

The New CCAO and CCO Mandate

Navigating volatility at
the intersection of
business and culture

The beginning of 2025

has seen significant shifts in the external environment that continue to reshape the role of the corporate affairs function and the executives who lead it.

Last fall, we conducted a study examining the shifting role of the communications executive. Our working question was simple: As companies pulled back from the societal issues postures that were en vogue in the early 2020s, would the elevated role of the Chief Corporate Affairs Officer and Chief Communications Officer also fade into the background? We found – emphatically – that this was not the case. While these leaders in many cases were less visible, they were doing more, with elevated postures in driving the modern CEO agenda.

Following the second inauguration of President Donald Trump and his first 100 days in office, our survey research painted a stark portrait of a divided America – a national mood defined by pessimism and hyper-partisanship. But it also found bright spots in the role of business in society, with 66% of Americans saying they feel positively about their employers, and over three-quarters of Americans across political parties saying that business should play a leading role in stabilizing the economy and democracy.

We found ourselves asking: Where does this environment leave the corporate affairs leader?

We had another series of conversations, speaking anonymously with corporate affairs leaders from major global corporations about their evolving roles, responsibilities, and challenges. How were these leaders adapting to a volatile and unpredictable new normal? What role had they found themselves playing as corporations navigated an unprecedented volume of Executive Orders, economic volatility, and the complexities of hyper-partisanship?

Our interviews revealed corporate affairs leaders taking on increasingly proactive roles in business strategy. The daily function of the Chief Corporate Affairs Officer has become more central to navigating an unpredictable political and economic environment, ensuring business can sustain its license to operate amid increased cultural complexity. Rather than simply reacting to external developments, communications and corporate affairs leaders have helped shape their organizations' positions, leveraging stakeholder knowledge and insights to anticipate and mitigate risks before they materialize.

A common thread in these conversations was the acceleration of trends we identified in our previous research – particularly the need for business acumen, cultural fluency, internal diplomacy, and political navigation as corporate affairs becomes a more strategic business function – but with ever more challenging stakeholder problems to solve. The corporate affairs function continues to wield increasing power and influence in the C-suite, but with this elevation comes greater responsibility and scrutiny. As one interviewee noted, “Real money is having to be spent now in anticipation of future risk.”

The ultimate vision for the corporate affairs function is the ability to offer foresight to the enterprise – judgement not only for reputational advancement and cultural navigation, but for broader business risk, performance and competitive positioning. While corporate affairs leaders are near-ubiquitous in recognizing this vision as an end goal, our interviews suggest that they are taking an array of paths to deliver on it.

Business decisions: From reactive to proactive

01

A near-universal theme among the corporate affairs leaders we spoke with was their evolution from reactive advisors to proactive business partners who directly influence business decisions. Their ability to anticipate and manage the business impact of political, regulatory, cultural, and policy shifts increasingly defines the new scope of the corporate affairs function. Where past communications executives were tasked with explaining decisions to stakeholders, the modern corporate affairs leader is increasingly tasked with helping to shape these decisions in a complex economic and policy environment.

These leaders act as orchestrators across the organization, pulling together different functions to address emerging risks and opportunities. They are uniquely situated within the C-suite as most aligned to the CEO in attitude, thinking and incentives – able to balance competing departmental interests while maintaining focus on broader business objectives and stakeholder needs.

The corporate affairs function is increasingly earning seats at the table by delivering strategic value during critical situations, from acquisitions to regulatory challenges. Many are now leveraging their unique enterprise-wide perspective to help the business translate external affairs issues into business and product decisions.

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“We were having [policy] issues with [one of our consumer products.] We took the data to the business and suggested product changes. This led to an 8-week sprint that ultimately started to resolve product issues. That experience radically changed my relationship with our product leader. Now he wants to know what I think.”

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These leaders have the unique ability to remain objective and lead with a balanced stakeholder view, bringing forward stakeholder intelligence as neutral arbiters. This ability to see and understand the external world and its impact on business allows them to coordinate necessary responses. But for many, challenges persist in balancing reliance on insights-driven, stakeholder intelligence-driven strategy with instinct and practicality.

Counsel to leaders

Quantify business risk and impact

Develop frameworks that translate external risks into financial metrics your C-suite peers understand. Create models that show how proactive investments in stakeholder management can mitigate potential revenue impacts from regulatory changes, consumer backlash, or reputational damage.

Build cross-functional intelligence networks

Establish formal mechanisms to synthesize insights from across your organization, positioning corporate affairs as the central nerve center that connects disparate information flows into actionable intelligence for business decision-makers and makes recommendations based on that intelligence.

Lead role in navigating political complexity

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Corporate affairs leaders must now operate in an environment where the political landscape can shift rapidly, requiring increasingly nuanced approaches. The function finds itself at the center of efforts to navigate an administration where single statements from political figures can dramatically impact business operations.

Companies are shifting from the en-vogue social activism of the early 2020s to a focus on brand protection and risk management in the current political environment. Accordingly, corporate affairs leaders are carefully evaluating which issues align with their business interests versus which should be avoided.

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“The administration has already changed the role of comms. We have a committee that meets every month to discuss new directives. It’s an opportunity to have more of a place at the table.”

The “audience of one” phenomenon has created new dynamics where corporate affairs must navigate the potential for single political figures to significantly impact business.

This requires developing new playbooks and mitigation strategies for sudden political attention, and many of our interviewees said they had already developed new frameworks for assessing political engagement. Communication strategies now require detailed preparation and scenario planning, with many companies creating dedicated cross-functional teams to monitor and plan for various contingencies.

“Every one of us is trying to make sure that we don’t end up as the next corporate example... Because the second it ends up with President Trump, a huge spotlight gets shined on it. And, quite frankly, we don’t know the playbook yet for this stuff.”

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In many cases, leaders told us that their role was to act as a voice of reason on executive leadership teams, bringing a clear-eyed view of where engaging with this administration in the public arena is useful – and where closed-door dialogue is more appropriate.

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“We’re used to moving very quickly and bringing information to the business. Now we tend to sit on some of the news coming from the administration. We sit on it for a while... because these things are bargaining chips that in 24, 36, 48 hours can make a huge amount of difference.”

American CCAOs of companies headquartered globally also pointed out that they are frequently called on to make sense of U.S. politics.

Counsel to leaders

Develop “audience of one” mitigation strategies

Create scenario plans specifically addressing potential attention from influential political figures. Establish rapid response protocols that include predetermined decision-making frameworks and stakeholder management approaches, particularly for the markets, employees, and customers.

Know your blind spots – and tap relevant advisors

Think of where your business may need frequent support or counsel in dealing with the administration, and tap relevant advisors and expertise to help with insights on various challenges.

Rebalance social positioning

Conduct a systematic review of your company’s public positions, identifying areas where business interests and core values intersect with the current political landscape. Focus on initiatives that deliver clear business value while avoiding unnecessary political exposure.

From crisis to always-on reputation management

03

The leaders we spoke with note that handling crises is now considered a fundamental rather than an exceptional capability for corporate affairs teams. As one executive told us, crisis management is often “the only value that a comms team brings” in the eyes of some leaders, making it essential but insufficient for today’s corporate affairs function. In an environment of evolving permacrisis, leaders find themselves applying the traditional tools of crisis management in a more continuous way, creating nuanced ways to react to evolving policy on tariffs and similarly volatile issues.

Crisis management has evolved to include more than just media response, extending to active problem-solving when issues arise. Teams are expected not only to communicate during crises, but to help resolve them, often coordinating responses across multiple business functions.

“To me, activist investors and union staff are table stakes. A comms team should be in there during a crisis. That’s often the only value that a comms team brings. It’s about protection. I think it’s much harder to be seen as the day-to-day business partner and be able to add that value.”

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Leaders are also using data and analytics to quantify the business impact of potential crises and justify preventative investments. By translating potential reputational damage into financial terms, they can make more compelling cases for proactive risk management.

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“We were in the middle of a contentious situation and asked for \$2.5M for a campaign. I did some analysis to show how much profit the company would make if the campaign was successful. The ROI was 12X the investment. Our CFO ended up saying ‘I used to think of this stuff as nice to do; now I think it’s something we have to do.’”

Still, for many, the challenge is shifting the corporate affairs function from an issues-and-crisis posture to a strategic function – and earning a seat at the table for a proactive, versus reactive, posture on issues in the public arena.

Counsel to leaders

Implement crisis prevention scoring

Develop a systematic approach to evaluating potential issues before they become crises, using consistent criteria across business units to identify and address vulnerabilities proactively.

Quantify the business impact

As you engage on emerging issues and crises, work with AI tools and partners in finance to quantify the financial impact of crisis mitigation plans – ensuring you can speak the language of the business in crisis management and prevention.

Employee communications remains a focus, with added caution and a “sanitized” view

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The definition of key stakeholders has expanded, and for corporate affairs leaders, balancing their sometimes conflicting interests requires new skills and approaches.

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“Many describe their roles as fundamentally about stakeholder management for business in culture, with a particular emphasis on employees during periods of uncertainty.”

The leaders we spoke with are navigating complex and competing stakeholder demands, catering to administration interests while seeking to serve as a source of ongoing stability for their employees. This balancing act has become increasingly difficult amid increased polarization.

“Our CEO views the role, and so do I, as really like a stakeholder management type of role... With the most important stakeholders being employees, which is probably what he’s most focused on right now.”

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Communicating with employees during political volatility requires special care and is a continued focus for corporate affairs leaders. They must thread the needle between transparency and compliance with new regulatory requirements, often taking a more cautious approach to internal communications.

“We have been very transparent in a high-level, sanitized way. And part of that is also ensuring that we tread a fine line and don’t tip our hats in a partisan way... we know from the DEI executive orders that employees are being encouraged to whistleblow against their companies.”

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Counsel to leaders

Understand your employee base

Leverage sophisticated tools – including message testing, where possible – to understand the positions and points of view of your employee base, mitigating potential activism and dissent among employees whose perspective may differ from other stakeholders and from one another.

Map stakeholder intersections

Create comprehensive internal stakeholder maps that identify where different employee groups’ interests align or conflict, using this analysis to develop nuanced engagement strategies that navigate competing priorities

Just as the external affairs environment has become increasingly volatile, AI applications have moved from theoretical to practical. In many cases, this has been a boon for corporate affairs leaders, whose notoriously limited budgets would have otherwise prevented them from sophisticated approaches to the current environment. New technology is being rapidly integrated into core workflows, changing how teams approach everything from media monitoring to strategic planning.

Teams are using AI to process large amounts of information quickly, such as vetting potential influencers by analyzing years of social media content. This capability is proving especially valuable for monitoring emerging political risks and identifying potential vulnerabilities, and for situations that require a large amount of scripting.

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“We had days to prepare pages and pages of Q&A for a major transaction. Without AI, it would have been impossible to work through our stakeholder communications plan.”

Corporate affairs leaders are helping their teams overcome fear that AI will replace their jobs by demonstrating how it enhances their strategic value. By automating routine tasks, AI is allowing communications professionals to focus more on advisory and strategic work, which leaders say is a motivator for junior talent.

Companies are conducting systematic testing to determine which communications tasks benefit most from AI assistance. Many are finding that AI can dramatically improve efficiency in areas like content creation, media monitoring, and data analysis.

AI is enabling better crisis monitoring and faster response capabilities through tools that analyze misinformation and disinformation. These tools help teams identify emerging narratives before they gain significant traction.

Accordingly, corporate affairs leaders say they're investing more in research and intelligence, shifting budget allocations to support enhanced monitoring and analytical capabilities.

“This year, I shifted my budget around to bring on two different new research partners, and I don't have the budget for them. So what I'm expecting is that then I'll say I tried them, we need to keep them, and then we need extra money for that.”

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Counsel to leaders

Develop AI ethics guidelines

Establish clear principles for how your team will use AI in communications work, addressing potential bias, accuracy concerns, and appropriate use cases to ensure responsible implementation.

Work through a change management plan

Understand that AI adoption is primarily a change management challenge, and help teams adapt to new ways of working. Define which aspects of communications work should remain primarily human-driven versus AI-assisted, designing workflow models that leverage the strengths of both while building necessary guardrails.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured, in-depth interviews to examine the evolving role of Chief Communications Officers (CCOs) and Chief Corporate Affairs Officers (CCAOs) within large-cap companies. The research aimed to understand how these leaders navigate strategic decision-making, crisis management, and organizational transformation in an increasingly complex business environment.

The study utilized purposive sampling to identify and recruit corporate affairs leaders from Fortune 1000 companies. Participants were selected based on current employment as CCO or CCAOs, minimum of five years in senior corporate affairs leadership, direct reporting relationship to CEO or executive leadership team, representation across diverse industry sectors, and geographic distribution that included both U.S.-based and European corporate affairs leaders.

In-depth individual interviews were conducted over a two-month period in early 2025. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes, was conducted via secure video conferencing platform, was recorded with participant consent, was transcribed verbatim, and followed a semi-structured interview protocol.

Our analysis followed a systemic, iterative process. Thematic categories were developed and refined, with cross-case analysis used to identify common patterns and negative cases analyzed for divergent perspectives.

Our research adhered to strict ethical guidelines. Informed consent was secured from all participants. Confidentiality was protected through data anonymization and secure data storage procedures. We provided an option for all participants to review findings prior to publication.

About United Minds

United Minds is a management consultancy built to help organizations lead through change. We specialize in organizational design, change management, and leadership alignment—bringing clarity to complexity and helping leaders drive measurable progress. Born from a creative communications network and built by experienced consultants, we combine analytical rigor with a deep understanding of human behavior. Our approach is practical, people-centered, and outcome-driven. We partner closely with leaders to shape organizations that deliver greater value and impact—moving people to move business.

About Weber Advisory

Weber Advisory is a modern corporate affairs capability built for every facet of the CEO and corporate enterprise agenda. In an era where understanding cultural nuances, political trends and societal shifts is essential for navigating the business landscape, Weber Advisory offers a comprehensive suite of services and technology built to empower agile corporate affairs executives to create and protect stakeholder value in high-stakes situations, including geopolitical issues, mergers and acquisitions, employee activism, major crises, leadership transitions, and business transformations.

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