



Corporate communications function:

Navigating a
new leadership
imperative

Over the past several years, Leidar has seen growing demand from international organisations, NGOs, multi-stakeholder organisations and associations, as well as corporations, for evaluations of their communications and stakeholder engagement functions.

While institutional and operating contexts differ considerably, the underlying trend is remarkably consistent across sectors. Organisations are increasingly asking whether these functions are 'fit for purpose' to support today's strategic priorities and tomorrow's challenges.

The communications function is changing. Very fast.

This shift is strongly reflected in Deloitte's 2026 research, [Corporate Affairs: The road to 2030 – The 2026 Corporate Affairs Report](#). Deloitte describes a function operating in a radically different and increasingly unpredictable environment, shaped by geopolitical volatility, rapid advances in artificial intelligence and declining institutional trust. Its findings point to significant structural change: 83% of Corporate Affairs functions are undergoing substantial transformation, 66% are restructuring their operating models and 49% are focusing on cost efficiencies and capability uplift.

At the same time, 43% of Corporate Affairs leaders now identify their function as a "growth driver", reflecting increasing expectations that the Corporate Affairs function should contribute more directly

to organisational performance. The research also highlights an evolving capability agenda – including commercial understanding, strategy, agility and AI – while finding that conventional reputational metrics still dominate measurement.

Deloitte is not alone. The OECD's 2026 article, [Public communication as a core asset for trust and policy success](#), calls for a shift from communications as a supporting function towards one that demonstrates strategic impact. McKinsey's 2025 report, [A new operating model for a new world](#), puts this within a broader organisational context, arguing that effective operating models depend not only on structure but on the alignment of governance, leadership, talent, processes and technology.

Taken together, these developments reinforce a fundamental shift in the leadership question: is the communications function properly positioned, organised and equipped to perform?

1. Stop reviewing communications. Start rethinking the function.

Reviews of communications strategies and programmes have typically started with outputs: media coverage, campaign metrics, channel utilisation, content and key messages, reach or stakeholder responses. Those questions remain relevant, but they are increasingly insufficient.

The problem is that organisations are struggling to anticipate issues, engage priority stakeholders, coordinate across markets or donor landscapes, or demonstrate the contribution of communications to strategic impact. The issue is often not the quality of an individual campaign, the choice of channels or the performance of individual executives. Instead, it sits deeper in the function itself.



That is why the focus of evaluation is widening. Executive leaders are asking whether:

- Communications mandates are clearly defined
- Decision-making processes are understood and utilised
- Teams are organised around the organisation's priorities
- Resources follow those priorities
- The function can draw on the skills, data and technology required to operate in a faster and more complex environment

The questions are moving from 'How well did communications perform?' to 'Is the communications and stakeholder engagement capability designed to perform?'

The pressures reshaping communications



Geopolitical fragmentation has made stakeholder landscapes less predictable. Regulation and public scrutiny increasingly intersect with reputation and commercial or mission outcomes. Artificial intelligence is changing both the production and discovery of information, while also creating new expectations around speed, insight and efficiency.

Resource pressure is forcing organisations to make harder choices about what should be centralised, embedded, automated, outsourced or stopped. At the same time, declining trust and a more fragmented information environment increase the cost of weak coordination and slow decision-making.



For communications and stakeholder engagement, this creates a new evaluation agenda. Structure matters, but so do governance, leadership access, processes, interfaces with other functions, talent, technology, measurement and culture.

A function can have excellent people and still underperform if accountabilities are blurred, priorities compete, information is trapped in silos or senior leaders engage communications too late. Conversely, a well-designed capability can increase the value of existing resources by improving clarity, speed and focus.

2. Fit for purpose? The question every leadership team should ask.

‘Fit for purpose’ is therefore more useful than a generic search for best practice. There is no universally optimal communications model. The right design depends on what the organisation is trying to achieve, which stakeholders can influence those outcomes, where decisions are made, how risk is distributed and which capabilities must be available centrally, locally or within business and programme teams.

This changes the meaning of communications capability. It is not simply the sum of professional skills within a communications department. It is the organisation’s ability to:

- Understand its operational environment
- Identify and prioritise stakeholders and broader target audiences
- Make informed engagement choices
- Take decisions and initiate or steer broader decision-making
- Mobilise leaders
- Develop and manage narratives
- Execute effectively

Some components of that capability sit inside communications; some are shared with executives, policy teams, programme leaders, country operations, marketing, public affairs, investor relations, HR or other functions. Evaluation therefore has to examine interfaces as well as departments, units or even partner organisations.

Are you measuring effort or impact?

The distinction between activity and capability is particularly important in measurement. High volumes of content, meetings, campaigns or media engagement may demonstrate effort, but not organisational effectiveness.

Instead, a capability-oriented review asks whether activities are connected to strategic objectives and whether the function can prove how it contributes to outcomes. The OECD’s work on public communication makes a similar distinction. It identifies the following prerequisites for focusing on impact not outputs:



Governance



Institutional structures



Professionalization



Systematic evaluation

as prerequisites for a more strategic function, and notes that evaluation too often remains focused on outputs rather than impact.

Seen this way, a ‘fit-for-purpose’ review is not primarily a communications audit. It is a leadership exercise about organisational readiness. It tests whether the function is configured for the environment the organisation now faces rather than the environment in which its current structures were created.

3. Different missions. Similar leadership challenge.

The logic applies across sectors, but the purpose of the capability differs. NGOs and intergovernmental organisations ultimately seek mission impact, legitimacy and stakeholder support, often under significant resource constraints and within complex governance networks. Corporations seek enterprise value improvements, revenue growth, competitiveness and resilience.



Their stakeholder systems may overlap, but their mandates, accountabilities and definitions of success are not interchangeable. This is why similar review questions can lead to different priorities. An NGO or IGO may need to clarify relationships between headquarters, regions, country offices and member organisations, while strengthening donor and policy engagement

and ensuring that scarce resources are aligned with mission priorities. A corporation may need to integrate public affairs, corporate and marketing communication, internal communications and other disciplines more effectively with the overall business strategy and improve executive counsel. All this requires a stronger measurement of business contribution.

Same framework, but different objectives

DIMENSION	NGO'S / IGO'S	CORPORATIONS
Primary objective	Maximise mission impact with (often) constrained resources	Increase enterprise value and competitiveness
Typical trigger	Funding pressure, donor expectations, governance reviews, fading legitimacy	Market transformations, external shocks, M&A, reputation decline, business underperformance
Strategic priority	Improve organisational performance, accountability, stakeholder engagement and stakeholder support	Strengthen business resilience, accelerate adaptation, enhance competitiveness and (restore) growth
Primary evaluation focus	Governance, organisational effectiveness, stakeholder engagement, resource alignment, activation	Operating model, functional integration, capability, business contribution
Success	Stakeholder trust, legitimacy and policy impact	Enterprise value, licence to operate, business resilience and sustainable growth

The common leadership challenge is therefore not to copy a model from another organisation or sector.

The leadership challenge is to establish the capabilities required by the organisation's own strategy and then determine whether governance, resources, structures and behaviours support them. Benchmarking can provide perspective, but it should inform judgement rather than replace it.

4. One assessment approach. Varying organisational realities.

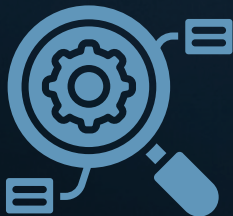
Although outcomes differ, the analytical toolkit is broadly comparable. A robust review normally combines evidence from several sources:



Strategy and organisational documents



Interviews with leaders, communications teams and internal clients



Stakeholder research



Performance and resource data



Process and governance analysis



External benchmarks including peers and competitor reviews

The purpose is not to produce parallel streams of evidence, but to test whether they point to the same underlying strengths, gaps and root causes.

A useful assessment begins with strategy. What does the organisation need communications and stakeholder engagement to enable over the next three to five years? From there, the review can examine:

- Mandate
- Stakeholder priorities
- Governance
- Structure
- Roles and decision rights
- Processes
- Existing and required skills
- Technology
- Available resources
- Measurement tools and current KPI frameworks

This sequence avoids a common failure that involves starting with the existing organisational chart and asking how to optimise it before asking whether it is designed around the right objectives.

The same methodology must nevertheless be adapted to organisational reality. Networked NGOs and IGOs may require greater emphasis on governance across semi-autonomous entities, collaboration, legitimacy and resource stewardship.

Corporations, on the other hand, may place greater emphasis on business integration, speed, functional interfaces and the link between reputation, regulatory outcomes, resilience and value creation. The questions may be similar; the evidence and weighting will differ.

Similar questions, different priorities

DIMENSION	NGO'S / IGO'S	CORPORATIONS
Primary stakeholders	Donors, members, governments, partners	Customers, investors, regulators, employees
Organisational focus	Governance, collaboration and alignment across the network	Operating model, business integration and executive alignment
Key evaluation dimensions	Communications effectiveness, stakeholder engagement, advocacy, governance, organisational alignment	Public Affairs, regulatory affairs, IR, internal comms, executive visibility, marketing comms, reputation management
Advisory outcomes	Governance refinement, clearer accountabilities, stakeholder prioritisation, resource stewardship and stronger mission delivery	Operating model evolution, capability enhancement, functional integration, measurement frameworks and stronger business performance
Executive sponsor	Secretary General, head of operations, chairs of supervisory or advisory councils	CEO, COO, Corporate Affairs Director

The result should be more than a list of observations. The most useful reviews distinguish **symptoms from root causes** and translate **findings into choices**. A proliferation of channels, for example, may be a symptom of unclear stakeholder prioritisation. Slow approvals may reflect governance rather than process.

Weak measurement may originate in the absence of agreed strategic outcomes rather than a lack of tools. Recommendations become actionable when they identify these relationships and define what must change, who owns the change and how progress will be measured.

5.No executive sponsor?
Don't expect transformation.

This is where top executive sponsorship becomes decisive. A review of communications and stakeholder engagement frequently touches organisational boundaries, senior leadership behaviours, budgets and decision rights. The communications lead may own many processes and improvements, but cannot unilaterally redesign interfaces with other functions, change governance across a network or require executives to engage differently. The sponsor therefore needs both authority and visible commitment.

The appropriate executive sponsor will vary according to the organisation. In an NGO or IGO, this may be the Secretary General, COO or council chair. In a corporation, it may be the CEO, COO or Corporate Affairs Director. What matters is that the sponsor frames the review as an organisational priority, ensures access to relevant evidence and stakeholders, helps resolve contested issues and remains accountable for implementation once the assessment is complete.



The growing proximity of communications leadership to CEOs reinforces this point. Katie Deighton mentioned in her WSJ article that nearly half of Chief Communications Officers surveyed by Korn Ferry in 2025 reported directly to the CEO, compared with 37% in 2015.

Deloitte similarly finds high levels of CEO access as Corporate Affairs functions undergo significant transformation. Proximity alone does not guarantee influence, but it creates the conditions for communications to contribute earlier to decisions rather than being asked to explain them afterwards.

Without sponsorship, evaluations can generate well-researched reports that sit alongside existing structures. With sponsorship, they can become a mechanism for organisational adaptation: clarifying mandate, reallocating resources, strengthening capability, changing governance and creating a more explicit link between communications, stakeholder engagement and organisational performance.

6. Eight questions to test your communications capability

A periodic review provides leadership with a systematic opportunity to assess whether communications and stakeholder engagement remain aligned with the organisation’s strategy, operating environment and evolving expectations.

Rather than assuming that existing structures and ways of working remain effective, leadership teams can begin by asking a small number of fundamental questions:

- ? Is our communications and stakeholder engagement function structured, governed and empowered to deliver against our strategic business or organisational priorities?
- ? Do our governance arrangements, decision-making processes, roles and accountabilities reflect the realities and demands of today’s operating environment?
- ? Are resources, capabilities and leadership attention aligned with the stakeholders, issues and outcomes that matter most to organisational success?
- ? Do our measurement frameworks demonstrate communications capability, effectiveness and strategic impact. Or do they remain predominantly focused on activity and outputs?
- ? Are communications leaders engaged sufficiently early in strategic decision-making to anticipate risks and opportunities, shape choices and provide effective counsel?
- ? Do we have the right combination of skills, data, insight and technology to operate effectively in an AI-enabled, increasingly fragmented and fast-moving information environment?
- ? Is the function sufficiently agile and resilient to anticipate change, adapt to emerging challenges and support the organisation through periods of transformation and uncertainty?
- ? Is communications sufficiently integrated across functions, geographies and leadership structures to ensure consistency of direction while enabling effective execution?

These questions move the discussion beyond whether communications is busy, visible or producing good work. They ask whether the organisation has built the engagement capability it needs to navigate change, earn stakeholder support and deliver strategy. In a more volatile operating environment, that is increasingly not a functional question. It is a leadership question.

Leidar is a leadership and corporate affairs consultancy that helps clients set their course, navigate and communicate effectively.

This is Leadership Navigation.

We hope you have found this report useful.

If you would like further detail about the findings, or more information about navigating, rethinking and rebuilding trust, legitimacy, and impact, please contact:



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About Leidar

Headquartered in Geneva with offices in London, Brussels, Oslo, Dubai, Singapore, Washington, DC and New York, we mainly work with businesses and organisations that operate on a global scale. We understand how to develop and deliver their messages to a wide internal and external stakeholder audience and how to leverage business opportunities in a rapidly changing political landscape.

Our clients include publicly listed and private companies, industry groups, international organisations and NGOs, across all sectors.