

Voices of Leadership

CEOs are turning to Corporate Affairs like never before

By Charlie Beasley, Helen Crowley, Artemio Garza, Lena Kilee

As organisations emerge from the initial shock of COVID-19, Corporate Affairs leaders are well and truly earning their position at the ExCo table. The operational necessity of crafting and delivering business realities to organisations in a human and authentic way, whilst navigating the external environment and unseen reputational risk, has CEOs turning to their Corporate Affairs leaders like never before.

To discuss this, and how organisations are managing the gradual emergence from lockdown, Egon Zehnder recently gathered 60 global Corporate Affairs leaders from across different sectors and geographies. Whilst it was clear that every organisation is facing unique challenges as a result of this crisis, there was much agreement as to the complicated nature of this emergence – how do you give people the confidence to come together and start thinking about the future when so much about the present remains uncertain?

It was also clear that getting the communication approach right, and having communication leaders deeply embedded in the senior leadership of an organisation, is vital for organisations as they look to survive and hopefully recover.

A more surgical approach to internal communications

Corporate affairs leaders face a new level of responsibility when it comes to their stewardship of internal communications. Whereas in the past internal communications may have been a secondary consideration, COVID-19 has catapulted this function and the important role it plays to the fore. In the initial shock there was a very real and practical necessity to communicate to broad

audiences to support quick operational decisions (such as the move to remote working). As the crisis has matured, and parts of the business experience the crisis differently, the messages are need to be increasingly nuanced and targeted.

“Communications are challenging because colleagues have different needs; every building is different, every floor is different, and every person is different,” said one leader. “When you have people around the world experiencing different stages of the crisis it makes it a difficult challenge. We need to ensure everyone knows what to expect and we need to be able to answer their questions quickly. We try to look at messages location by location, floor by floor, colleague by colleague.” Organisations are having to find ways to communicate very specifically to individuals in way that makes sense of their specific situation – regional playbooks or general guidance material which does not help people confidently make choices in real-time will not be sufficient. Where teams do not feel public authorities are providing the information they need to make the choice to return to the workplace, they are looking to the communications of the organisations where they work to make sense of the world – providing that clarity and building trust places a heavy but important burden on communication leaders to get the message right. Much of the communication is about building confidence, where possible. “People are less confident about getting to work, especially if they rely on public transportation. The priority is the safety of our individual employees and their confidence in returning to the office and workspace.”

This new dynamic is requiring Corporate Affairs leaders to develop new processes and tactics to connect with teams across their organisation. “We developed a philosophy early on to increase the frequency of internal communications. We communicate more and try to be surgical in terms of what we are trying to achieve. We aim to be quite specific and intentional in what we say,” said one leader. “Everyone is working without a playbook,” he added. “Things change very quickly. We are trying to act on instinct and integrity.”

A greater focus on mental health

Increasingly, Corporate Affairs leaders say, they are finding their teams are responsible for a new critical factor: employee psychology. Communications are very much being seen through the lens of how it will impact the mental health of workers as much as about the information that is being conveyed.

“We have to give guidance to employees in a sensitive way, making sure they know we’re asking a lot of them and that we have their best interests in mind while maintaining the business,” said one leader.

The re-opening of any company will be closely tied to the emotional state of its workforce, said another. “Now we are talking about opening offices. We need confidence to do that,” he said. “We stepped up communications to frontline associates who make and move our product. We’ve started video calls and surprise calls to factories. The communications function has been integral to how we navigate this crisis and has proven to be an important tool to motivate employees and help them manage their energy levels.”

To manage this responsibility, leaders are turning to digital tools to help them understand the feelings employees may experience. Organisations are making use of more real-time pulse surveys to capture data around the emotional state of the workforce, helping them understand what is blocking progress, where uncertainty or fear exists, and what messages are getting through. “We have to spend a lot of time just listening,” said one leader. We expect companies to continue to adopt sentiment-tracking tools, including more advanced techniques such as those employing Artificial Intelligence.

The focus on reputation cannot be forgotten

Even with increased responsibilities, communications leaders cautioned against forgoing their function’s core role – to tell the company story to the outside world. There was a general consensus that a company’s response to this crisis will form the basis of its reputation for decades to come. How companies interact with employees, customers and broader community will be heavily scrutinized. When one company had an early success helping a hospital secure necessary supplies the communications team took care to tell that story – sensitively. “We were careful to not overly celebrate externally, but we were showing stories internally to build morale. Some of our employees are now front line workers and they need to be recognized and celebrated. But, we need to be careful about how to communicate that externally. We are mindful about not wanting to trivialize what we’ve done. We need to find a method of telling these stories in an appropriate way.”

A binding experience?

Despite the personal, organisational and societal trauma COVID-19 has caused, Corporate Affairs leaders are engaging with the positive. The crisis has brought employees together like never before, creating close working relationships despite the physical distance. When asked what they would like to take forward from the crisis, leaders were keen to praise the agile nature of the response, the increased pace of change and decision making. In addition, the crisis has thrown a real light on corporate purpose and organisations' reasons for being. For those companies deemed to be responding well to the crisis – both internally and externally – there are reports of an increase in organisational pride, potentially binding teams together in a way never seen before.

The recent months have underscored the need to have Corporate Affairs at the top table, embedded in senior decision making and ensuring messages can be delivered quickly and authentically to employees and to the world at large. Collaboration between all functions at the ExCo has increased, and the Corporate Affairs leader can often be the person to make sure decision-making is consistent with agreed messaging. Continuing to engage the hearts and minds of all stakeholders will be key as we move into the next phase of the COVID-19 crisis, and Corporate Affairs leaders will be critical to ensuring the messages are shared in an appropriate and sensitive way.

For more information, contact:



Charlie Beasley
London
charlie.beasley@egonzehnder.com



Helen Crowley
London
helen.crowley@egonzehnder.com



Artemio Garza
Miami
artemio.garza@egonzehnder.com



Lena Kilee
Berlin
lena.kilee@egonzehnder.com

Covid-19 Micro-Website

We have launched a micro-website where this and other informative pieces are posted. This site will be regularly updated: [click here](#) for further details.

About Egon Zehnder

Egon Zehnder is the world's preeminent leadership consulting firm, sharing one goal: to help people and organizations transform. We know what great leaders can do and are passionate about delivering the best solutions for our clients.

Our more than 500 Consultants in 68 offices and 40 countries form one powerful, collaborative team. Our services include: leadership development, individual, team and organizational effectiveness, CEO search and succession, executive search and assessment, Board advisory, and cultural transformation.

For more information visit www.egonzehnder.com and follow us on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).