EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION MONITOR 2025/26

INTERGENERATIONAL CHALLENGES IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS: EXPLORING CORPORATE POSITIONING, TALENT MANAGEMENT AND COACHING

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Preface

Turbulence and change are being normalised in our modern world, and the ability to steer a path through this landscape is becoming increasingly challenging. We are seeing global markets shifting rapidly, rules of engagement changing, alliances renegotiated, and crises emerging without warning. Communication leaders are in the eye of this storm and more than ever are using strategic foresight and organisational values to guide decision making and to stay on course. Their ability to lead through ambiguity is not only essential – it is fast becoming a critical differentiator.

For nearly 20 years, the European Communication Monitor has scientifically studied and provided data-based interpretations of the changing environment that communication managers work in and in so doing has helped them to navigate what are increasingly turbulent waters. This has been managed through transnational surveys across the whole of Europe and for the past two years through a new methodological approach based on one-to-one conversations about key topics and challenges with an elite sample of chief communication officers (CCOs) from the Top 300 European companies.

For this year's report, we have drilled down on three key topics starting with the exploration of how top communicators manage values-based positioning strategy, then looking at their approaches to bridging the gap in recruiting and retaining top talent and finally how they engage in coaching top management, team members, and others in their organisation to meet strategic drivers for their companies. All three topics have been explored through the lens of intergenerational factors, or how organisations and their strategic communication activities are affected by generational diversity in their teams as well as in their wider stakeholder networks.

The research team would like to cordially thank the 30 global heads of communication who volunteered their valuable time to participate in this study. We greatly appreciate the work done by our project manager Caroline Siegel. Further, we are indebted to our partners who enable us to conduct neutral and independent research: the Academic Society for Management & Communication, Centro per la Comunicazione Strategica (CECOMS), #NORA – The Nordic Alliance for Communication & Management, Asociación de Directivos de Comunicación (Dircom) and Entreprises et Médias. Last but not least, we would like to thank Fink & Fuchs for designing this report and our website.

We invite you to explore this report with curiosity and reflect on its findings – it offers compelling insights, some of which may challenge assumptions, spark new ideas, and inspire fresh approaches to leadership, competence, and development across your organisation.

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What the report tells us

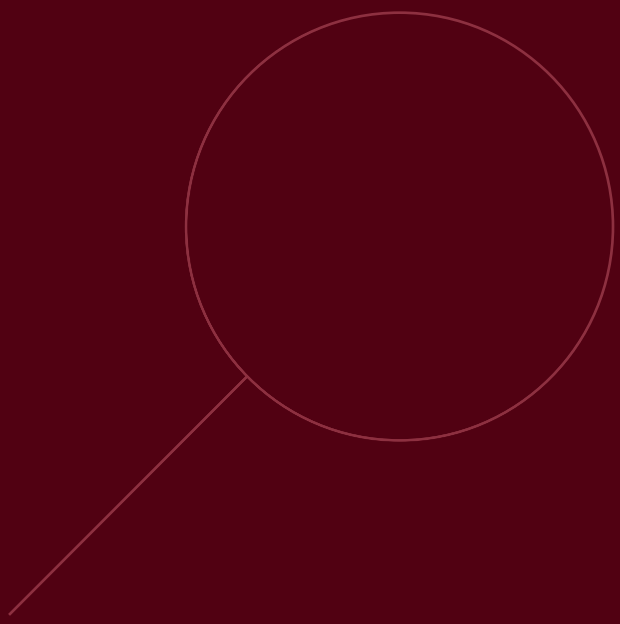
The European Communication Monitor 2025/26 is a large-scale scientific study that produces unique insights by analysing the experiences and projections of an elite sample of chief communication officers (CCOs) representing the 300 largest companies in Europe. The selection of the sample was based on country-specific rankings in order to ensure a comprehensive representation of major corporations in each European country. These senior executives – whose titles range from Chief Corporate Affairs Officer to Head of Group Communications – are responsible for shaping both external and internal communications strategies at a global level. Through a rigorous blend of qualitative and quantitative methods the study explores three pressing topics corporate communications, each examined through an intergenerational lens: (1) the use of values as a foundational communication framework; (2) the challenge of retaining top talent in an increasingly fluid and competitive global marketplace; and (3) the role of coaching in fostering empowered leadership, developing future capability, and reinforcing the leadership identity of CCOs themselves. Each of these topics is analysed with particular emphasis on one overarching theme: challenges related to intergenerational differences. This theme is of particular importance as business leaders face challenges balancing diverse work expectations, communication styles, technology adoption, and cultural cohesion across generations. This independent academic study delivers new and original insights in all three areas.

The research highlights a pivotal shift in how chief communication officers conceptualise and operationalise **values** in their organisations. Rather than treating values as static declarations, CCOs frame them as adaptive, context-sensitive tools for ongoing sense-making and cultural negotiation. This reframing positions values as central to navigating complexity, fostering cohesion, and building credibility across diverse internal and external audiences. The evolving role of values calls for a more reflexive and participatory communication strategy – one that is iterative, co-created, and attuned to generational expectations and social dynamics. As such, values-based positioning becomes less about asserting identity and more about sustaining trust and alignment in an increasingly fragmented and fast-moving environment.

Effective **talent management** in communication departments increasingly depends on the ability to lead intergenerational teams with agility and foresight. The findings underscore that CCOs who invest in cultivating purpose, adaptability, and recognition within their teams are more likely to attract and retain top talent, particularly in competitive global markets. Strategic talent stewardship involves more than recruitment and retention; it requires crafting a team culture that reflects the values of the organisation, adapts to changing expectations, and demonstrates visible impact on business priorities. This approach not only elevates communications as a strategic function but also reinforces the role of communication leaders as culture carriers and change agents within broader corporate and societal landscapes.

Coaching emerges as both a leadership philosophy and a strategic tool in the hands of top leaders in communication. CCOs do not view coaching merely as a method for performance enhancement, but as a relationship-based practice that supports top management, cultivates future leadership, and strengthens organisational resilience. By embracing inclusive, situationally adaptive coaching styles and rejecting reductive generational assumptions, they foster environments where diverse talents can thrive. Coaching becomes a lever for shaping culture, reinforcing purpose, and embedding values throughout the organisation. In doing so, it also affirms the evolving identity of the CCO as a transformational leader – one whose influence extends beyond communication into the heart of organisational strategy and development.

Research design and topics covered by the study



The empirical approach of the ECM study combines rigorous qualitative and quantitative methods. The academic standards applied in conducting both the literature review and interviews with CCOs, combined with the independence that is ensured by a network of renowned research universities, sets the study apart from all others in the field. An elite sample of chief communication officers, representing the Top 300 companies across Europe, shared their experiences and thoughts. This provides deep insight into how intergenerational factors are managed by CCOs dealing with the company's values-based strategic positioning; how talent streams in communication departments are developed and managed; and how coaching is utilised to build organisational resilience and growth.

Methodological approach

The deep-dive study design of the European Communication Monitor captures the escalating challenges and dynamics within the field.

A unique study design provides profound insights

The ECM 2025/26 research design explores current and future challenges of strategic communication beyond the surface of popular surveys. Such studies, which are frequently conducted by trade media, professional associations, agencies, or service providers, are often instructive and inspiring. But they are seldom based on established theories and previous research. Many samples are undefined and include respondents that may or may not have experience, knowledge, and power to understand and shape the future of the field.

The ECM research design uses in-depth interviews supported by a short standardised survey to generate new, unique, and robust insights for communication research and practice by focusing on acknowledged top leaders in the field. The insights presented in this ECM report and in the previous edition are based on interviewing a changing elite sample of 30 chief communication officers (CCOs) representing the Top 300 listed and private companies in Europe. Those businesses are not only a major driver of the economy but key actors impacting all other spheres of life, affecting, e.g., cultural, political, and technological change. The highest-ranking communicators of those companies, their views and decisions, influence the development of the profession in all types of organisations, including agencies, on a global level. Business leaders, communicators, scholars, and students alike can learn from their experiences and insights. The assessments from those shaping the future of the field can be used to reflect on one's own situation in a profound way without the fear of following hype pushed in the interest of various players in industry.

Thought-provoking topics on three levels

The topics investigated in each annual edition of the ECM are rooted in interdisciplinary debates, scientific research, and the results of accurate pretests. A key concept from current management research (this edition: intergenerational differences; see pp. 12–13) is explored by discussing three topics that impact corporate communications on different levels of analysis: the level of companies (macro level: organisational challenges), communication departments (meso level: functional challenges), and the most senior communication executives (micro level: personal challenges). This reflects the holistic perspective of social science research and helps to generate nuanced and critical insights.

Qualitative interviews supported by a pre-questionnaire

Revealing in-depth knowledge and perceptions requires a sophisticated empirical design. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for

Organisational challenges (Macro level)

Current business trends and their impact on communication strategies and activities, e.g. driven by developments in society, politics, technology, economics, or the media landscape.

Functional challenges (Meso level)

Established and upcoming practices for managing and executing communications in specialised units, e.g. regarding processes, products, services, resources, and value creation.

Personal challenges (Micro level)

How chief communication officers deal with new and pertaining expectations and practices in their roles as top-level managers, team leaders, and experts for all aspects of corporate communications.

Holistic approach of the study

this purpose. Expert interviews are useful to examine the interviewees' understanding individually and in detail (Maxwell, 2013). This allows researchers to "tailor the questions they ask to the respondent in order to get rich, full stories and the information they need" (Palmer, 2019, p. 61) and participate in a broader narrative and exploration of the topic (Sandelowski, 2010). The interviews are supported by a quantitative online pre-questionnaire that helps to catch unbiased and standardised assessment of the interviewees prior to the personal interviews. The mixed method approach helps to structure the data collected and supports a holistic interpretation (Morgan, 2014).

Generating the Top 300 company panel and the CCO sample

The sampling is based on a rigorously compiled and annually updated database, which includes the largest companies from all 50 European countries. These companies are selected in a three-step procedure and ranked according to their sales/revenue in Euros based on current conversion rates: First, the highest-ranking European companies according to the Forbes 2000 list are identified (public companies only). Second, companies from the Family Capital ranking (family businesses only) which do not appear in Forbes 2000 are added. Third, country-specific company rankings are analysed to ensure that any large company which neither appears in Forbes 2000 nor in Family Capital is included. This results in the full ECM company panel showcasing the Top 300 companies in Europe. Those businesses are mainly headquartered in the strongest economies in which the main languages spoken are English, French, German, Italian, or Spanish. The respective CCOs (also known as Chief Corporate Affairs Officers, Head of Communications etc.) and their contact data are identified with the help of partners. This generates a final database, the Top 300 CCO panel.

A random sample of 30 from the Top 300 CCO panel is interviewed for each edition of the ECM. The researchers recruited interviewees based on a preliminary list and a back-up list reflecting similar sectors or countries, which was used when invited CCOs were not available. This ensures consistency and diversity and follows a purposeful random sampling strategy (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Miles et al., 2020). The final sample for the ECM 2025/26 listed on page 9 includes 30 chief communication officers (16 identified as female, 14 as male). The CCOs are on average 52 years old, have more than 22 years of relevant professional experience in corporate communications and almost 17 years of leadership experience in the field. Their companies are based in 13 different countries with an average annual revenue of 37.86 billion Euros and an average of 96,643 employees. Industries spanned a diverse range, including financial services, customer goods, retail, and ICT.

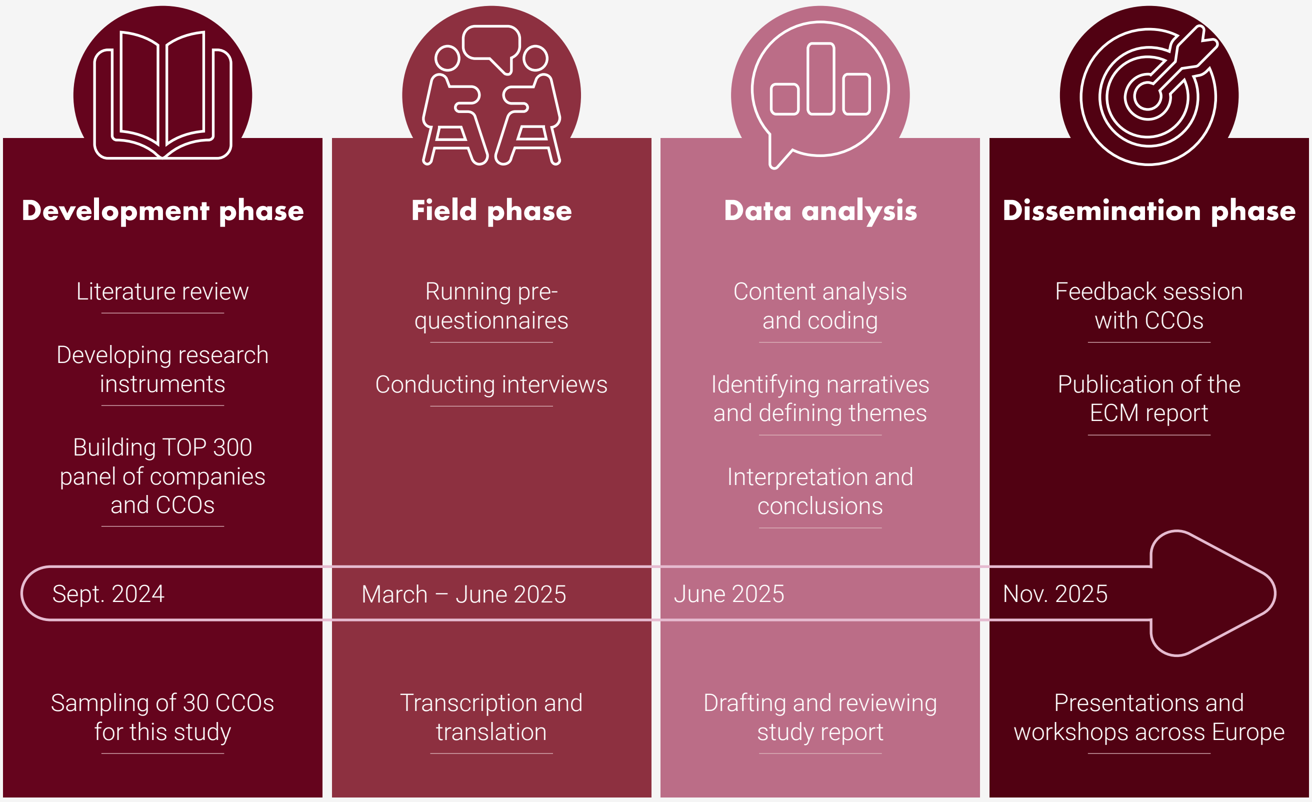
Gathering data across countries and language zones

To identify the existing body of knowledge on the main theme (this year: intergenerational differences) and to develop research questions according to the three subtopics (organisational, functional, and personal challenges) a comprehensive interdisciplinary literature review was conducted. The research questions were operationalised in two major instruments. A quantitative pre-questionnaire with 13 sub-instruments used 5-point Likert scales to measure agreement to different statements (Strongly disagree – Strongly agree). It also covered demographics, data usage, and privacy. A qualitative semi-structured interview guideline included 26 open questions. The questionnaire and guideline were pre-tested, approved by the ethics committee of Leeds Beckett University, and translated where necessary.

The CCOs were asked to fill in the online pre-questionnaire prior to the interview. Results were treated anonymously and are used in this report to indicate initial assessments of the topics. The 30 interviews were conducted personally by the six professors of the ECM research team between March and June 2025 with a videoconferencing tool (Paulus & Lester, 2022) and in a language chosen by the interviewees. Interviews lasted 54 minutes on average and were audio-recorded. Participants agreed that their names are listed but all quotes are anonymised.

Analysing and interpreting the data

The quantitative survey was statistically evaluated. Percentages shown in this report indicate how many respondents supported a statement (agreed, strongly agreed), reported frequent use (often, always), or mentioned a major impact. Figures refer to the sample and are indicative (not representative) of the population of all Top 300 CCOs. The qualitative interviews were transcribed, translated to English (where necessary), and reviewed multiple times before starting the data analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study involved two rounds of coding, including open, in-vivo, and axial coding by two coders and supported by MaxQDA software. This included breaking down the data into meaningful segments and analysing them based on clear meaning, direct language, phrases, or quotes from the participants, as well as understanding deeper characteristics and attributes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Miles et al., 2020). The codes were condensed to facilitate the search for themes, which were then reviewed in relation to the extracted codes. In a final step, these themes were defined and labeled to convey the participants' overall narrative, with quotes selected to illustrate each theme (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). The data were interpreted by the researchers and the research assistant in the light of the previously identified body of knowledge, which formed the basis for preparing this report.



Research process

Interviewees

Chief communication officers participating in the study			
01	Allianz	Lauren Day	Group Head of Communications
02	Atlas Copco	Sara Hägg Liljedal	Senior Vice President, Chief Communications Officer
03	BAE Systems	Caitlin Hayden	Group Communications Director
04	BBVA	Paula Puyoles	Global Head of Communications
05	Bank of Ireland	Damien Garvey	Director Group External Communications and Public Affairs
06	Bayer	Michael Preuss	Executive Vice President, Head of Communications
07	BNP Paribas	Elise Hermant	Head of Communications
08	Carrefour	Charles Hufnagel	Senior Vice President Communications
09	Deutsche Telekom	Philipp Schindera	Senior Vice President Corporate Communication
10	DHL	Nicola Leske	Executive Vice President Group Communications and Sustainability
11	Eni	Erika Mandraffino	Director External Communication
12	Erste Group Bank	Margarita Thiel	Head of Corporate Communications, Corporate Affairs and Stakeholder Management
13	Essity	Jessica Alm	Chief Communications Officer
14	Ferrero	Marco Brambilla	Head of Corporate Communication
15	Fnac Darty	Cécile Trunet-Favre	Vice President Communication and Public Affairs
16	Generali	Simone Bemporad	Group Chief Communications and Public Affairs Officer
17	Heineken	Joanna Price	Chief Corporate Affairs Officer
18	Henkel	Carsten Tilger	Senior Vice President Corporate Communications and Public Affairs
19	Imperial Brands	Jonathan Oliver	Global Communications Director
20	Inditex	Raúl Estradera	Chief Communications Officer
21	L'Oreal	Blanca Juti	Chief Corporate Affairs and Engagement Officer
22	Lavazza	Alessandra Bianco	Corporate Communication Director
23	Lloyds Banking Group	Andrew Walton	Chief Corporate Affairs Officer
24	Moeve	Juan Llobell	Senior Vice President Corporate Communications and Public Affairs
25	NorgesGruppen	Stein Rømmerud	Executive Vice President Public Affairs, Sustainability and Communication
26	Novo Nordisk	Katrine Sperling	Corporate Vice President, Global Communication
27	Orange	Caroline Guillaumin	Executive Vice President Corporate Communications
28	Sonepar	Matt Pothecary	Chief Communications Officer
29	Tietoevry	Jonna Peltola	Head of Communications and Brand
30	WPP	Chris Wade	Director of Communications and Corporate Affairs

Sample of the ECM 2025/26

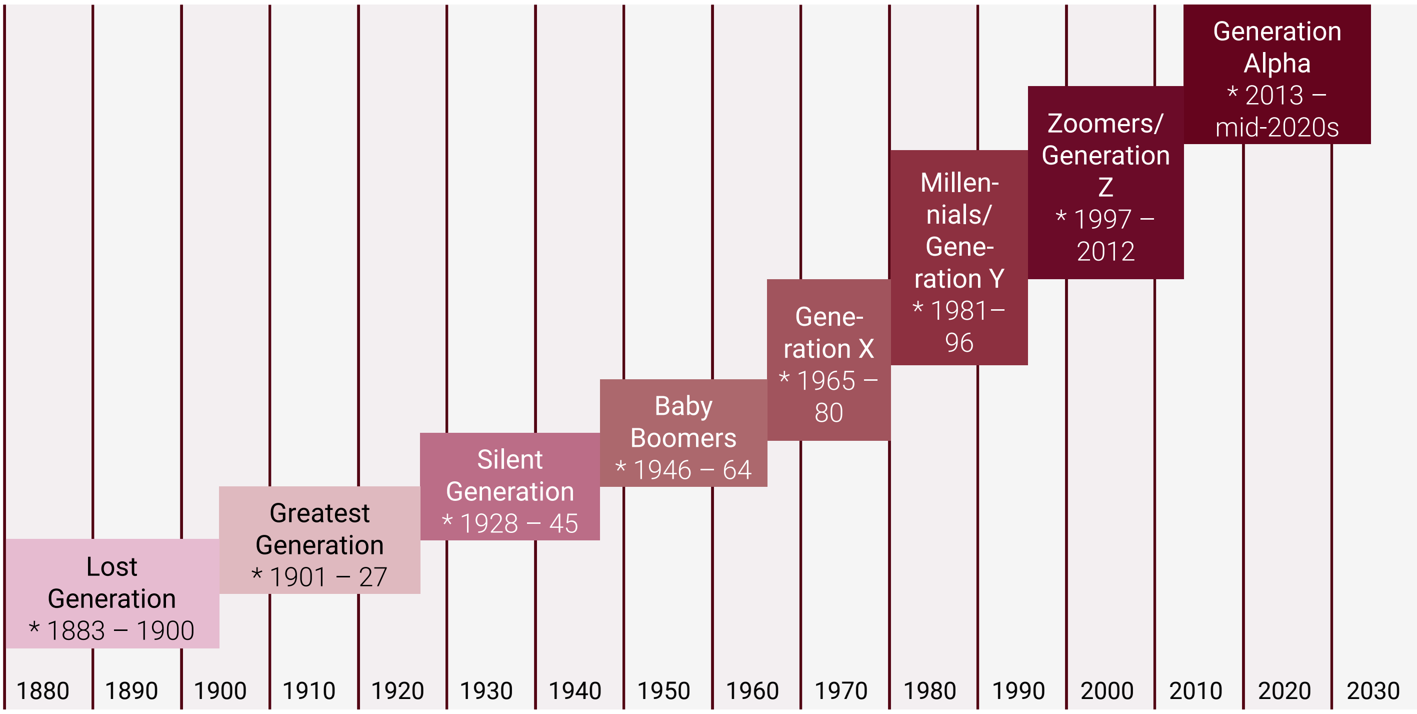
Intergenerational challenges in corporate communications

Why the topics explored in this study are timely and relevant.

Intergenerational stakeholders raise challenges for organisations

As workplace demographics shift, strategic communicators face the critical task of crafting internal and external messages to effectively engage stakeholders across five generations. Although generational diversity is increasingly recognised as a dimension of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), it is often given less attention compared to gender or ethnicity, despite its growing importance due to global demographic shifts (Arsel et al., 2022).

A key challenge in corporate communications is to create clarity, trust and alignment between the different worldviews, values and expectations of the generations. Successful corporate communications requires a shift from generic messages to segment-specific strategies that reflect generational identities and preferences (Candello & Mohammadpour, 2025; Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Raslie, 2021).



Generational categories based on Dimock (2019)

Generational insight matters in corporate communications

Generations represent cohorts that are shaped by shared historical and social contexts and influence their interpretation of organisational narratives and leadership communication (Costanza et al., 2012; Rudolph & Zacher, 2023). Theories such as social identity and categorisation explain how employees often form generational in-groups that resist corporate messages perceived as coming from generational out-groups (Sparkman, 2019). Recognising this dynamic helps communicators avoid stereotypes and encourage genuine engagement.

Generational communication preferences

Recent findings highlight that different generations exhibit distinct preferences in terms of communication tone, frequency, and medium:

- Traditionalists and Baby Boomers favour formal and hierarchical channels such as emails or face-to-face interactions (Zemke et al., 2013).
- Generation X (Gen X) prefers autonomy and direct, concise updates that respect time and independence (Adams, 1998; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).
- Generation Y (Gen Y, also called Millennials) and Gen Z expect fast, transparent, two-way communication, often facilitated through digital platforms and social media. They are also more attuned to values-based messaging, especially around corporate social responsibility (CSR) and DEI (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Ngotngamwong & Suvannasing, 2024; Raslie, 2021; Zainee & Puteh, 2020).
- 44 % of Generation Z (Gen Z) employees have left a job due to a lack of purpose or authenticity, underlining the necessity for internal communication to be authentic and meaning-driven to retain young talent (Deloitte, 2025).

These divergent preferences are not barriers – they are opportunities to craft tiered, segmented communication strategies that resonate across generational lines.

Internal communication: Embracing personalisation

Standardised internal communication often leads to alienation between the generations. Younger cohorts, especially Millennials and Gen Z, seek purposeful narratives, recognition and meaningful engagement (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Twenge, 2006). In contrast, older generations often value institutional legacy and recognition of their loyalty. Research suggests that communicators should use audience segmentation models to tailor tone, content and channels accordingly (Candello & Mohammadpour, 2025).

While internal segmentation promotes cohesion, generational targeting must also influence external communication. Brand storytelling, reputation management, and stakeholder dialogue should reflect the values of the different generations. Younger generations, particularly Gen Z, expect brands to be committed to social and environmental causes and are quick to recognise gaps between stated values and actual behaviour (Edelman, 2024). Older target groups, on the other hand, may place more value on credibility and continuity.

This requires a generationally aligned approach at all levels of strategic communication that harmonises the internal culture with the external voice and strengthens trust between stakeholders of different generations.

Managing generational conflict

Generational differences can lead to misalignment and conflicts in values, complicating organisational initiatives (Dittmann, 2005). Proactive strategies such as reverse mentoring and multidirectional communication structures can mitigate these conflicts (Gadomska-Lila, 2020). Effective intergenerational communication reduces perceived ageism, boosts employee satisfaction, and fosters greater engagement (Lagacé et al., 2019).

Purpose and employer branding

Younger age groups, especially millennials and Gen Z, attach great importance to authenticity in corporate social and environmental initiatives. Consistent and transparent CSR narratives, paired with authentic internal reinforcement through employee advocacy and storytelling, are critical (Moreno et al., 2022; Ngotngamwong & Suvannasing, 2024). Gen Z particularly favours employers who actively demonstrate ethical practises and transparency. Emerging concepts such as “digital-first leadership” and “employee activism communication” are becoming increasingly relevant, emphasising the need for leadership styles and communication practices responsive to younger generations’ digital sensibilities and social consciousness (Ramirez & Islam, 2024; Santoso et al, 2025).

Conclusions for managing corporate communications

The findings from existing research can be summarised in the following recommendations for practice:

- **Audience mapping:** integrate generation profiles into the personas of internal communication.
- **Channel diversity:** implement multi-channel approaches – Email for older generations, collaborative platforms and instant messaging for younger employees.
- **Messaging for managers:** train managers in the use of an inclusive communication style that addresses the different sensitivities of the generations.
- **Reverse mentoring:** facilitating structured cross-generational knowledge sharing.
- **Onboarding narratives:** personalise onboarding and cultural introductions to meet Generation Z’s expectations for clarity, mentorship and goal setting (Chillakuri, 2020).
- **Measurement and feedback:** continuously evaluate the effectiveness of intergenerational communication using engagement analyses and pulse surveys.

Communication managers stand at a pivotal juncture. The intergenerational business landscape and workforce is not a trend – it is a structural shift. Those who succeed will not be the ones who communicate the loudest, but those who listen the widest. Building inclusive, adaptive, and generationally attuned communication ecosystems will be a defining competence for tomorrow’s strategic communicators.

Values-based positioning in contemporary corporate strategy

Values are no longer a “nice-to-have” brand trait; they are a central source of legitimacy and trust. CCOs now treat values as flexible tools for navigating complexity, building trust and uniting diverse audiences. This shift demands adaptive communication strategies that reflect social change and generational needs.

Introduction

Understanding values-based positioning in contemporary corporate strategy

Why values-based positioning has gained importance

Positioning serves as the starting point for developing corporate communications programs that build reputation and create business value (Zerfass, 2008). Values-based positioning refers to companies' efforts to make themselves distinctive and unique compared to their competitors by drawing on and emphasising particular values and beliefs when shaping stakeholder perceptions.

In an age marked by heightened stakeholder scrutiny and increased demand for corporate responsibility, values-based positioning has emerged as a fundamental driver of brand differentiation and reputational capital. Consumers and stakeholders, especially younger generations, expect brands to take stands on social, environmental, and ethical issues. As noted by Kotler and Sarkar (2017), brands are increasingly seen not only as market actors but also as cultural agents with the power to influence norms and behaviours.

Digital platforms have further amplified the visibility and impact of brand values. Social media exposes inconsistencies between brand claims and behaviours, while also accelerating the spread of values-driven narratives. According to a recent study, 63% of respondents globally stated that they choose, avoid, or boycott a brand based on its stand on societal issues (Edelman, 2024).

This indicates that values-based positioning is not only a matter of ethics or reputation, but a key strategic asset for business resilience and stakeholder alignment. Additionally, the post-pandemic shift towards more purposeful consumption and the rise of ESG frameworks have reinforced the urgency for companies to articulate their values clearly and consistently. In saturated markets, values can be a differentiator capable of generating emotional resonance and long-term loyalty. As Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) argue, identity-based connections between companies and consumers foster stronger relationships than transactional ones.

Strategic components of an effective values-based positioning strategy

Creating a compelling values-based positioning strategy involves several interrelated communication components, each of which contributes to clarity, credibility, and differentiation. First and foremost is narrative coherence. A company must ensure that its values are not only stated but also embodied across all touchpoints. This requires what Christensen et al. (2008) describe as alignment between talk, decisions, and actions. A values-based narrative should flow from the brand's purpose and be reinforced in both internal and external communications.

Secondly, stakeholder-centred storytelling plays a vital role. Narratives should not be constructed solely from the company's perspective but rather co-created with or reflective of stakeholder voices. This involves leveraging tools such as brand activism, user-generated content, or employee ambassadorship to convey authenticity and shared purpose. According to Holt (2004), cultural branding emerges when brands tap into collective ideals and cultural tensions, thus offering symbolic resolution to social issues through consumption.

Finally, data and digital intelligence are indispensable for fine-tuning values-based positioning. Sentiment analysis, social listening, and audience segmentation can reveal value alignment gaps and uncover emerging sensitivities. The capacity to measure and visualise how brand values are perceived across channels strengthens the responsiveness of the positioning strategy.

Generational differences: Challenges and opportunities

The increasing heterogeneity of values among generational cohorts presents both challenges and opportunities for brands pursuing values-based positioning. Younger generations – particularly Millennials and Gen Z – are more vocal, digitally fluent, and socially conscious than previous cohorts. They expect brands to take authentic stances and are quick to expose inconsistencies. As the IBM Institute for Business Value (LaPrade et al., 2023) reports, 57% of Gen Z consumers have stopped buying from a brand that did not align with their personal values. One of the primary challenges is value fragmentation: what resonates with Gen Z (e.g., inclusivity, climate justice, mental health) may differ significantly from Baby Boomers' priorities (e.g., stability, tradition). This requires brands to navigate what Brown (2025) describes as "value pluralism" – the coexistence of multiple, sometimes conflicting, normative expectations. Companies must avoid vague or diluted value propositions but instead choose clear priorities while embracing respectful dialogue across audiences.

Generational diversity also requires adaptive messaging. While core values should remain stable, their articulation must be tailored to the audience's needs. For instance, storytelling formats such as memes, reels, or gamified content might engage younger stakeholders, whereas newsletters or long-form narratives may be more effective with older segments. As research by Fromm and Read (2018) suggests, Gen Z values interactivity, peer validation, and transparency over traditional authority-based messaging.

On the opportunity side, younger generations are active co-creators of brand meaning. They contribute to shaping brand narratives in real time, offering valuable insight into evolving societal norms. This presents an opportunity for brands to learn, evolve, and even shift their values in alignment with social progress. Furthermore, brands that authentically engage with youth-driven movements often benefit from earned media visibility and enhanced cultural relevance. In conclusion, values-based positioning is not simply a branding trend, but a strategic imperative in a world where stakeholders expect brands to act with integrity, clarity, and commitment. Its success depends on coherence, co-creation, and contextual intelligence – especially in a generationally fragmented and digitally amplified landscape. Companies that manage to build meaningful, value-aligned connections will not only survive but lead in the evolving marketplace.

> **Values-based positioning refers to companies' efforts to make themselves distinctive and unique compared to their competitors by drawing on and emphasising particular values and beliefs when shaping stakeholder perceptions.**

Results

The role of values-based positioning in corporate communications

As expectations for corporate accountability intensify, and communication landscapes become increasingly fragmented and politicised, values-based positioning has emerged not merely as a branding strategy but as a foundational logic of organisational legitimacy.

No longer can values be relegated to a page in the corporate code of ethics or an annual sustainability report. Values today are performative – they must be seen, experienced, and interpreted in action: "The company has a way of acting and that way of acting is the one that has to be attractive to our people." (N38) As the social contract between business and society evolves, values-based positioning allows organisations to claim a role not only as economic actors, but as cultural and political agents, conscious of the environments that surround them and accountable for the world they help to shape. Values are considered the third important factor for the positioning of a company, after contributions for customers and clients, past performances successes and history of the company.

> **Today, every employee is evaluated 60 % on performance and 40 % on adherence to values, highlighting the importance of behavioural consistency.**
>
> (CCO H50)

Important factors for the positioning of a company

Contributions for customers and clients	90.0 %
Internal values of the company	83.3%
Values and beliefs of the societies the company is based in	80.0 %
Past performances, successes, and history pf the company	80.0 %
Future oriented pledges	70.0 %

Interviews with chief communication officers (CCOs) of major European corporations reveal a growing awareness that values are now essential instruments of strategic navigation. As one CCO states: "There are a lot of values that the company holds; they are part of its DNA and it has always behaved in that way." (T75) Values offer coherence in times of ambiguity, and differentiation in markets saturated by product parity and purpose-driven rhetoric. Values are no longer add-ons – they are strategic assets, particularly salient in contexts marked by crisis, polarisation, and stakeholder activism.

These interviews show how CCOs interpret, construct, and deploy values as communicative infrastructure, highlighting the tensions, enabling practices, and generational dynamics that shape their choices. Overall values-based positioning is not understood as a static declaration of principles, but as a dynamic, iterative process of organisational sense-making and cultural negotiation over time. As a CCO observes: "We developed and the world around us developed. But actually the fundamentals didn't change. But the way we articulated them needed to have a little bit of a revisit." (E31).

> **Even in internal campaigns, we try to have all generations represented. We had an internal campaign where employees said, 'Why don't you put older people in?' Now we have a lot of campaigns where we see people of different ages. It's something we pay attention to, and we do it consciously.**
>
> (CCO Y31)

Structural dilemmas in values-based communication

The CCOs reveal that the operationalisation of values-based positioning is fraught with inherent complexities. Far from being a linear process of message definition and dissemination, it requires continuous negotiation between competing imperatives and evolving stakeholder expectations. CCOs frequently find themselves navigating a constellation of tensions that reflect the structural dilemmas of contemporary strategic communication – most notably, the need to balance global consistency with local resonance, to project authenticity while maintaining strategic control, and to shift from reactive reputation management to proactive cultural engagement. These dilemmas are not marginal; they are constitutive of the values-based positioning (or perspective) itself. This implies the need for a more flexible and dialogical model of communication, rather than a "one size fits all" approach which is perceived as outmoded in the professional field. As one CCO observes, "We are very mindful that many of our stakeholders will have different expectations and needs and demands of us and some of them actually are quite contradictory. So we have to apply that lens and adopt a balancing act. The group can communicate on values and beliefs and on positions that it holds, but it does so in a way which is sensitive to the fact that different stakeholders demand different things from us." (U10) This process is very challenging and as one CCO states, it implies "a lot of gender, value fatigue, green fatigue." (X73).

A particularly salient challenge lies in aligning internal values with external messaging in a manner that is both credible and context-sensitive. In a hyper-transparent world, organisations are increasingly judged not by what they say, but by how their values are enacted across operational layers. CCOs emphasise the centrality of narrative coherence – the imperative that the same values should be legible in the tone of a CEO's communication, the policies governing suppliers, the language of employee manuals, and the content shared on social media.

Such alignment also requires sensitivity to cultural nuance. A value like "inclusion," for example, may resonate strongly in one market while triggering resistance in another. One CCO admits, "We're a massive supporter of the Pride Festivals. But if you were based or had a satellite into the US, that would be more challenging at this moment. We're going to continue to support those around the world, but you do have to take into consideration where things might be illegal, then you can't support those initiatives. But it doesn't change your values into – it's the how you demonstrate it." (T75) This demands from communicators a dual competence: holding firm to the organisation's core ethical commitments while adapting their expression and activation to specific local realities.

Ultimately, values-based communication is not just about what is said, but how it is contextualised, interpreted, and lived – both within and beyond the organisation: "So we have very clear values. It's called respect and results. And it's very simple. Basically, it's if you are okay with respect and results, then you will have a place in our company. If you are not, then you do not have a place in our company. That means respect your colleagues, respect the company and respect yourself." (B26).

> **You can put many things on a wall. You can put many things on a PowerPoint. But the real proof happens when you actually act in accordance with your values … we announced a gender-neutral global parental leave program last year … These are proof points that first put actions behind words and that also resonate very well with the younger generation.**
>
> (CCO H50)

Organisational practices that enable values-based positioning

The interviews reveal a series of enabling practices through which communication leaders are embedding values into the strategic core of their organisations – not as symbolic add-ons, but as operational logics that shape how decisions are made, communicated, and perceived. These practices reflect a shift from performative declarations to institutionalised value enactment, where communication becomes a transversal capability rather than a downstream function.

At the heart of this transformation lies the articulation of a corporate purpose that functions as a strategic compass, not just a marketing slogan. Purpose, in this sense, is not aspirational rhetoric but a set of guiding principles that orient the organisations' priorities, trade-offs, and stakeholder relationships. Several respondents stressed that purpose-driven storytelling is credible only when anchored in operational integrity – visible in hiring practices, supplier audits, leadership evaluations, and investment decisions. One executive remarks: "On sustainability we have set aside the general principles, which sound redundant, in favour of communication on what has been concretely done, on the results we have achieved. This does not replace an explicit statement of ambition, but it is more characteristic for us to tell what has actually been done, even if the process is not complete or even in the event of a setback." (J21) Another CCO says: "We see young people coming in interviewing, they've read the purpose, and they ask questions on the purpose. Some people go further by saying that we're in a post-purpose world." (F27).

Equally vital is the activation of employees as reputational agents. Internal alignment is consistently framed as a reputational asset — indeed, a reputational precondition. Employees are no longer passive recipients of values messaging; they are validators, amplifiers, and interpreters of the brand's ethical identity: "We have had several surveys indicating that as all organisations, there is a challenge to communicate strategy internally from CEO and all the way down to customer-facing roles. What we have seen is that the most important source of information and source also of value understanding is line managers." (E99) To cultivate this alignment, companies are investing in structures such as ambassador networks, peer-led storytelling programs, and values-based KPIs that hold managers accountable for embodying ethical commitments in their day-to-day leadership.

Moreover, several organisations are innovating in the field of adaptive storytelling-replacing static narratives with flexible, modular frameworks capable of shifting tone and emphasis depending on audience, platform, or context. This approach reflects a growing awareness that message uniformity does not equal authenticity. Such storytelling agility allows organisations to maintain coherence while engaging meaningfully with diverse stakeholders, particularly in environments marked by generational, cultural, or geopolitical plurality. Notably, this narrative adaptability does not dilute values – it operationalises them. Values-based communication becomes an ecosystem of alignment, built on relational intelligence and situational fluency.

Generational shifts: A catalyst for strategic evolution of communication practices

Generational change represents far more than a demographic turnover – it signals a deeper transformation in the way organisations must conceive, articulate, and perform their values. Generational differences in the positioning of a company are definitely strategic and CCOs today have to deal with this issue more than in the past. The interviews make clear that younger stakeholders, particularly those from Gen Z, engage with corporate communications not passively but as critical interpreters. This poses a particular challenge for companies with historically established values, as one CCO describes: "The great generational challenge is instead closely linked to our ability to transfer the company's history and heritage to generations who, by necessity, have not seen what we did fifty years ago. With them, we need to build a bond based on what we will do in the next fifty years." (O46).

Most CCOs describe this generation as "hyper-literate" in decoding corporate signals – capable of spotting contradictions or forms of "performative values" within seconds. As some executives point out, Gen Z read social feeds, the comments section, who the company collaborates with, and how the company responds when challenged. This dynamic introduces reputational vulnerability but also encourages greater discipline and intentionality in the way values are translated into action. Everything is more challenging, but as one CCO states: "different age groups in the team create better results. And for me, that's part of the diversity and inclusion commitment that the company needs to do in combining it." (A16).

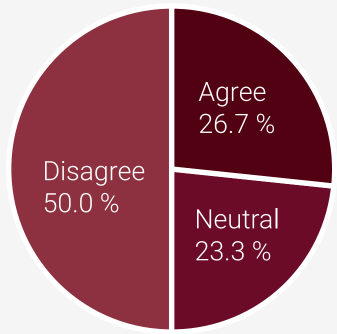
Generational diversity within the workforce also reshapes the internal communication landscape. Several respondents highlight the need to move from unidirectional communication models to participatory formats that give voice to younger employees as co-constructors of meaning. Initiatives such as reverse mentoring, intergenerational panels, and storytelling labs are cited as effective in bridging cognitive and cultural gaps.

Intergenerational dialogue becomes not only a matter of inclusion but a mechanism for strategic adaptation. Emerging practices suggest that inviting critique from younger cohorts can act as an internal form of issue detection-surfacing potential risks before they escalate externally. A particularly forward-looking approach involves the use of social listening platforms for internal sensing. Several organisations now analyse anonymous employee feedback, internal Yammer threads, and engagement metrics across digital platforms to map emotional responses to corporate initiatives.

In sum, generational shifts do not simply challenge communicators to adapt language or tone-they call for a reengineering of the values ecosystem itself. Rather than seeing Gen Z as a difficult audience, forward-looking organisations are leveraging their scrutiny as a strategic audit mechanism – a way to align internal culture with external commitments and to regenerate corporate values through genuine co-creation.

Generational differences in positioning a company are a ...

new and unexplored challenge



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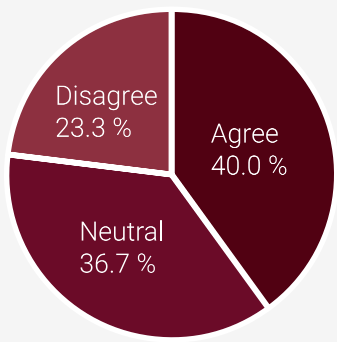
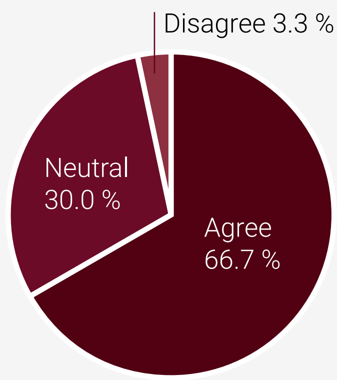


key consideration



Conclusion

A fundamental reconfiguration of the communicative role of corporate values in contemporary organisations is underway.

Values can no longer be conceived as fixed declarations enshrined in mission statements; they are increasingly understood as living constructs – dynamic, negotiated, and continuously reinterpreted across contexts and constituencies. For communication leaders, this shift demands new capabilities, new metrics, and a new strategic mindset. Five key insights stand out:

1. Performativity and values. **Be sure that values are enacted in daily decisions, interactions, and trade-offs. Check if the way your company treats people, partners, and even critics is consistent with its values.**

2. Alignment. **Align internal experience with external narratives and remind employees they are no longer passive audiences – they are validators, multipliers and, in some cases, whistleblowers.**

3. Flexibility. **Abandon the idea of rigid message control which, in such a fragmented, pluralistic media environment, is neither feasible nor desirable. Design modular narrative systems and frameworks that allow for contextual variation while remaining anchored to core commitments.**

4. Intelligence. **Integrate social listening and employee sensing tools into the communication function for early detection of misalignment, issue emergence, and opportunity spaces.**

5. Generational diversity. **Rather than seeing generational differences as a challenge to message consistency, embrace them as a strategic resource.**

The strategic management of talent in communication departments

Talent management in communication departments is essential for competitive advantage. The interviewed top CCOs focus on developing high-potential “Communicators of A level” while managing diverse generational expectations. They use tailored development paths, adaptive leadership, and align talent with business goals to enhance influence, collaboration, and retention.

Introduction

Talent management is essential for competitive advantage. Communication departments focus on "A-communicators" while managing generational diversity.

Developing communication talent for competitive advantage

Many organisations in the present business environment struggle to tackle the problem of attracting and retaining skilled talent, which helps capitalise on competitive advantage and enhance organisational performance (Amarakoon & Colley, 2023). The term "talent management" (TM) gained prominence with *The War for Talent* (Michaels et al., 2001), published by McKinsey consultants in 1998, and has since become a crucial element in organisational strategy. Communication departments in particular are leveraging strategic talent development as a key pathway to gaining both internal influence and external competitive advantage.

Talent has been defined in multiple ways for decades. Broadly, four main approaches to TM have emerged (Pagan-Castaño et al., 2022):

- **HR-focused approach:** TM is seen as an extension of traditional HR activities such as recruitment, leadership development, and succession planning, without clearly distinguishing it from traditional human resource management (HRM).

- **Process-oriented approach:** TM is viewed as a structured and formalised process for managing career progression, drawing a clearer distinction between TM and HRM.

- **People-centric approach:** TM focuses on identifying and developing high-potential individuals (often referred to as "A-players") while also managing underperformance using models like "top grading."

- **Position-based approach:** This approach prioritises identifying and developing critical roles within the organisation that drive competitive advantage, placing less emphasis on individuals and more on strategically important positions.

Managing talent in digital and evolving contexts

The proper management of this talent in the world of work is considered a key strategic factor in the pursuit and achievement of success, being essential for the survival and sustainability of organisations. Collaboration has emerged as a powerful dimension of TM. Recent research highlights the importance of interdisciplinary teamwork, performance metrics, inclusive leadership, and the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital tools in enabling innovation and competitive advantage as organisations transition from Society 4.0 to 5.0 (Chew & Zainal, 2024).

Montero Guerra and Danvila-Del Valle (2024) underscore the role of digital technologies in reshaping talent strategies – from recruitment to retention. Their findings suggest that while digital transformation is essential, it is the quality of talent management that determines an organisation's digital maturity. As AI tools continue to disrupt communication workflows, the need to strategically manage communication talent becomes ever more pressing. Looking ahead, several macro trends are expected to shape the future of talent management: the increasing integration of digital technologies, the emphasis on diversity and inclusion, the impact of the "gig economy" and remote work arrangements (Groenewald et al., 2024).

Addressing intergenerational challenges in communication teams

Workplace diversity brings undeniable benefits – but also complexity, especially related to today's polarisation. One key dimension is generational diversity. Today's departments include up to five generations, each bringing different values, expectations, communication styles, and approaches to work. While Baby Boomers and Gen X still hold many leadership roles, Millennials and Gen Z are increasingly shaping the organisational landscape. Gen Z is entering the workforce with distinct digital habits and expectations, while Millennials – described a decade ago as 'millennovators' (Moon, 2014) – have already pushed for disruption and transformation in the workplace.

Millennials have been recognised for their inclination towards innovation, disruption and digital transformation, while Gen Z is characterised by their hyperconnectivity, preference for visual and ephemeral content, and their demand for authenticity in interactions. The communication styles of the two younger generations are also diverse from their predecessors and similar in their general characteristics, both preferring face-to-face communication complemented by the use of visual elements for online communication. Communication departments must adapt continuously – not just to new technologies and formats, but to evolving expectations around immediacy, personalisation, and transparency. This requires flexible models, creative strategies, and dynamic team structures that foster collaboration across all age groups. Thus, a challenging aspect of communication departments is retaining talent in a volatile workforce. Millennials and Gen Z are eager to learn, yet less likely to show long-term loyalty to a single employer. This makes talent retention particularly challenging. An organisation's Employer Value Proposition (EVP) – what it offers employees in return for their commitment – is critical. Studies show a strong positive link between a compelling employer brand and successful talent management (Chandra Das & Kumar, 2024). Moreover, employee engagement plays a mediating role in talent retention. In turn, employee engagement, employer brand, and perceived organisational support can predict satisfaction with internal communications (Tkalac Verčič, 2021).

Millennials and Gen Z professionals in communication roles are more likely to leave if they lack satisfaction, trust, effective leadership, or a supportive culture (Moreno et al., 2022). While generational diversity is a strength, it requires active investment in training, mentoring, and collaboration to foster knowledge sharing and team effectiveness (Becker et al., 2022).

> **Talent management includes all activities and processes to attract, identify, develop, engage, retain, and deploy team members across all roles and age groups that are critical to gain strategic success for an organisation.**

Results

Understanding talent management in Europe's leading communication departments

In Europe's leading communication departments, the most established talent management (TM) practices focus on developing high-performing and high-potential staff. While recruitment remains part of the strategy, the emphasis is on managing existing talent. These key findings are supported by both the quantitative and qualitative data from this study.

Most CCOs report actively recruiting, retaining, and deploying talent for specific tasks, with a stronger emphasis placed on developing talent over time. Their efforts centre on nurturing an intrinsic motivation for excellence and aligning high-potential individuals with strategically important roles. The interviewees highlight efforts to build skills and leadership, such as "leadership development programs. So, we identify like hi-po [high potential] talent and then we put them through broad leadership development programs." (R43).

Dedicated processes for talent management in communication departments

"A-communicators" are primarily managed through formal learning and development structures. These include internal academies, onboarding programs, leadership pathways, and communication-specific training. As one CCO notes: "Special courses are made available to them [top talent] that go much further: specific communication and reputation programs." (L94).

A second key practice is competency development and skill framing, aimed at building strategic, holistic communicators. One goal is to develop talent capable of cross-functional work and systems thinking: "So one of the ways that we're building our talent pipeline in comms is making sure that they are having cross functional experiences." (T75) This approach redefines "high-potential" by valuing strategic, integrative thinking over traditional media skills. Other initiatives include setting skill development objectives and using performance reviews to support growth: "So we have a thorough process with performance review and then mapping our talents in terms of both performance and career aspirations. Then we try to address their development need" (E31).

In Europe's leading communication departments, a range of strategies is used to retain A-communicators, with a primary focus on empowering them through strategic opportunities and increased visibility. One interviewee states: "I think it's this giving more responsibility, having this regular career talks." (D35) Another CCO exemplifies: "Especially with high performing individuals, you have to challenge them. You have to keep or constantly expanding … it's probably what we do and what I try to do as a manager." (G12).

> **The fundamental task of communication is to influence, to move the boat forward. That is what adds value to the system.**
>
> (CCO N60)

The data suggests that successful talent management combines a people-centric approach, which identifies and manages A-communicators, and the position-based approach identifying strategic roles within the communication department that influence competitive advantage: "Well, this is twofold. So, on the one hand we have a – we know what the department needs because we are together with the line managers drafting lists on what skills we need and then we have on the other side, the interest of our employees and the employees clearly address their wishes, what they want. And then we see what kind of a fit we have." (C84) TM practices help to establish communications as a vital business function with strategic influence by demonstrating distinctive capabilities, shaping a compelling team identity, aligning recruitment with the department's vision, and promoting cross-functional relevance to senior leadership.

The interviewees value professionals who blend creative skills (e.g., visual language) with strategic business insight (e.g., corporate positioning). This hybrid profile boosts the department's internal influence and credibility. As one CCO explains: "The path is a hybrid model, but you have to be someone who has impact and influence" (N60).

At the same level, communication departments align their work and identity with measurable business outcomes (e.g., customer focus, growth, resilience) and their role in securing the company's license to operate. Talent management supports positioning communication as an attractive career path.

Intergenerational challenges in communication departments

Challenges may arise in communication departments when managing talent across different generations. The most important challenges stem from diverse generational work commitment and attitudes to technology. Many CCOs acknowledge difficulties arising from varying attitudes toward technology across age groups. Differences in how generations perceive flexibility, work-life balance, and professional loyalty are also seen as significant challenges for talent management. However, almost nearly one out of two communication directors do not perceive communication, collaboration and leadership styles or needs for competency development among the different groups of communicators.

Top CCOs in Europe challenge overly simplistic categorizations of generational differences in the workplace, emphasising that personality, context, and experience often outweigh generational traits. As one states, "For me, diversity is a very strategic thing … it's not just generations, it's not just nationalities, it's not just skills. I also have very diverse people, who come from the world of politics or the media, tech people … So, you get different points of view, and it takes longer to understand each other."

(Y31) Another adds: "I think that what is relevant is that all these individual situations that have to do with your generational situation are experienced in an environment that is conducive to understanding the specificities of people, right?" (N38).

Experienced generational challenges in talent management

Different commitment to work	62.5 %
Different attitudes to technology	56.7 %
Different appreciation of work-life balance	53.3 %
Different drivers for loyalty and retention	53.3 %
Different appreciation of flexibility	53.3 %
Different preferences for communication and collaboration styles in the team	50.0 %
Different needs for competency developmental	50.0 %
Different preferences for leadership styles	46.7 %

In more in-depth discussions, top CCOs recognise that generational differences in career expectations and work attitudes present key challenges for talent management in communication departments. Younger generations have distinct expectations regarding career development, learning opportunities, workplace flexibility, and mobility, contrasting with some of the established career models. This shift reflects changing attitudes toward professional growth, responsibility, and organisational loyalty. As one CCO explains: "They require high flexibility. They would love to work from home two to three days a week. They will love to work with their own specific tasks. When I ask them to join me on a project outside their job description, that doesn't come easily." (B83).

Shifts in workplace commitment – such as declining organisational loyalty and differing views on work-life balance create tensions between employees seeking stability and those valuing autonomy and flexibility in communication departments. However, as one CCO points out, these changes affect multiple generations: "I can see that there is a different relationship to work between the young and the not-so-young… I've got schemes that allow me to leave early." (W19).

These differences raise concerns among Europe's top CCOs about whether younger generations are fully prepared for professional demands. Generational dynamics also bring about processes of transformation in the leadership culture of communication departments, with a contrast between the empowerment and fast-paced cultures of younger generations and the resistance to change of older generations. "You have to appreciate the gradual steps and have the patience to realise that you're not going to be an executive managing people at 25. I think a little bit of this startup tech culture fooled them." (B83).

"

[Flexibility] I'm fermenting my kimchi this evening. It sounds like a euphemism but actually … that's literally what one of my team was talking about.

(CCO T17)

Managing talent across different generations in communication departments

Top European CCOs emphasise the value of intergenerational collaboration: “I see it more as a strength because I think a 25-year-old has a lot to learn from people who started communicating before the iPhone. I mean, it’s when experience meets inexperience, when age meets younger talents, it’s a good interaction. The power field in the meeting between those two is extremely powerful.” (E99).

Our data suggests that communication departments actively manage talent in multi-generational teams in two different ways. The first approach addresses differing expectations by offering tailored Employer Value Propositions (EVPs). This includes using differentiated motivational strategies, personalised development pathways, and adapting leadership styles: “[Young colleagues] crave a lot of feedback all the time. They are used to having thumbs up or thumbs down, and they are used to having comments, and they’re used to being centre of attention. You need to play with that.” (E99) As another CCOs add: “It’s a lot, a lot of exchange to retain talent, to give them a certain autonomy, freedom of organisation, that I think is very important, a lot of dialogue.” (G55) However, few organisations actively monitor engagement across age groups.

The second approach involves developing an EVP that appeals to different generations within the workforce. Such EVPs resonate with multiple generational mindsets, although a generational customisation is often used.

The interviewees also highlight how organisational and cultural attributes shape the EVPs and influence talent attraction and retention: “A very important component is to be a very international company on a day-do-day basis … “[this] generates a working environment that is quite stimulating.” (N38). Another CCOs exemplifies: “To attract talent, we built a campaign … which highlights how the future of [our core business] is the future of the world.” (M12) Their goal is to ensure all talented individuals feel recognised, supported, and motivated within a shared environment.

Moreover, communication roles are defined as dynamic, cross-functional, and strategically visible, making them attractive to ambitious talent across all generations, especially younger ones. As a CCOs puts it: “[Once] I have identified a series of people as top talent, I try to give them different experiences. For example, if I go to the COP [Conference of the Parties] on climate change, I always try to reach someone very young close to the CEO because these are experiences that others cannot have, the luck to work in a department like mine.” (N60).

“ If you have an early exposure to communications, I can promise you that you are going to be very effective at whatever you choose to do.

(CCO B83)

Conclusion

Communication departments must build talent across generations to gain competitive advantage and internal influence.

The increasing difficulty in retaining talent within a dynamic and competitive global environment, combined with the complexities of managing intergenerational teams, presents significant challenges for communication departments. Chief communications officers must adopt balanced approaches throughout the talent lifecycle to manage their workforce as a strategic asset. Talent management practices across generations help establish communications as a vital business function with strategic influence by demonstrating distinctive capabilities, shaping a compelling team identity, aligning recruitment with the department's vision, and promoting cross-functional relevance to senior leadership. Five key aspects must be taken into account:

1. Strategy. Adopt a strategic view of talent by combining people-centric approaches (identifying and developing A-communicators) with position-based approaches (identifying strategic roles) and aligning both talent and function with business goals.

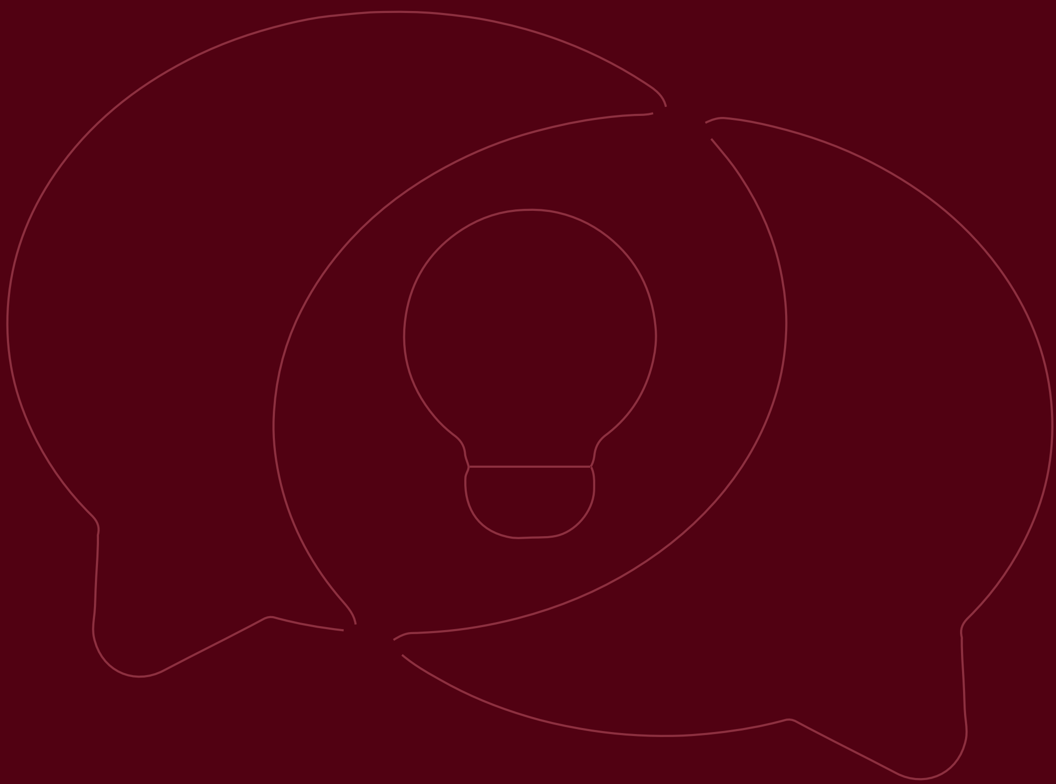
2. Recognition. Promote internal talent as a competitive advantage by offering opportunities and visibility to A-communicators.

3. Integration. Encourage hybrid profiles that combine creativity and business acumen, as these are essential to strengthening the department's influence and foster a culture of cooperation and adaptable leadership across generations.

4. Personalisation. Tailor or customise Employer Value Propositions (EVPs) and create differentiated development paths with motivational strategies tailored to each generation.

5. Positioning. Reinforce the strategic role of communication as a dynamic, cross-functional, business function connected to measurable results and position that function as diverse attractive career paths.

Coaching as a strategic imperative for communication leaders



Coaching is a practice through which chief communication officers (CCOs) lead with clarity, adaptability, and purpose-building leadership at all levels, strengthening team performance, and aligning communication with strategic goals in an inclusive, ever-changing environment. CCOs act as strategic leadership coaches, supporting growth at all organisational levels – from the C-suite to direct reports and team members – by tailoring their approach to individual needs rather than relying on generational generalisations.

Introduction

Why coaching is a strategic driver for today's communication leaders

From communication experts to strategic leaders

In today's landscape of shifting public trust, digital disruption, and multigenerational workplaces, communicators face unprecedented challenges: leading amid noise, complexity, and scrutiny. For CCOs and their teams, the role extends beyond messaging to focus on meaning, guidance, and internal alignment. As demands grow, coaching – once an elite perk – is now a strategic necessity. Beyond development, coaching fosters adaptability, ethical clarity, and leadership, enabling high-performance communication functions.

Corporate communicators, once primarily message crafters, now influence C-suite strategy, advise on crises, shape culture, and create meaning in a noisy world. This expanded role requires communicators to be strategic leaders, with coaching at the heart of their development. Communication professionals need not only technical skills but emotional intelligence, strategic insight, and influence-based leadership. Coaching offers reflection, dialogue, and behavioural change-tools traditional training often lacks – helping communicators thrive in uncertainty. As Grant (2014) notes, coaching during change enhances adaptability, clarifies priorities, and improves decision-making – vital for managing reputational risk and volatile situations.

Coaching and the "Ambitious Professional"

In *Communication Excellence* – a review of 10 years of research among senior communicators across Europe – three qualities of high-performing communication practitioners are identified: they are sagacious (knowledgeable and strategically reflective), linked (collaborative and connected), and solid (ethically grounded and professionally ambitious) (Tench et al., 2017). Coaching is uniquely positioned to cultivate all three. It sharpens strategic perspective, helps individuals understand how to align values with practice, and reinforces a leadership identity that is responsive, not reactive.

The ability to coach and be coached – whether formally or informally – is part of what distinguishes top-tier communication teams. "Communicators in excellent organisations are not just recipients of coaching," Tench and colleagues (2017) argue that "they are often internal coaches themselves.... (supporting) leaders, challenging assumptions, and facilitating growth." In this way, coaching is both a leadership tool and a cultural practice embedded in excellent communication departments. Beyond leadership development, coaching plays a practical role in driving performance and engagement. Research shows that structured coaching boosts confidence, goal clarity, and motivation-factors that drive better outcomes in high-pressure communication roles. Luthans and Peterson (2003) found that combining coaching with feedback significantly improved employee performance and satisfaction. In managing corporate communications, this might translate to: better handling of crisis messaging; increased influence in cross-functional teams; greater ability to manage ambiguity.

Tools like the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) have also shown how coaching enhances work engagement across key indicators: vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2006, Schaufeli; 2021).

The intergenerational dimension: coaching across generations

Coaching's relevance is clear in today's multigenerational workforce, where up to five generations – from Traditionalists to Gen Z – coexist with varying values and expectations. Younger employees prefer fast, informal feedback and quick advancement, while older professionals value legacy, structure, and clear roles. Coaching bridges these differences, helping generations understand each other. Mukherjee and Sivaraman (2022) show intergenerational coaching requires adaptability, recognising shared needs like authenticity but also distinct coaching preferences. A "one-size-fits-all" approach doesn't work – coaching must be personalised to generational cues. Reverse mentoring, where younger employees coach senior leaders, fosters mutual respect, flattens hierarchies, and breaks age stereotypes. Gadomska-Lila (2020) found these programs boost intergenerational trust and communication, especially when combined with coaching that emphasises active listening and reciprocal learning. Benefits include: increasing digital literacy for senior leaders; giving younger communicators leadership experience; and promoting cross-generational innovation.

Strategic coaching at the organisational level

Coaching increasingly boosts organisational capability within communication functions. Tench et al. (2017) found top departments embed coaching in talent development, succession planning, and team cohesion, aligning it with organisational priorities. Firms like Deloitte and PwC use intergenerational coaching to retain knowledge and prepare future communicators. Unilever and Nestlé adapt coaching to generational learning styles, improving engagement and knowledge transfer. As Zerfass and Brockhaus (2025) note, CCOs and their teams now support CEOs and middle managers in many ways, requiring emotional intelligence, political savviness, and clarity-skills developed through coaching.

Coaching's impact is measurable: it improves engagement, leadership readiness, and performance (Grant, 2014; Luthans & Peterson, 2003). To prove coaching's value, tools like Kirkpatrick's Four-Level Model, Goal-Attainment Scaling, ROI frameworks (Garvey et al., 2017), and 360-Degree Feedback assess progress and impact. Today's CCOs are strategic enablers and culture leaders who coach CEOs and teams, using skills like active listening and reflection as part of their leadership and development efforts. Coaching is no longer a "nice-to-have" but a core capability for effective communication.

Coaching the future of communication

The communicators who will thrive in the next decade aren't just masters of messaging. They're coaches and collaborators, ethical leaders and cultural interpreters. Coaching doesn't just help them perform better – it helps them become better (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023). Coaching is no longer a developmental luxury – it's a strategic lever. Wigginton and Cartwright (2020) offer empirical support for the positive impact of business coaching on leadership effectiveness, decision-making, strategic clarity, employee engagement, and customer satisfaction. For communication professionals, it fosters leadership, clarity, and influence and frequently includes working with and alongside the CEO and C-Suite. For organisations, it builds alignment, resilience, and cohesion – especially across generational divides. Communication excellence is not achieved through tools or tactics alone. It is cultivated through leadership, reflection, and continuous learning. And coaching is the catalyst that brings these to life.

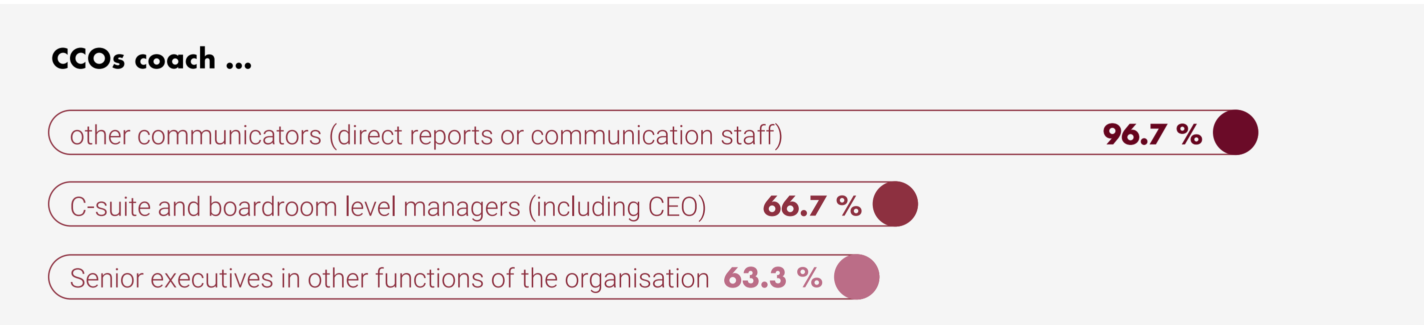
> **Coaching is a structured, goal-oriented process that builds skills, solves problems, and drives specific outcomes through active feedback. Unlike mentoring, it is short- to medium-term and focused on performance and adaptability.**

Results

How senior communication leaders practice coaching in their organisations

The interviewed CCOs emphasised the value of coaching. They engage in coaching across all levels – from direct reports to senior executives and board members. While recognising workforce diversity, they question the emphasis on age-based segmentation proposed in management literature. They describe "strategic coaching" as structured efforts to build strategic thinking, autonomy, and leadership. They also clearly distinguish coaching from performance reviews, with one noting: "We explicitly distinguish between one-on-ones, which are about what we're working on, and then what we call check ins. Check-ins are about coaching and developing." (Q77) There is also an acknowledgment by many that coaching involves a more considerable investment, "because coaching takes time. It's not me telling them how to solve their own problems. It's then me helping them reach their own conclusions about the problems." (B83).

CCOs were asked about coaching different individuals in their organisations. Coaching varied by recipient group (e.g., communicators, senior executives, board members) and involved practical insights, situational dynamics, challenges, and applied styles. A common trend was the rise of informal, on-demand coaching, reflecting a shift toward situational, less formal approaches: "I'm very much situation based." (F84) Others add that, "I don't have one model for everyone ... differs a lot between the individuals." (G12), or, "You have people who expect a lot of coaching, who expect to be very much around them almost every day, or people who want an appointment every month at such a time. I adapt to their needs." (W47).



CCOs discuss how they perceive and prioritise coaching of their direct reports – typically high-potential communication staff – as a strategic investment in organisational capacity and leadership continuity. It reflects a belief that intensive, time-consuming coaching of these individuals yields disproportionately high returns, as they are expected to assume greater responsibility or leadership roles in the future. Coaching is thus not seen as an operational task but as a deliberate, high-value activity aligned with long-term development goals.

Creating coaching mindsets across teams and instilling a broader coaching attitude within the communication team is important to CCOs. "With really good, talented people that also can help coach each other, lift each other, helps a lot." (F84) This approach encourages peer support, shared learning, and the integration of coaching into the team culture. Senior communicators confess to actively learning from younger communication professionals, "I'm there constantly listening to them." (F84), particularly regarding digital fluency, new cultural trends, or working styles. Strategic coaching for senior executives involves structured, goal-oriented coaching efforts by CCOs directed at senior leaders in other departments: “I have at least two one-on-one meetings with the 35 members of my executive committee … and it works very well.” (Y31) This includes formal training formats, planned interventions, and coaching efforts that are part of broader leadership development strategies.

Coaching the C-Suite – a key task

CCOs often support top management and C-suite leaders, with one noting, “So most of the coaching I do now at this level is more about your leadership style and how you show up as a leader” (T75), focusing on refining their communication style and presence. Another states, “The main task in this exchange [is] around communication issues, … trying to train them to look at reality with the eyes of a communicator.” (N38) This includes media training, preparation for public appearances, strategic speech design, and coaching for clarity, authenticity, and leadership credibility in messaging. “The core of a communicator's job is to coach people to communicate and, in particular, to speak in public” (W47) They also coach high-level leaders, often on media skills.

> **… the CEO or the CFO sometimes, or today, the chairman of our board (they) also needed some coaching on how to handle media and so on.**
>
> (CCO F84)

CCOs frequently cite how they support C-suite leaders in refining their communication style and presence, “working with CEO and C-Suite, but other leaders across the organisation [too], to try to up their communications game.” (U10) In addition, they describe having a close working relationship, with one stating, “If I walk one meter across the hallway… I'm into the CEO's office. That means I am closer to him than HR or to the Commercial Department” (E99), and a position of acceptance and trust with top executives, “someone that they would listen to.. and you need to have a certain intimate relationship with them, at least in the C-suite. And for that you need acceptance. Now that's the difference.” (D16).

Personal motivations and objectives to be a coach

CCOs talk enthusiastically about coaching to enable talent and individual growth. One shares, “I just want them to do well … to feel confident in their abilities and to progress … even leave, go on to do exciting, better things elsewhere.” (T17) Unlocking individual potential is central: “You're not coaching the task or the problem, you're coaching the person, which is a way of unlocking your breadth as a leader.” (R98) Contributing to successful career stories is motivating, as one CCO explains: “That's a huge driver for me looking around the world and knowing that I had a part of like a whole bunch of different people's careers and where they are now.” (T75).

An analysis of why CCOs coach reveals a strong personal, intrinsic motivation tied to fulfilment and leadership identity. They coach not just for organisational gain, but for their own growth. “It’s curiosity ... that motivates me.” (G12) As one notes, “You can actually learn a lot from it yourself. Sometimes you recognise mistakes that are made by younger talent that you know you’ve also been faced with and maybe you’ve done the same mistakes.” (E99) Coaching is seen as a meaningful leadership practice – shaping talent while reinforcing the CCO’s values and sense of purpose. Listening is a key skill many CCOs emphasise: “The idea of listening very attentively without judgment.” (R98) One adds, “I’m very mindful of listening, being reflective, ... organising the agendas in a way so there’s not too much in there, but we have time enough.” (E31) This aligns with management literature framing coaching as a dual-role activity-developing others while advancing the coach’s own growth – and supports theories of transformational and purpose-driven leadership.

> **I enjoy seeing them grow and eventually into the next position, possibly my position for all I know.**
>
> (CCO B26)

Does age matter to senior leaders when coaching?

Intergenerational factors matter in organisations, helping address the needs of diverse age groups. However, CCO data challenges management literature’s overemphasis on generational categories in coaching (Mukherjee & Sivaraman, 2022). CCOs caution against using labels like ‘Gen Z‘ or ‘Millennials‘ to predict behaviour or development needs. One remarks, “There are differences between the young and the old. But I’m not sure that this is the key, the major differentiating criterion. I think there is much more diversity within the same young population than between a junior and a senior.” (W47) Instead, they support an intersectional view that considers personality – “I take into account the differences between personalities, but I don’t put it down to a generational difference” (L94) – as well as culture, gender, and context. Coaching must be nuanced and person-focused. As one explains, “There are so many other things ...Are you an introvert or an extrovert? What drives you? What gives you energy? Where are you in life? Just so many things, where generation is part of it.” (E31) This reflects a shift toward individualised coaching that avoids stereotypes and highlights the value of diversity-aware leadership.

> **I’d say younger team members, they crave much more feedback than the older parts of the organisation.**
>
> (CCO E99)

The interviewed CCOs emphasise that generational labels (e.g., Gen Z, Millennials) are often too simplistic to meaningfully explain behaviour, potential, or development needs. One notes, “In this more concrete, professional world, there are differences of understanding, of perception according to the generations, but I don’t see it as a particularly complex difficulty. I think we all speak a similar language.” (N38) It includes statements that caution against stereotyping based on age: “I don’t think it matters what age you are. When it comes to feeling recognised and seen and coached well, you want the freedom to act, and you want to be able to develop.” (F84) This highlights the importance of seeing individuals beyond generational assumptions. This perspective often emerges from direct coaching experiences where supposed generational traits do not hold up in practice: “The generational aspect is ... one of the many facets that we need to factor into our communication. But I wouldn’t give it an over prominent role or a higher importance.” (A81).

On feedback culture of different generations, one CCO observes, "I do notice that difference. Young people aren't afraid when you're coaching or giving feedback... to give you their own opinion, older people are much more cautious." (L94) Another notes that younger team members aspire for more feedback than their older peers (E99 above) There are also observed differences with learning preferences, agility and openness across age groups "willingness to learn and to change… it diminishes over time" (A81) Attitudes and values differ and come out in the coaching experience "I see a major shift away from this notion of the more hours you put in, the more quality you get out." (E31) Reverse mentoring is a factor for CCOs–they recognise and appreciate it as organisationally helpful. It also benefits them personally, as some interviewees note: "I have a coach in his thirties who's teaching me a lot about tech" (Y31) and "I've done a reverse (development) program and loved it." (R43).

Evaluating coaching with different generations

CCOs assess the impact of their coaching across generations using formal and informal evaluations – like goal tracking, behaviour observation, feedback, and reflections on how generational differences affect perceptions of effectiveness. CCOs measure and evaluate coaching in diverse ways but not always using formal mechanisms. One states, "Easy answer is to see where performance improves" (E99), while another shares, "Does it translate into high performance? And do we perform as a team? Does my coaching make them do what is the right thing to do? And are they satisfied with their work life and work culture? So it's both about performance and well-being." (E31) Others link coaching evaluation to strategic priorities: "Did this deliver for the individual? Did it deliver for the company? Is this on message? Is this aligned with strategy, commerciality, values?" (U10) There are also examples of feedback-driven evaluation: "Thank you very much, you helped me overcome this and I felt that I was able to deliver was of a higher quality and I was more confident and comfortable than I would have been" (R98).

CCOs measure and evaluate the effectiveness of coaching by …

Behavior – how participants apply the skills or knowledge in their roles	**90 %**
Reaction – how participants feel about the coaching	**73 %**
Learning – what knowledge or skills participants gained	**67 %**
Results – the impact on the organization, such as wproductivity improvements or turnover reduction	**60 %**

There is also a sense that coaching makes change happen but requires ongoing check-ins. "They'll often touch back with you and say, 'This happened – we talked about this, and now this happened,'... But the onus is on you as coach to check in." (T75) Change can be observed in behaviour – "obviously a change in behaviour" (B26) – or in incremental improvements: "They're little by little starting to improve. Taking on board what you've said. And get better. And that's where I measure it." (D16) More traditional HR methods are integrated into coaching practice such as 360-degree feedback "I'm a big believer in 360 reviews as a part of coaching." (R43) and: "We use 360 evaluations once a year ... part of the outcomes of your coaching are to make sure those scores are moving in the right direction." (Q77).

Conclusion

To drive lasting impact, CCOs must lead as strategic coaches – empowering individuals through personalised development and inclusive communication.

Chief communication officers serve as pivotal strategic coaches, fostering leadership growth across all organisational – levels from direct reports to the C-suite – while deliberately tailoring their approach to individual needs rather than relying on broad generational stereotypes. Their coaching practices emphasise empowering talent, nurturing leadership capacity, and reinforcing their own leadership identity, all within a culture that values continuous learning, peer support, and two-way learning relationships. By integrating diverse evaluation methods, including formal feedback and informal check-ins, CCOs ensure coaching drives meaningful performance improvements and well-being. This dynamic, inclusive coaching approach not only strengthens individual and team capabilities but also aligns closely with long-term organisational objectives and diversity-aware communication leadership. The following insights are essential to effective CCO coaching:

1. Visionary. Coaching is strategic, not just operational. Communicators should view coaching as a long-term investment in leadership capacity and succession planning.

2. Flexibility. Coaching styles require elasticity and are adapted to individuals' needs rather than imposed via rigid models.

3. Influence. C-suite coaching builds impact. Trusted relationships with top executives help communicators to enhance their internal standing and drive organisational alignment as well as strategic messaging and listening.

4. Reciprocity. Reverse and peer coaching are important. Knowledge flows both ways, and coaching cultures flourish when learning is mutual and collaborative.

5. Individuality. Generational labels are insufficient. Coaching should refrain from generational stereotypes and use intersectional and personality-driven approaches.

References and additional food for thought

The literature cited in this report is listed on the following pages. This includes conceptual articles and books, as well as other empirical studies on the topics covered in the ECM 2025/26. The references reveal the body of knowledge on which the research team relies. They ensure transparency and are an indispensable part of solid research projects. They can also be used by readers to identify interesting sources that provide a deeper insight into the debate.

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