

# The Modern CCO and the Art of Balancing Competing Forces

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# Foreward

A few months ago, we spoke anonymously with European corporate affairs leaders from major global corporation about their evolving roles, responsibilities and challenges. Our interviews revealed that, like the secret star of a rally team, the modern Chief Communications Officer (CCO) carries the immense responsibility of foresight and guidance without ever holding the steering wheel. More than just a strategic co-driver translating a complex world into actionable "pace notes," the modern CCO is focused on building trust and engagement with stakeholders. By influencing the actions and commitments required to move the business forward, they ensure the CEO can drive with both speed and confidence.

Today, the CCO's 'race course' is more complex than ever. While our US counterparts are focused on navigating hyper-partisanship, the challenge in Europe is centered on managing cultural nuances and complying with ever-increasing regulation, particularly during organizational transformation. All set against the advent of AI and the implications this has for the business and the communications function.

Successfully steering through this requires a new level of partnership and strategic input, and while the role of corporate affairs continues its trajectory from reactive support function to strategic business partner, many European CCOs still find themselves battling outdated perceptions of their function as a mere cost center.

The CCOs who succeed are those who earn their place in the co-driver's seat by becoming indispensable advisors.

Inside the world of rally driving, the driver may get the glory, but without the co-driver in the passenger seat next to them their race to the finish line would be near impossible. The co-driver is an essential strategic mind, interpreting complex "pace notes" to guide the driver through treacherous terrain, and the voice of calm anticipating hazards and keeping the team on track. This partnership is one of the most intense in all sports, built on the ultimate foundation of trust where the driver's performance and safety are entirely dependent on the clear, precise and strategic guidance of their co-driver.



# Executive Summary: The Co-driver's Mandate

## Headline Finding

The defining challenge for today's CCO is the "Navigator's Plight". The intense pressure to look several corners ahead, providing strategic foresight, while simultaneously managing the immediate bumps and hazards of the road.

The CCO has become the indispensable co-driver, acting as a "sounding board" and "dot-connector" for leadership. Their role is no longer about describing the journey by mastering messaging and storytelling; it's about defining the route to successfully influencing performance by mastering three critical balancing acts.

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*"The role of communication professionals is evolving in response to the increasing complexities of corporate environments, shifting towards a more integrated and strategic approach."*

— Quote from contributor

## Three Core Balancing Acts:

- 1 The Strategic Balancing Act**  
Translating long-term strategy into immediate, actionable instructions.
- 2 The People Balancing Act**  
Navigating transformation versus anchoring the team.
- 3 The Technology Balancing Act**  
Integrating new tools versus relying on experience.

## Key Takeaway:

The CCOs who embrace this "plight" and master these tensions become the "secret stars" of their organizations, building teams and capabilities in counsel, crisis management and execution support to deliver the trust, insight and direction organizations need to win.

## “Seeing What Others Missed”

In one organization, a routine staffing update revealed that a contractor in a public facing role had a history of inappropriate conduct. Operational leaders initially dismissed it as a closed matter, but the CCO looked at the situation through the eyes of employees who might feel unsafe, customers who expect rigorous duty-of-care, and media or regulators who could expose the organization for inaction. By spelling out these consequences with unfiltered honesty, the CCO transformed a seemingly minor operational detail into a strategic risk requiring immediate action - illustrating how offering clear-eyed, challenging counsel is essential to protecting trust and guiding leaders through hidden hazards.

## “Brave Inside, Trusted Outside”

One CCO described their role as being “the strongest critic of the company internally, and its first ambassador externally.” In practice, this meant challenging leadership on issues such as inequality and declining trust in authority - arming executives with uncomfortable insights that could inform leadership behavior over the long term, rather than simply polishing short-term narratives.

## “Drafting - a Strategic Stress Test”

A CCO described how the act of drafting communications often revealed strategic weaknesses that had not surfaced in discussion. Only once decisions were written down did leaders fully grasp their implications - allowing communications to serve as a constructive mechanism for strategic correction rather than post-hoc messaging.

### The Tension

The constant shift between a wide-angle view of the map (strategic, forward-looking counsel) and the tight focus on the next corner (immediate priorities and crisis management). The CCO is uniquely placed to have this transversal view, cutting across functions to connect dots others cannot see. They integrate insights across functions such as HR, finance, public affairs, R&D and marketing to shape enterprise decisions. They help harmonize strategy and stakeholder expectations across the business. Finally, they bring external intelligence into business strategy—from investor sentiment to geopolitical risk to societal expectations—ensuring decisions reflect the full ecosystem beyond communications.

### The Navigator’s Plight in Action

The CCO is expected to be the “shadow strategist,” yet is frequently pulled into “firefighting.” They must read the complex map of stakeholder relations, regulatory changes, and market shifts, but their value is often only recognized when the car is already skidding. To earn their place, they must build trust through deep business acumen and a willingness to offer honest, challenging counsel.

### Taking Action

The Navigator doesn’t just read the map; they create the pace notes. They provide the essential, simplified instructions that allow the driver to act with confidence about which route to choose. This means:

- **Become a Strategic Enabler:** Systematically connect communications to business performance by taking a forensic approach: review the specific goals of each business function and map communication strategies directly to support their success or mitigate their risks.
- **Act as a Proactive Guardian:** Evolve from a reactive monitor to a proactive strategist by using predictive analytics to identify and get ahead of emerging narratives and potential risks, protecting the business from reputational damage.
- **Shape Decisions as a Cross-Functional Bridge:** Use your unique position and external intelligence to build relationships across the business, connect diverse stakeholder perspectives, and help shape enterprise-level decisions.
- **Embrace the Dual Role of Challenger and Champion:** Challenge the C-suite with unvarnished, data-driven perspectives on stakeholder sentiment and risk, then champion the chosen strategy with a compelling narrative that aligns the entire organization.

*“You are invited into the room to ensure people aren’t worried about things. You worry about the stuff so the CEO doesn’t have to.”*

*“When fire ignites, you call the fire brigade.”*

*“I’m the strongest critique of the company internally and its strongest ambassador externally.”*

*“The perceived value of the function is decreasing. We are often reduced to crisis communications and PR.”*

*“Misinformation, disinformation and fake news will transform how we work on crisis management. It’s one of the main challenges for us on how to be prepared.”*

*“In Europe, we are expected to tell the truth and challenge assumptions when it’s right. This establishes CCOs as counsellors.”*

# The People Balancing Act: Navigating Transformation vs. Anchoring the Team

PART

# 02

The navigator is responsible for more than the route; they are responsible for ensuring teams at enterprise level understand the direction they are heading.

## The Tension

Guiding the organization through the constant turns of transformation while ensuring the team remains anchored, stable, and focused. Internal communications is no longer just about motivation and information dissemination; it is the critical nexus for culture and employer brand. Across multiple organizations, leaders describe internal communications not as a "nice to have," but as the primary mechanism for cohesion, alignment, and cultural continuity, especially in environments marked by hypergrowth, restructuring, or dispersed workforces.

## The Navigator's Plight in Action

The CCO must champion change while simultaneously being the critical guardian of the organization's most valuable asset: trust. As one leader noted, multiple transformations can "block the view" for employees. The CCO must ground leadership in the reality of the workforce – who are thinking about their jobs and "putting food on the family table" – and ensure the "why" and "what's in it for me" behind the change is clear.

## Taking Action

The Navigator's Role: The navigator's calm, clear, and confident voice is what keeps the driver focused, regardless of the road's twists and turns. In an environment that will continue to get louder, more chaotic and more complex, the CCO is the guardian of trust, ensuring the bond of trust between leadership and stakeholders including employees remains strong, even when the journey is challenging. This means:

- **Treat internal communications as the strategic dashboard for driving change**, not just the radio for announcements. CCOs must get a constant pulse of the organization through employee data and two-way dialogue to make sure messages resonate and risks and opportunities are identified early. Active listening is a key to success.
- **Remind the team where they are going and why the difficult turns are necessary.** CCOs must understand what psychological factors impact the human side of change to anticipate and overcome resistance, while making the link between the strategy and the day-to-day clear for employees.
- **Set a narrative for leaders to align with and follow.** The modern CCO coaches the C-suite to help them read and deliver the same pace notes consistently. CCOs must use leaders and line managers as the channel that is most effective at delivering the message and coach them on transparency, empathy and authenticity as core capabilities to build and maintain trust.

## "Holding the Culture Together"

In one fast-growing organisation built through numerous acquisitions, internal communications became the only force capable of maintaining a shared sense of direction. With thousands of employees spread across countries, fragmented systems, and no consistent way to reach half the workforce, the company risked losing the entrepreneurial culture that defined its identity. The CCO recognised that without a unified internal narrative, people would interpret the organisation's trajectory through their own local lenses, creating confusion and drift. By pushing leaders to prioritise internal comms – and explaining how silence or inconsistency would erode trust, belonging, and alignment – the CCO ensured the entire enterprise understood not just the destination, but the path to get there. This demonstrated the navigator's role: not only charting the route, but making sure every team stays on it together, through clear, honest and sometimes challenging counsel.

*"We do lots of transformations. They block the view for what we want to do."*

*"When done badly, internal comms can create external reputation issues."*

*"If you look after people, the numbers look after themselves."*

*"I see internal communications as a critical nexus for culture."*

# The Technology Balancing Act: Integrating New Tools vs. Relying on Experience

PART

## 03

A modern navigator uses advanced tools, but it is their human judgment that makes the difference between winning and losing.

### The Tension

The push to adopt AI and data analytics for greater efficiency and measurement versus preserving the human instinct, creativity, and authenticity that are the hallmarks of great communications. This is especially true as CCOs face pressure to "put a monetary value on communications."

### The Navigator's Plight in Action

The CCO is pressured to prove ROI with hard data, yet knows their greatest value often lies in the unquantifiable: their "feel" for the road and their nuanced, EQ-driven judgment. The best approach is to use technology to achieve manual tasks more quickly and use predictive analytics and scenario planning to measure effectiveness more accurately, freeing up human capacity for what it does best.

### "The Real ROI of AI is Strategic Headroom"

One communications function described how AI is increasingly used to automate drafting, translation and media monitoring. Rather than positioning this as a costcutting exercise, the benefit is framed as time regained. The real return lies in freeing senior communicators to focus on judgement intensive work - such as crisis preparation, leadership counsel and narrative oversight - where human experience remains irreplaceable.

### "From Execution to Decision-Making"

As AI absorbs more executional work, recruitment is shifting toward communicators who combine strategic thinking, business understanding and critical judgement - profiles capable of working with AI fluently while retaining responsibility for decisions.

### Taking Action

The Navigator's Role: The navigator's ultimate job is to combine the insight and efficiencies gained from technology and data with human experience and judgment. This means:

- **Use AI for Advanced Reconnaissance.** Using AI-driven modelling, communications teams can test how different messages are likely to land with specific audiences before decisions are finalized, sharpening counsel to leaders and reducing reputational risk. This shift - from explaining what happened to anticipating what will happen next - was largely unheard of in corporate communications even two years ago.
- **Augment Human Capacity:** Automate repeatable, data-intensive and language-reliant tasks, freeing up teams to focus on what humans do best: high-level strategy, creative storytelling, relationship building and nuanced counsel.
- **Foster a Culture of Experimentation:** Give the team a "license to play" with new tools on low-stakes projects to build confidence and capability. CCOs must embrace AI, role model from the top and allow innovation to come from across the team through experimentation.
- **Invest in training** that combines data analysis with the core communications skills of empathy, ethics, and emotional intelligence. CCOs must re-evaluate and adjust training programs to cater for the skills of the future, either by upskilling from within or bringing in new talent.

*"Time saved by AI must be reinvested in becoming more strategic."*

*"We have to get a license to play around with AI. We will only learn from trying, not from PowerPoints."*

*"The CCO is called for when an EQ judgment needs to be made."*

# Where United Minds Can Help

United Minds supports CCOs and leadership teams in turning these tensions into sources of advantage through three offerings.

Unblocking Adoption of AI in Comms Teams	Boosting Marketing and Comms Leadership Skills	Mission Critical Change
<p><b>Assess readiness, unblock adoption, and rewrite workflows for impact, faster.</b></p> <p>This offering directly addresses the AI Value Gap - helping communications leaders move beyond simple efficiencies to transform their function and add new, strategic value to the business.</p>	<p><b>Develop the human capabilities to lead through relentless change</b></p> <p>This offering directly addresses the Leadership Squeeze - equipping marketing and communications leaders with the distinctly human capabilities required to lead effectively in an era of AI transformation, high uncertainty, and constant change.</p>	<p><b>Supercharge your change communications for turbulent times</b></p> <p>This offering helps CCOs lead through the People Balancing Act - guiding organizations through ongoing transformation while maintaining trust, cohesion and performance.</p>
<p><b>It helps leaders answer:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we create significant value with AI, not just incremental efficiencies?</li> <li>• How do we bridge the gap between AI non-users and advanced users on our team?</li> <li>• How can we ensure the AI tools we have are living up to their full potential?</li> <li>• What is a clear, actionable path to redesign workflows and increase team productivity?</li> <li>• How do we build an AI-confident culture and a scalable operating model tied to business outcomes?</li> <li>• How to shape new career paths for junior roles threatened by AI's replacement of menial tasks?</li> </ul> <p>Drawing on the combined expertise of United Minds' human-centered transformation approach and Weber I/O's technical acceleration, this work focuses on delivering a low-investment, high-impact diagnostic. The 5-8 week engagement provides a 90-Day Quick-Win Roadmap to build clarity, leadership alignment, and an actionable path forward.</p> <p>Contact us for a complimentary 30-minute conversation to learn more.</p>	<p><b>It helps leaders answer:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to display an authentic leadership style?</li> <li>• How to develop insight-led, nuanced strategies?</li> <li>• How to make decision in ambiguity?</li> <li>• How to influence cross-functionally without authority?</li> <li>• How to keep an optimistic mindset?</li> <li>• How to build resilience and help teams deal with the messiness of change?</li> </ul> <p>Through tailored, fast-to-value options - including leadership audits, team development workshops, leader labs, and coaching - the program enables leaders to build trust, deliver impact, and develop the adaptability needed to champion their brand through any upheaval.</p>	<p><b>It helps leaders answer:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do we communicate change when transformation is constant - not episodic?</li> <li>• How do we protect trust and culture while moving fast?</li> <li>• How do we ensure employees understand not just <i>what</i> is changing, but <i>why it matters to them</i>?</li> <li>• How do we turn internal communications into a listening system, not just a broadcast channel?</li> </ul> <p>United Minds works with leaders to design change narratives, listening structures and leadership behaviors that sustain momentum without eroding trust.</p>