Management

The CCO identifies the right vehicles for particular communications: emails, e-newsletters, subscription services, webcasts, wikis, social networking sites, intranet portals, interactive SMS or MMS campaigns, videos, memos, speeches, road shows, town meetings, face-to-face meetings, electronic message boards or chat rooms, interactive web sessions, training sessions, press releases, posters. The CCO will have to ensure that all company communications collateral is optimized for mobile screens. Then CCO will have to be an apostle for Web 3.0 as it evolves, from text to video, and help customize company content for the company's identity and story, serving as a kind of Chief Content Officer.

The CCO as Change Master

The CCO must make sure that all communications to stakeholders describe the rationale for any change, people's new roles, and the benefits that can be expected for employees, customers, shareholders, and the company. This implies forging close ties between the *change* and the *communications* strategies.

The CCO as Manager

To lead the communications department, the CCO needs advanced management skills. Recruit capable people. Give them the freedom to make the right decisions swiftly. Keep them thinking strategically, and not just jumping from crisis to crisis. Guide them in a directive, top-down way. Manage large, complex projects. Budget effectively.

The CCO as Business Expert

To take part in the CXO conversation, and have enough confidence to believe that senior executive colleagues should take their advice CCOs need to understand the business well enough. This is not a trivial challenge. Other CXOs come to the table with profound, business-specific functional expertise. The CCO has to be tough enough, and have the "gravitas" to change the view of the CEO and senior managers that the role requires little more than word-smithing and copywriting expertise. The CCO of the future knows at least as much about managerial finance, marketing, organizational behaviour, supply chain management as a newly minted MBA.

CEO as Influencer

Understanding the dynamics of organizational change is not enough; the CCO needs to know how to influence people. High credibility for high influence. For

low influence means low traction for getting things done. To be influential, the CCO can play four *roles* - conceptualizer, counsellor, coach and executor. To fill all these roles, the CCO will have to have some basic competencies: influencing skills, building status and gaining visibility, the ability and willingness to share knowledge, multi-tasking, and putting the client, internal or external, first.

Conceptualizer. The CCO forges plans to communicate and maintain relationships with various groups of stakeholders, mainly to gain public trust. In this role, the CCO is concerned mostly with broad business topics through other internal and external groups, and with public opinion as a whole. The aim is the flawless execution of company mission and strategies.

Counsellor: The CCO analyses the changing values, norms and issues of society, of company culture and in the markets, and discusses these with members of the organization. She counsels other members of the organization, particularly top management, to make sure that they express the company vision/mission, story and strategy accurately and honestly. She also counsels them on the use of communication guidelines, policies and standards.

Coach. The CCO works to educate members of the company to communicate competently, in order to serve the company strategy. The CCO serves as an internal coach to the CEO and other top managers, often preparing them for major communication events.

Executor. The CCO, with the communications team, prepares the means of communication in order to help the organization formulate its specific communications practices. But in execution - the measure of all business effectiveness - the CCO needs the expertise of any executive, managing against targets, deadlines and measurements.

A Look to the Future

Is there a single prescription for CCO success? Probably not. The CCO as a full member of the CXO team. The CCO at the strategy table. More integrated, higher status, better resourced communications departments. The old exhortations apply: Know your business — and make sure every member of your team knows it as well. Set up get-it-done-systems. Build a deep, thorough knowledge of yourself and your products and services, the ways in which your customers use them, your competitors' positions, the trends and currents, opportunities and upheavals that you and your customers face, all open and readable by a variety of means, reachable via a variety of devices. Know your company story. Perhaps a couple of new exhortations apply as well: Be on your business game (and be sure your IT and Web teams are on theirs). Focus on value creation: the messages will come. Be ready for whatever Web 3.0 throws your way in this most technically, psychologically, politically complex of functions.