



THE EVERYTHING, EVERYWHERE, ALL-AT-ONCE CEO

A perspective
on leadership
challenges from
chiefs of staff



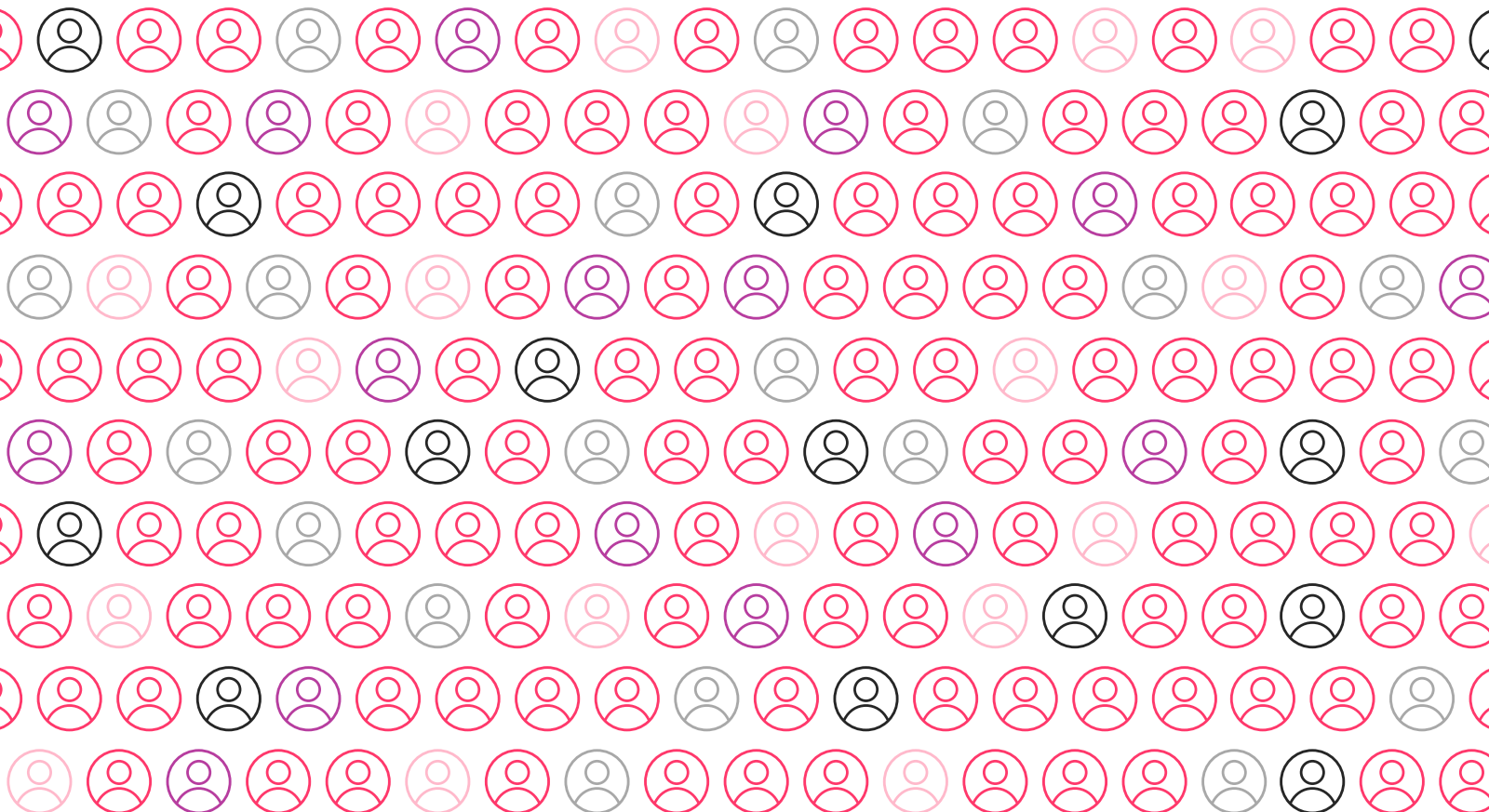
What are the issues at the forefront of leadership teams' minds in 2025? How are they managing conflicting demands from different stakeholders? And how prepared are they to face these mounting challenges?

To explore these questions, **Milltown Partners** and **The Chief of Staff Association** surveyed over 250 chiefs of staff at global organisations across technology, financial services, and healthcare, amongst a range of other sectors and industries. The majority were based in the UK and the United States, with over half at companies generating \$100M+ in revenue.

As both strategic advisers and operational leaders, chiefs of staff span individual business functions, offering a holistic view of the challenges faced by both an organisation and its leadership. In particular, the proximity of a chief of staff's relationship to their principal provides unparalleled insight into how these

leaders process information, make decisions, and handle pressure, both publicly and privately.

Their responses reveal insights into the common challenges leaders face due to internal and external factors, from regulators, political stakeholders, and employees, and provide valuable advice on how they can effectively navigate the anticipated turbulence of 2025. Our survey also offers those who support leadership teams, including board members and C-suite executives, new perspectives on the challenges their leaders are facing and the actions needed to drive continued success.



OUR RESEARCH REVEALS THREE KEY THEMES:



First, being an effective communicator, and especially having a proactive internal communications strategy, has become critical for leaders - and there is significant room for improvement.

The accelerating pace and scale of technological and organisational transformation demands greater agility than ever before. Driven by AI's rapidly expanding impact on jobs, business models, and entire sectors, companies must adapt quickly to secure competitive advantage. Those that fail to do so risk being left behind. This means leaders have to take their employees on a journey, motivating and aligning them around a common vision - and an effective internal communication strategy is critical in achieving this.



Second, never has the spotlight shone so brightly on businesses, and specifically on leaders, with a greater expectation on them to manage a wider range of stakeholders.

Heightened tensions between the United States and China, especially following the return of Donald Trump as President and increased scrutiny from regulators across multiple jurisdictions, are all contributing to the volatile geopolitical and economic environment. Navigating these challenges requires leaders to be more adept at stakeholder management and policy engagement, knowing that it is not just their businesses that are at risk but their personal reputations as well.



Third, leaders continue to navigate complex cultural trends and how they impact the workplace.

In recent years, leaders have faced increasing pressure to take public stances on social and political issues, often drawing criticism regardless of their position. Today, as even widely accepted initiatives like diversity, equity, and inclusion programmes face scrutiny, there appears to be somewhat of a reset taking place. The challenge for CEOs and principals remains how best to balance business priorities with a range of (often conflicting) employee and societal expectations - and how to do so while minimising internal friction.

Today's leaders have become the “**everything, everywhere, all-at-once**” CEOs. They are required to engage, communicate, inspire, and impact a broader range of stakeholders on a wider set of issues than ever before. They also need to do so at a time when scrutiny on them and the organisations they lead has never been more intense.

This poses a significant challenge, but also an opportunity. Those CEOs that demonstrate a clarity of vision and purpose are the ones who will be able to inspire their employees, manage their stakeholders, and guide their organisations to future success.



The most pressing communication and reputation challenges for my CEO stem from a disconnect between their intended strategic priorities and how these are conveyed to the organisation and external stakeholders. There is a clear gap in the ability to articulate thoughts in a manner that inspires confidence, aligns teams, and reflects a coherent vision.

KEY FINDINGS

Our multinational survey of 256 chiefs of staff found that:



1 There is a gap between the communication skills CEOs have, and the needs of the organisations they lead: The vast majority of chiefs of staff agree corporate communications, reputation and executive leadership are all key to the success of an organisation and its leaders, **but less than half (45%) say their CEOs are especially strong in these areas**, creating a major risk for organisations.



2 During periods of organisational change, internal communications is critical: **61%** of chiefs of staff note that their CEOs ask their communication teams to place a **high priority on internal audiences**, which is especially important during moments of uncertainty or transformation.



3 Policymakers top boards and investors: The volatile geopolitical and economic climate has elevated the importance of policymakers, **with 66% of chiefs of staff ranking them amongst the top three stakeholder groups that have increased in priority**, outpacing boards and investors.



4 CEOs face mounting expectations on social issues: Despite recent perceived shifts in the ‘great DEI retreat’, **59% of chiefs of staff anticipate increased pressure on leadership due to expectations from employees that their organisation takes a stand on societal or cultural issues.**



5 The role of the chief of staff continues to evolve: Chiefs of staff are increasingly consulted on communication and reputation challenges, **with 71% being a source of guidance for their leaders on these key issues.**

KEY FINDING #1

THE CEO'S VOICE: COMMUNICATIONS REMAINS A CORNERSTONE OF LEADERSHIP

As the worlds of business, society and politics continue to collide at an ever-increasing rate, there has never been a greater expectation for executives to be a vocal presence in the public domain. It is no longer sufficient to simply get on with 'business-as-usual'; CEOs have to be advocates for their organisations and themselves. Despite this, some CEOs often remain hesitant to do so.

The implications of this skills gap are significant, especially at a time when over 80% acknowledge executive communications has become more important for their leaders in recent years.

96%

Almost all chiefs of staff agree high-quality leadership communications skills can help CEOs and other senior executives succeed in a role

82%

More than 8 in 10 chiefs of staff agree the balance of issues that a leadership team has to navigate has become more complex in the last three years

45%

But less than half believe their CEOs are very or extremely strong in corporate communications and reputation management

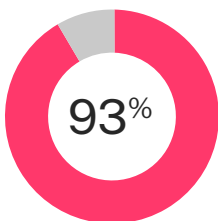


A challenge I have been trying for years to address is to be proactive, put our foot out first...instead of waiting for someone else to put the first word out and tell our story.

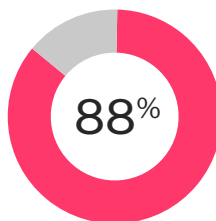


The CEO seems to be navigating with 'the wrong compass,' focusing on tactics or micro-management instead of embodying a forward-thinking, strategic mindset. This approach misrepresents the organisation's potential and dilutes confidence in their leadership.

There is also a business rationale for robust and authentic communications.



More than 9 in 10 chiefs of staff agree a positive or negative corporate reputation can impact shareholder value



A similar share believe corporate reputation should be a C-suite level priority

This becomes particularly acute as companies scale - where decisions about how to communicate a compelling vision can have a disproportionate impact on business success.

As unpredictability and virality become the norm, corporate crises represent another challenging moment. Chiefs of staff note leaders face increased pressure to offer rapid responses that deal with the immediate situation, but also move the conversation on.



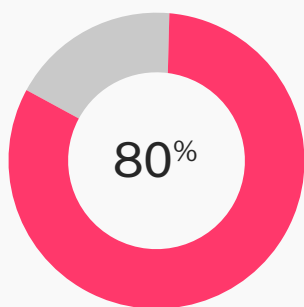
It is vital that any communication is carefully thought about and any impacts that it may have are considered, before the communication is made. Hitting the wrong note or saying the wrong thing could have disastrous consequences.



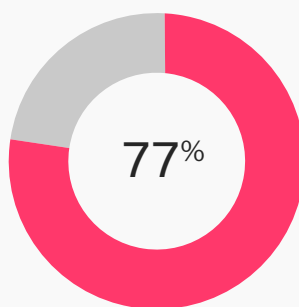
We recently experienced a crisis at a major shareholder level and required daily crisis management meetings and communications / statements both internally and externally. The process exposed some gaps in our readiness... We did not have set policies or playbooks for managing some of these scenarios.



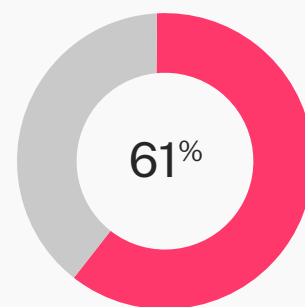
The CEO has been very quiet on social media and outward marketing which is becoming a potential issue for investors. It seems they want greater company visibility.



80% of chiefs of staff have seen expectations for high-quality communications at moments of crisis increase pressure on leadership in recent years



77% expect this trend to continue to increase in the next three years



61% agree social media has a disproportionate influence on a company's reputation

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Skills that propel individuals into leadership - like financial acumen or operational efficiency - do not always guarantee success at the top. While still important, these skills often become secondary to communication when articulating organisational vision, inspiring employees, and building stakeholder trust become the focus. Although natural for some leaders, authentic communication is a skill that must be developed by all.

KEY FINDING #2

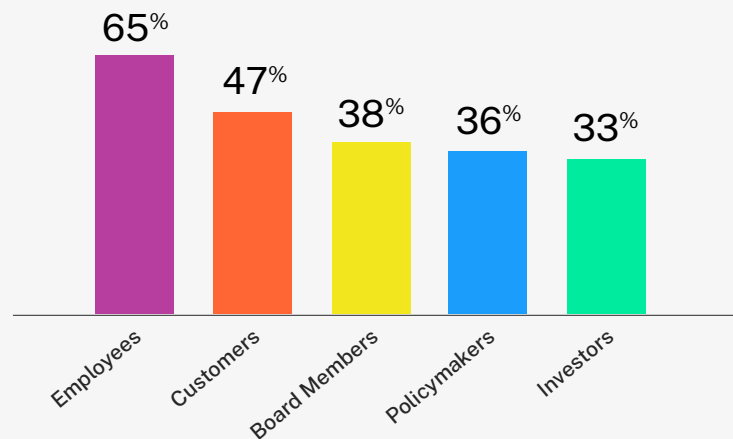
EMPLOYEES FIRST: INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS REMAINS A CORE FOCUS FOR LEADERS, ESPECIALLY DURING MOMENTS OF ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

Employees have always been a, if not the, critical component of a business' success, and attracting, retaining and motivating the best talent is a top priority for any leader. This is reflected in the fact that chiefs of staff say employees have become the most demanding stakeholder group in recent years.

It should therefore be no surprise that 61% of chiefs of staff report that their leaders are placing internal communications as a high or very high priority challenge for communications teams to address.

EMPLOYEES TOP CUSTOMERS AS THE MOST DEMANDING STAKEHOLDER GROUP.

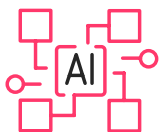
Which stakeholder groups have become the most demanding in the past three years?



N = 256 chiefs of staff | Showing % top 5 results



3 in 4 chiefs of staff note their leaders have increasingly sought guidance on how best to communicate around issues relating to organisational change, something **54%** say their leaders are asking communications teams to make high priority.

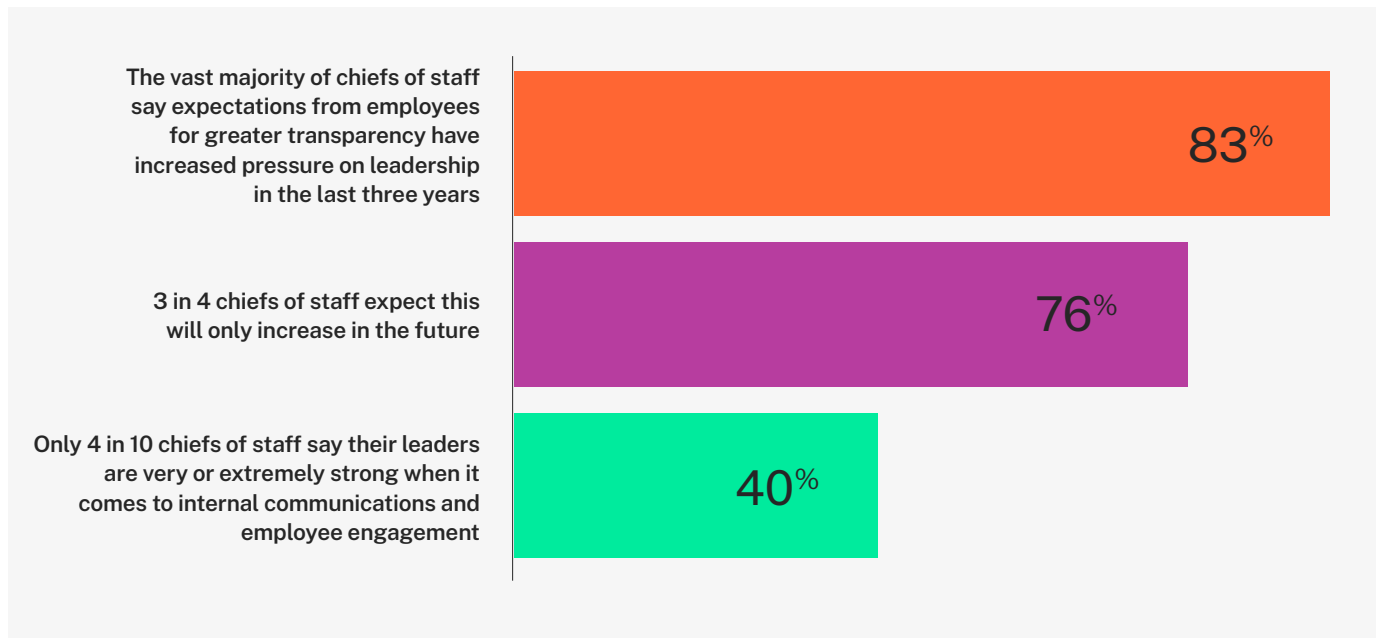


For example, **85%** of chiefs of staff also highlight mounting pressure on leaders to articulate how the integration of artificial intelligence will impact business operations.



Our organisation just went through a reduction in force (RIF), losing approximately 10% of our staff. The biggest challenge is rebuilding trust in leadership, boosting morale, and reinvigorating engagement for the staff who remain.

Alongside this is an increasing demand for overall transparency, where heightened expectations from employees have exerted pressure on leadership. But despite a clear recognition of the growing challenges internal communications poses, a notably smaller percentage of chiefs of staff think their leaders are especially strong in this key area.



The CEO is new to our organisation, where the tenure of employees averages 15 years. The CEO's ability to navigate the financial stress and communicate with empathy and transparency is of utmost importance to the employees...This crosses lines with their reputation and how they are perceived...



Striking a balance between transparency requested by employees and confidentiality required by [other needs] feels sometimes like you are juggling with bombs.

Taken together, it is no surprise, therefore, that internal communications have become of paramount importance to leadership teams. In fact, 89% of chiefs of staff say internal communications and employee engagement have increased in importance in how they support their leaders.

▶ WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Leaders face a challenge during disruptive change: implementing tough decisions while engaging and motivating employees. They must balance their drive for progress with employees' need for transparency and reassurance, and identifying the right internal communications channels to achieve this is key. No longer are employees just seen as important internal stakeholders, but as a group that has a significant impact on an organisation's external reputation.

KEY FINDING #3

POWER SHIFT: HOW POLICYMAKERS BECAME CRITICAL STAKEHOLDERS FOR CEOS

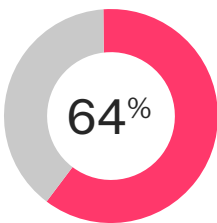
2024 saw elections in more than 60 countries in what proved to be a turbulent year for incumbents and mainstream political parties. The start of the second Trump presidency has heightened the sense of upheaval and uncertainty, with international trade and competition intensifying between the United States, the EU and China, and businesses adjusting to the new geopolitical reality.

This atmosphere has impacted how leaders prioritise their time. While customers remain the primary focus, chiefs of staff were more likely to report policymakers (63%) as having grown in priority for their leaders than both investors (47%) and board members (58%).

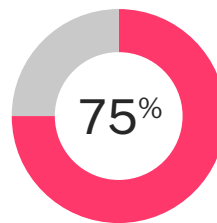


The most pressing communication/reputation challenge is explaining to policymakers a couple of thousand miles away how the situation [is] changing, and therefore why their policies and our actions [need] to change too.

Adding to the increased uncertainty of a sensitive and changing political landscape is escalating scrutiny from more active regulators.



More than 6 in 10 chiefs of staff report increased pressure on leadership in recent years due to greater levels of scrutiny from political or regulatory stakeholders



An even greater share expect this scrutiny to intensify further in the next three years



One challenge lies in effectively communicating the relevance and impact of our work to a broad audience — ranging from policymakers...to researchers and practitioners — each with unique interests and levels of technical understanding. Ensuring that our messaging strikes a balance between technical rigour and accessibility is crucial for sustaining our reputation.

There are also greater expectations for senior leaders to be directly involved in political and regulatory affairs, with 91% of chiefs of staff believing this to be true, marking a significant expansion of the traditional CEO remit.

Beyond political and regulatory challenges, 71% of chiefs of staff also predict mounting demands and scrutiny from investors and financial stakeholders will increase pressure on leadership over the next three years, which will require delicate management, especially from a communications perspective.



Being a FTSE100 company, there is much more pressure for structured communication from both regulators and investors and we don't have the relevant strong expertise as yet to manage those demands correctly all the time.

▶ WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Under increasing pressure from politicians and regulators, leaders must be both effective managers and visible spokespeople. This increased exposure and scrutiny creates greater risk as missteps are not just public, but directly impact the bottom line. Given the complex stakeholder landscape and high stakes, thoughtful and impactful external positioning is crucial. But done well, it can turn obstacles into opportunities for leaders.

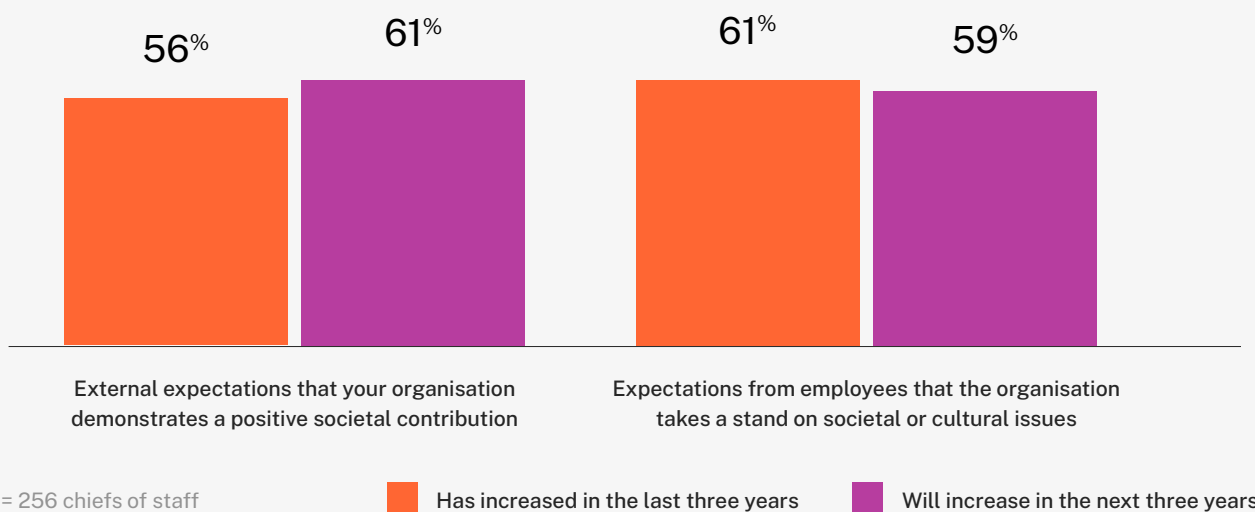
KEY FINDING #4

WALKING THE TIGHTROPE: MANAGING STAKEHOLDER EXPECTATIONS ON SOCIETAL ISSUES

Over half (56%) of chiefs of staff believe the external pressures to demonstrate a positive societal contribution have increased in recent years. A greater share (61%) think it is even more likely these pressures will only increase moving forward.

STAKEHOLDERS' EXPECTATIONS HAVEN'T JUST HEIGHTENED IN RECENT YEARS - THEY LOOK SET TO INTENSIFY FURTHER.

To what extent have the following trends increased pressure on your organisation's leadership in the last three years? / To what extent do you believe the following trends will increase pressure on your organisation's leadership in the next three years?



One of the most prominent cultural issues leaders need to manage is diversity, equity and inclusion. Looking ahead, these challenges are likely to intensify in light of political trends, especially in the United States. More recently, some organisations are openly questioning the impact of diversity, equity and inclusion programmes, or actively retreating from them.

43%

of chiefs of staff report their leaders have increasingly sought out advice around communications and reputation challenges relating to diversity, equity and inclusion

Ultimately, whilst some CEOs and principals might wish to focus on business priorities as opposed to responding to cultural and societal trends - as many organisations have done in recent years, such as the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements - they must still engage a complex, inter-generational, and politically active workforce. This represents a delicate balancing act and poses questions about what forces drive culture within an organisation.

Despite this, one thing remains constant. As leaders seek to build visibility without alienating key stakeholders, every internal or external intervention around societal issues contains both opportunities and risks, and both must be carefully considered.

Judge it right, and a CEO can be viewed as an influential leader within broader society. But get it wrong, as CEOs have done in the past, and the reputational damage to them personally, and to the businesses they lead, can be significant.



Creating a reputation as an authoritative voice in our field, balanced with the need to be discreet and not make overly political statements that can affect our access to the communities we serve on the ground, remains a challenge.



In a world of freedom of speech, academic freedom, global issues, DEI etc. and intergenerational workforces at play, there are hugely contentious issues that can, and are, bringing reputational challenges to the fore more often than before. Internal and external communications are no longer delineated in a world where everyone is a journalist!

► WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Organisations continue to struggle balancing social responsibility and business interests amidst political shifts and changing priorities. While navigating this, leaders should be highly cautious about public interventions on cultural issues, as they more often result in friction and rarely significantly impact broader societal debates.

KEY FINDING #5

FROM THE SHADOWS TO THE SPOTLIGHT: HOW CHIEFS OF STAFF HELP SHAPE ORGANISATIONAL AND EXECUTIVE REPUTATION

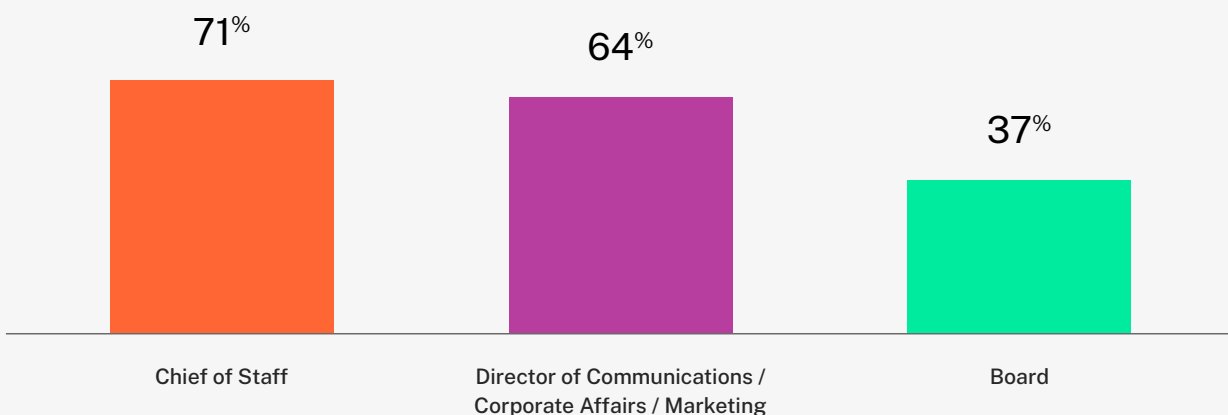
At times, the role of a CEO can be a lonely occupation. Increasingly, chiefs of staff are seen by their leaders as trusted professional advisers - to the extent that leaders are most likely to lean on them for communications and reputational challenges.



Everyone wants my principal's thoughts on everything... It is imperative that they utilise their chief of staff to help prioritise for them otherwise it would be a daily game of whack-a-mole.

WHO LEADERS LEAN ON FOR COMMUNICATIONS / REPUTATION ISSUES

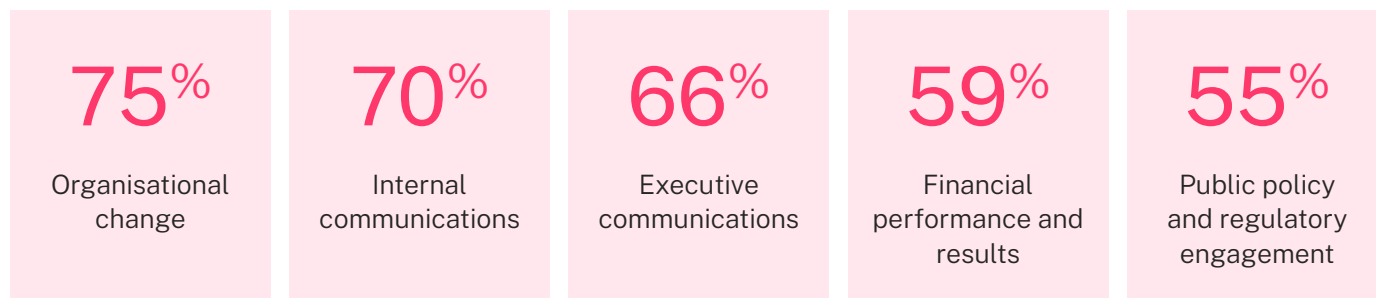
Which of the following sources does your CEO/Principal turn to for advice on reputation and communications?



N = 256 chiefs of staff | Showing % top 3 three results

As they have to engage with a growing number of stakeholders, leaders are unsurprisingly seeking out counsel to support their decision-making process across a plethora of challenging and complex issues.

Issues leaders are seeking advice on...



This increasingly strategic role across a wider brief has led to chiefs of staff being very or extremely interested in upskilling their capabilities across executive communications (77%), corporate communications (73%), internal communications (70%) and crisis management (66%).

► WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

CEOs and leaders face mounting challenges while their organisations become increasingly complex to run. Chiefs of staff offer a critical solution, enabling CEOs to be “everything, everywhere — all at once.” As leaders in their own right, chiefs of staff act as crucial conduits, both internally and externally, helping their principals navigate a turbulent landscape. More leaders could benefit from such strategically aligned individuals who combine executive-level vision with a deep understanding of the entire organisation.

CONCLUSION

MASTERING COMMUNICATIONS EQUALS MASTERING LEADERSHIP IN AN ERA OF ORGANISATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Whilst not without its significant challenges, today’s business environment offers unprecedented opportunities for leaders who can effectively engage with diverse stakeholders. As organisations navigate employee empowerment, evolving regulatory landscapes, societal pressures, and transformative technologies like AI, strategic communication remains a powerful tool for organisational success.

For leaders, every public engagement presents an opportunity to strengthen relationships, build trust, and advance organisational goals -and good, proactive communication is key to doing this successfully.



The most pressing communication challenges for my CEO are the ability for him to share what is in his head faster than the speed of light to get into something tangible for executive teams to run with.



Currently, much of our communication is reactive, responding to problems after they escalate rather than addressing them proactively. This creates a cycle of damage control rather than reputation building.

Communications excellence remains a key differentiator of successful leadership. Those leaders who master it by drawing on internal or external resources can articulate compelling visions, inspire employees, navigate change, and build enduring trust with stakeholders that drives both personal and organisational success. And that can only be good for them, and good for the businesses they lead.

METHODOLOGY

We surveyed 256 chiefs of staff, all of whom were members of The Chief of Staff Association. The survey covered chiefs of staff across 31 countries, mostly based in either the UK or the United States, working in technology, financial services, healthcare and a range of other sectors and industries.

The chiefs of staff surveyed mostly served CEOs. Some others reported to those of similar levels of seniority in executive leadership teams, including elected officials and board chairpersons.

The survey was conducted between 19th November to 8th December 2024. Responses were collected through an online survey that was distributed to all members of The Chief of Staff Association.

CONTACT DETAILS

Milltown Partners is an independent global advisory firm working with influential organisations and individuals on the communications challenges that define their reputations.

Our team of 150+ works from offices in San Francisco, New York, London, Dublin and Brussels.

To learn more about the work at Milltown Partners, please contact Dan Sacker (Director) at dsacker@milltownpartners.com.

The Chief of Staff Association's mission is to connect the world's chiefs of staff across business, government, non-profits, and the military to solve complex global challenges. CSA achieves this through education, research, networking, and issuing the industry-recognised Certified Chief of Staff® credential.

To learn more about The Chief of Staff Association, please contact Trent Smyth (CEO) at trent.smyth@csa.org.