



# Corporate Affairs Insights and Leadership in a Time of Permacrisis

Report from the Corporate Affairs Academy 2023



# Contents

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## Themes



## About the Corporate Affairs Academy

The Corporate Affairs Academy (CAA), run by the Oxford University Centre for Corporate Reputation in conjunction with Executive Education at Saïd Business School, provides a forum for CA leaders to consider ways to develop both the effectiveness of the function, their capacity to add value to organisations, and their own capabilities, with the help of the latest research, and contributions of leading practitioners from corporate affairs, the wider business community and the media.

The 2023 cohort was the largest and most diverse to date, with 35 participants, representing 16 different sectors, 17 nationalities and with a 50:50 gender mix. It made for a really stimulating week of discussions, notable both for the range of perspectives, and for the number of core concerns common to the group: in the professional aspirations of the corporate affairs function, the challenges that participants face currently – and expect to face in the future – and the personal qualities required to navigate the reputational implications. For more information see: [www.sbs.oxford.edu/caa](http://www.sbs.oxford.edu/caa)





# This year's participants

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**Jakob Bøss**

Executive Vice President, Danske Bank

**Peter O'Shea**

Head of Corporate and Regulatory Affairs, ESB

**Dominique d'Haens**

Manager Public & Government Affairs, NN Group

**Robert Colmer**

Head of Corporate Affairs and Sustainability,  
Aston Martin Lagonda

**Rasmus Mariegaard**

VP, Marketing, Comms and Sales, Finansforbundet

**Elliot Dunster**

Executive Director, Communications, International  
Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and  
Associations (IFPMA)

**Carly Eales**

Director of Communications, Australia & New Zealand,  
McKinsey & Company

**Claudia de la Vega Martinez**

Director Corporate Affairs, Walmart Mexico  
and Central America

**Madeleine Haden**

Corporate Affairs & Engagement Director,  
L'Oréal UK & Ireland

**Claire Blakeway**

Vice President, Strategic Communications Planning, BP

**Sam Peacock**

Director of Corporate Affairs and Strategy, SSE

**Mona Patel**

Head of External Communication, Metro Bank

**Shoshana Whybrow**

VP Colleague Communications, Sage plc

**Jonathan Ashton**

Head of Marketing and Communications, KROHNE

**Olakunle Olusanya**

General Secretary, Executive Director Legal & Public  
Affairs, Fan Milk & Danone

**Harshna Brahmbhatt-Capman**

Head of Corporate Affairs, Pension Insurance  
Corporation plc (PIC)

**Emma Morrison**

Regional Corporate Affairs & Stakeholder Engagement  
Manager, Gold Fields Ghana

**Luiz Ricardo Santiago**

Director, Global Corporate Affairs, Vale S.A.

**Hannah Frank**

Government Affairs and Public Policy, Google

**Matthew Taylor**

Assistant Head, Policy and Plans for International  
Communications and Engagement, British Army  
Headquarters in the Ministry of Defence, London

**Claire Hall**

Executive Officer for Head International,  
Communications and Engagement, British Army  
Headquarters in the Ministry of Defence, London

**Odette Maher**

Global Head of Communications and  
Corporate Affairs, Symphony

**Ashley Shackleton**

Principal Advisor, External Affairs, UK, Rio Tinto

**Rodrigo Darquea**

Head of Corporate Affairs, BHP

**Georgiana Gheorghe**

Head of Corporate Affairs, STADA Romania

**Jacqueline Nelson**

Managing Director, Corporate Communications, CPP  
Investments (Canada Pension Plan Investment Board)

**Zoe McDougall**

Head of Global Corporate Affairs and Strategic  
Communications, Oxford Nanopore Technologies



**Kulveer Ranger**

SVP Head of Strategy, Communications & Public Affairs, Northern Europe & APAC, Atos

**Stefano Ballista**

President and CEO, Eni Sustainable Mobility SPA

**Cristina Billett**

General Manager, Corporate Affairs, New Zealand Superannuation Fund

**Sunita Kapoor**

Head of Corporate Affairs and Sustainability, ASEAN, Reckitt

**Efosa Aiyebomwan**

PR and Publicity Manager, sub-Saharan Africa, Netflix

**Ava Zekri**

Head of External Relations for France and Corporate Philanthropy for the EU, Bloomberg LP

**Sajin Varghese**

Senior Director, Global Public Affairs, Intuitive Surgical Asia Pacific





## Executive summary

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Today's corporate affairs virtual in-tray is enormous and constantly evolving. The core role of the function as the radar for organisations, the place where external risks and opportunities are recognised, calibrated and disseminated, has always been a considerable proposition, but now it has reached unprecedented levels. The scale and speed of the challenges, their novelty and unknowability, was captured in what became almost the *leitmotif* of this Corporate Affairs Academy: by the time you have found the answer, the question will have changed. It therefore becomes more than ever a matter of looking for the best possible answer with the best possible information in the expectation of uncertainty, and with the ability to show your reasoning and justification. Identifying the important components in any decision becomes vital: the relevant stakeholder, expectation frames, risk of biases, and aligning with the priorities and purpose of the organisation, so that any decision follows the right principles even if it is harder than ever to say it is uncontentiously correct.

It was in that context that we embarked upon this year's academy, developing thinking around critical concerns we have identified over recent years, such as activism and advocacy, misinformation and ESG (environmental, social and governance), but also posing questions that seek to make sense of the new vulnerabilities – and opportunities – in a future where one of the key components, AI (artificial intelligence), is already upon us before many of us know quite what it is or what its implications are. Unsurprisingly in this context, resilience was a preoccupation for the cohort, both organisationally, as a function and personally, and sessions on both resilience and scenarios planning stimulated considerable discussion and shared learnings. To reflect the character of the sessions and interactions this year, the sections are all posed as questions; as usual, quotations throughout the report come from participants.

*'The companies at the top of the S&P 100 now are the asset-light companies, with high intangible value, brand capital and reputation – Microsoft, Alphabet, Amazon. That is part of the reason why the work that you do is becoming more valuable.'*

Rupert Younger, Academic Director of the Corporate Affairs Academy



## Do you understand the key drivers of reputations?

There was a shared perception among the cohort that reputations are more vulnerable than ever, thanks to speed of information dissemination, fragmentation of media sources, imperviousness of closed networks to influence, and the polarisation of opinion that process intensifies. While there is indeed vulnerability, some of the mechanisms behind the drivers of reputation have proved consistent over time: your behaviour, the narratives – stories people tell about your behaviour – and the networks these travel through. Information flows through and around networks, but depending on the nature of the network, the information operates in very different ways, with different levels of trust, reliability and impact, and the cohort discussed ways to be more deliberative about creating the network structures that best suit their tasks:

**Closed networks – information moves fast and with a high degree of certainty, and can prompt a high degree of trust/distrust, as the members are well-known to one another.**

- **Positive:** Quick and efficient communication
- **Negative:** Can foster ignorant certainty

### Open networks

- **Positive:** allows information to percolate at its own pace and fosters innovation
- **Negative:** information can move slowly

### The importance of network brokers

- Network brokers are the first in organisations to recognise the value of information moving across networks. Knowledge they receive is disseminated more quickly, and they decode information coming in.

*‘Research shows network brokers are paid better, are happier in their jobs and they get promoted faster. There are very few people suited for this role, but as Corporate Affairs Directors, that is where you sit.’*

### Character and capability

Narratives that speak to how you are considered/rated by stakeholders tend to do so through the lenses of character and capability.

There is a key difference between character and capability reputations, and the way perceptions around them are influenced: the former are highly volatile and quick to be affected in the light of crises; and the latter more stable, robust and less prone to shifts where prior positive capability is proven. Engagement strategies should be anchored in a clear analysis of which dimension is under threat: capability dimensions require engagement on amending the product or service in question, whereas character dimensions require a focus on governance enhancements.

*‘We had a lot of problems on the capability side. But I feel like our character has helped us – so I am thinking, how can we amplify the character, because I feel we would be in a worse place reputationally were it not for our character, and I wonder if we need to really ramp that up just to keep us going over the hump that we’re in?’*



# How should corporate affairs approach the emergence of AI?

The rise of AI, from its predictive learning incarnation to more recent generative AI (GAI) has been as precipitous as it has been confusing. It is discussed as if it is imminent, when in fact it has already been with us for several years in different forms, and there is a huge discrepancy in understanding around it. Corporate affairs leaders have to understand the different forms, identify their relevance for different stakeholders, calm irrational fears around them, identify the reputational risks, and inform/guide the way their organisations deploy AI. We initiated an exploratory discussion starting from a provocation:

- **Should you treat GAI as a stakeholder rather than as a technology?**

Do you treat it differently because it is a creator, rather than just pattern recognition as the technology was in its early days?

- **Is this beyond-technology/technology+? Should it be treated like a journalist, with stakeholder engagement strategies, prompts of the 'right' information, connecting it to sources, understanding 'editorial strategies'?**

Is it the equivalent of the early days of SEO? Will there be strategies to flood areas of the internet with information that will be more salient to AI?





*'We were doing due diligence to buy smaller companies, in natural language platforms – a similar concept to AI. As we were going through the process, I thought, we need to plan to speak to the robots clearly, it's not enough just to put things out. I would also argue that the taxonomy input into all those AI systems are different, so it's very challenging to speak to all the robots in the same way.'*

*'I can't see my team driving it on without IT in some shape, but the more it goes on the more we will be engaging in the conversation.'*

*'I don't think as individual companies and corporates you're going to be able to do much. I think it's going to be how people are feeding it across the board.'*

There was some initial resistance to the notion of the technology as a stakeholder, and the sense of it as a threat.

*'Everyone's very busy and not everyone is familiar with generative AI and copywriters are reluctant to use it because it is self-disruptive.'*

*'With DALL-E, you can say, "Create me a fully integrated launch plan, creatives, full suite of advertising products, stakeholder mapping and engagement plan, and it will produce it for you in minutes. If you don't like it, you can just regenerate.'*

*'For a practical way in, look for easy to use tools that are out there, and that will help your colleagues get on board with what the bigger picture AI stuff means for the business. Quite often we compartmentalise it as if it is "over there". Search is AI driven already, and you can be very incremental.'*

*'The interface changed with ChatGPT. People felt there was a sudden shift – but is that a fully formed stakeholder? It's almost there – maybe it's the language we are using, and struggling to define it.'*

*'Normally you think of a stakeholder having intent, and I am not seeing that from generative AI. If media is a stakeholder, I can get on board, but if you want that vested interest, that's where I get stuck with AI.'*

*'My son uses AI to do coding, and if we as humans don't know how the coding is being produced – this is the tipping point: maybe AI is not a stakeholder, but it is an influencer.'*

*'The only option to influence GAI is via its creators. Once it is functioning, it has a life of its own. I think it will be very difficult to influence.'*

Is the emergence of AI just part of the repeating cycle we go through in incorporating a new technology?

*'We always go through this process of assessing new technology emerging – blockchain, the internet of things: it's the Wild West, then you move into rationales and then you frame it. The technology needs to be part of something else to deliver. We need to let it mature and treat it like a technology.'*

*'It's very sexy at the moment, but there is a whole spectrum of technologies: machine learning, natural language processing, quantum – GAI is just one part of it. Remember it's just one emerging technology out of a whole suite.'*

*'Everyone is working very hard in the GAI "arms race". Government is coming to us asking, what does this mean for the economy/society? [Corporate affairs] is the place people go when no one else in the business has answers. We scoop up all the thorniest problems.'*

*'The thing is with AI, even my mum knows what it is. It has this mass appeal, people are playing with it, unlike something like blockchain. People are going to end up using it without even realising it, and that is the risk and the opportunity.'*



# How can corporate affairs be an organisation's best radar?

Now more than ever, the antennae of the corporate affairs function are called upon to reduce the burden of uncertainty. There is a danger that the emphasis gravitates to threat identification and risk avoidance. There is a much richer return available from scanning the horizon with a view to contributing to the strategic plan.

*'We do soft scan, soft power – leading with intuition. This heavily focuses on more qualitative data that we get from conversations: it's constant communication, but focusing on the quality of the coverage and not the quantity; what it's saying, not how many people have said it. It's a two-way process where you also consider the culture of feedback: not just giving feedback internally, but also taking feedback from external partners. That gives us great data.'*

Through exploring the corporate affairs function as the antennae of the organisation, and the extent to which different types of risk assessment and projecting scenarios were useful and effective, the cohort focused on how to proactively tackle the unknown, rather than prepare to react to a crisis already upon you, and how it is best to do this in a systematic and rigorous way that draws on a broad range of expertise.

Constant calibration of feedback, even with traditional media, can be used as data points to feed into strategy.

*'Most companies use [traditional media] as a mouthpiece. We make it a two-way process. For example, across all functions, from traditional media to social media, when we measure, we also take the sentiment and incorporate it, and actually present all of these sentiments and the feedback at quarterly business review meetings, and incorporate that into the broader organisational strategies. You also understand your cross-functional partners internally better. Essentially using these conversations, emotions and feelings actually being sources of data and not just intangible. It continues to be part of the company's DNA, not just from a corporate affairs standpoint but also from a strategic business-wide perspective.'*

## CASE STUDY

### How to develop radar capability

*'You don't need a big team. We have what we call the policy lab: two economists, helped by external consultants. Their job is to do the translation of what is going on in the economic, social and political arena and translate it into the possible impact to the companies. We do red light, yellow light, green light, just to better get a visual to show the probability. It's not only that this is going to happen, but how does that truly translate into a risk, or into an opportunity for the company? And I think that has helped a lot.'*

*'I'm struggling with how you would use it in comms?'*

*'Our comms and corporate affairs sit within the strategy team, so we actually work very closely together on a lot of this kind of stuff. It helps us prioritise stakeholders that then can inform potential comms strategy, depending on which scenario you're deciding on, which trajectory the business is deciding to focus on. We're able to be nimble and shift if we need to because we've had those discussions with the strategy guys at the ground level.'*

*'We lay out what we think may happen, what are the risks, and we prioritise them, whether those are coming from external sources, or internal sources... And then we also build in a government affairs strategy and anticipatory issues management. So, you elevate it rather than just laying out what the scenarios are, but how corporate affairs can also support in terms of elevating and adding value.'*



## How can we deal with the intensification of misinformation?

The proliferation of digital channels and the rise of social media makes it much easier for various kinds of malicious content and the spread of misinformation, whether: imposter content – e.g., a fake social media presence; false context – when a real image or video is placed in an incorrect context; hacks – taking control of someone else’s real account; fabricated or manipulated content such as deep fakes – ultra-realistic audio or video clips. All of this activity is amplified by the potential of AI.

*‘There’s increasing polarisation now, so that malicious intent added to confirmation bias and the need to share content align. More and more our audiences and our stakeholders are relying on feeling more than fact, and emotion over evidence. It becomes increasingly difficult to spot the real from the fake.’*

### CASE STUDY

#### An imaginary run on the bank

*‘In 2019 a branch of one of the ‘challenger’ banks in London was suddenly deluged with customers trying to take their money out and to get access to their safe deposit boxes. It arose because of a WhatsApp rumour that was circulating in the area saying the bank was going under and they better get their money out. The PR team managed to contain the story to the area, but it shows the power of fake news and misinformation. As soon as they got wind of it, all branches were put on high alert: if anyone experienced any increase in footfall, it would be reported back to head office, to make sure that it would be caught if it started to get bigger and bigger. And it didn’t.’*

*‘Preparation is key, and that includes misinformation policies. Have processes in place, partners within the private sector and with government. [We] have our own in-house misinformation policies. They are developed for a couple of reasons: 1) It’s part of a global company and so we have to be consistent around the world in how we deal with it; 2) Government doesn’t regulate in this space adequately. No one sector can tackle misinformation alone. I think that’s the key message. So, work with your stakeholders and work with your partners to be ready.’*

#### Expect the worst, and plan for it.

*‘We do a lot of scenario planning: what are the most likely types of misinformation we’re likely to come across? We launched specific policies into Covid and vaccine misinformation, and elections misinformation policy. I always say, “What’s the worst thing that could happen?” and then work backwards from there. We worked with the Australian Electoral Commission on “What are you most worried about in terms of misinformation being out there?” We war-gamed exactly what our response would be in each of those scenarios, what policies would we apply, what decisionmakers would need to be involved, is it a legal issue or is it a content policy issue? Have that document ready, because people panic, and if everyone knows [the issues] in advance, that goes a very long way to assuring regulators, government officials, and most importantly our own internal colleagues that we have it under control.’*

#### The three stages of misinformation.

*‘The first is how you scan and monitor, and it’s really alongside the traditional media-monitoring techniques. If you do scan something that you believe is misinformation, the process that you go through to do the fact-checking can be onerous. So, at that stage you have to weigh up where is this information coming from, who is or who are the misinformants, and then whether or not it’s worth going through that onerous process, and to go into full-on crisis preparedness, or crisis management mode. Or perhaps it’s just a case of stakeholder engagement.’*

Communicate directly with stakeholders in order to reduce distortion of the narrative: not only to be effective, but also to ensure that you satisfy growing regulation around certain areas of communications.



*'Make sure that you're putting out your information and you're being as transparent as you can. If you're going through an intermediary, there's the potential to be slightly distorted... [by] an excitable subeditor.'*

*'In the ESG and sustainability space, we are seeing regulations coming in is saying you must have assurance behind your data, so it's been independently verified before it's communicated.'*

Having identified issues through effective horizon scanning, forming partnerships and making broad-based initiatives to support your case is key. Our discussion on 'advocacy and activism' incorporated both this more self-interested aspect of advocacy, and activism in the sense of presenting yourself as societal change-makers (the latter is considered below).

Partnerships with regulators, governments and trade associations can play a crucial role in accurate understanding of what is in the air and on the horizon, and as collaborators in resisting unhelpful initiatives.

*'The government wanted to come up with some restrictive regulations, and I called up my contact in one of the chambers of commerce, who had very good contacts with the department of trade and industry. Within two weeks that regulation got killed off. It's been two years, and I'm still holding my breath.'*

*'For our industry, the main regulator is, in certain markets, basically the activist against the industry. So, you need to go beyond that specific regulatory agency, and build a coalition with other government agencies. I would also bring in foreign embassies for government-to-government advocacy, because a lot of times they will pick up the phone and talk to their counterparts and get more insights, analysis, and hopefully gets things changed.'*

*'It all comes down to building your allies. You need to understand who your allies and adversaries are. If you have more adversaries than allies in this advocacy strategy that you want to put forth, maybe you need to rethink the whole initiative.'*

*'We have a gazillion playbooks – I don't know how many playbooks I've taken off the shelf and used. But we didn't plan for a pandemic. So, go with the completely unbelievable, turn it into a rumour, and then figure out what you might do.'*

## CASE STUDY

### Detailed horizon scanning with stakeholders

*'We have been quite deliberate in how we seek stakeholder views and expectations. For about 13 years, our organisation has set something called the panel of critical things: they bring in various different experts in NGOs, former political advisors, people who represent consumer groups. They are essentially contracted with us for a period of about two years. They are presented with the strategy and told, "Pull it apart, what would you have expected to see? What would you want to see more of?" They do that for the short term, so to respond to what the teams are working on, and with that same group, they horizon scan about two years in advance.'*

*It's very easy to look long-term, but actually we're finding now we need to do much more short term, so we will bring in experts from that panel if we're trying to respond to something immediate, and that will be a much more specific topic.'*

*We have about 50 people on a panel. Ten of those, might be more in the DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) space. If we're battling a DEI issue, we bring them in, and they are part of the process of deciding how is the group going to respond to this topic, where does the group need to move, what policies do we need to create, and what role should the organisation play? Are we idealist here? Are we not? It goes back to authenticity.'*





## CASE STUDY

### Dealing with an online brand scammer

*'We had a scammer who set up a Facebook account. She used our logo and managed to scam some people out of money. We put out an advisory and actually a reporter got hold of it and it ended up being on the national news. So we thought, "Great, so people know... we'll get it pulled down." But Facebook wouldn't do it. And since then, it's older people, they continue to get scammed. Has anybody else faced that kind of scenario? So, what do you do about it?'*

*'This happens a lot, unfortunately. My tip to you is if it doesn't work going directly to the tech platforms, go via government or a regulator. All of the tech companies have special communication pathways with the regulators in government. Everyone thinks tech companies are magical and ubiquitous. The truth is, they're held together by sticky tape and tired engineers, and things fall through the cracks all the time. My advice is: do not hesitate to escalate, especially if it's something serious, because there's every chance it's just gone to an inbox.'*

### Three key takeaways

1. Have systematic processes in place for horizon scanning, of both foreseeable threats and imagined scenarios, and revisit them regularly.
2. Bring partner organisations into the process, both for the intelligence they bring and for the different perspectives they provide.
3. Turn your two-way-conversation intelligence gathering into data that can feed into the strategic plan



# How do you define what your organisation is for, and how should it achieve that purpose?

Moulding the soul of an organisation is an area where corporate affairs has a huge contribution to make. To this end, articulating the purpose of the organisation, and distinguishing between what it does and why it exists, is a critical starting point. The Enacting Purpose Initiative ([www.enactingpurpose.org](http://www.enactingpurpose.org)) chaired by CAA Academic Director Rupert Younger goes into more detail on this process, but in summary:

**Purpose = why the organisation exists**

**Values = how it goes about its work**

**Mission (strategy) = what it does**

Different approaches to identifying purpose will suit different organisations. Have you chosen one that truly captures what everyone understands as your purpose?

*‘The board said, if we don’t have clarity about our purpose we won’t get anywhere. The head of corporate affairs was told go and collect a representative sample across the organisation, get them to articulate why we exist, what we do and our values from the ground up, and run that through a set of tests, with the board coming in at various times saying well done, giving it visibility and time, and they now have mission, vision, purpose, values... and now they are rolling it out. Top-down start, then bottom up.’*

Sometimes the search for purpose is not a question of imposition, but of ignition.

*‘It’s a journey. We are trying to put our purpose out in the company, but what we have found is that our purpose was already living among us. We couldn’t see it.’*

How purpose becomes the commitments an organisation makes, where the broader non-financial contribution applies – whether articulated as ESG or in some other form – it is vital to ensure that if you start to prioritise and highlight purposeful activity, there is consistency, authenticity and relevance in the direction of travel.

*‘If you step outside the context you are operating in and the consumer expects of you, and start producing political products basically, you are essentially marketing yourself to a politically engaged audience which may be a sensible marketing strategy, but from a corporate reputation and a purpose perspective is dangerous.’*

*‘Should we deconstruct B2C purpose and B2B purpose? Within the B2B ecosystem we are seeing increasing demand from customers buying our products about our ESG impact reports, and [that means] the end user doesn’t have to make that choice.’*





*'We've done away with mission, we have purpose, vision and values. We've amalgamated mission and purpose.'*

*'I think that limits you, it ossifies your strategy, or undermines your purpose. I think you will end up talking about different things in the same bucket all the time.'*

*'A well-constructed purpose acts as a North Star. If you are clear about why you exist, you will know where not to spend your money as well as where to spend your money. It also acts as guard rails, delineating to others what to expect.'*

*'We've just been through this exercise, had a hard look, and said, "We are here for clients that want to grow, that is our purpose, but we have a powerful force that will enable this organisation to be doing good." How do you merge this force for good with this purpose? The new direction for the organisation is to create sustainable and inclusive growth. It's been somewhat positive, but created a huge amount of friction.'*

Purpose declarations present challenges depending on the global context.

*'We were on an activist list of companies still doing business in Russia after the invasion. But we are supplying medicines – how do you say to the people you are treating, I'm sorry but because of Ukraine we are not going to supply your medicine? These things are very challenging. Purpose will help you out, with the other parts of your framework (mission and vision). You can draw different conclusions depending on the lens you are using.'*

*'We are a global business, and we had a small centre in Russia delivering services across the world. We are also in a talent war. We can't find people in other geographies to shift this work, we want to retain that capability. We are also looking through a Western lens, with significant customers in India looking at this differently. Our communications had to be balanced to take their attitudes into account.'*

Does everyone have to own the purpose?

*'If it's just the board that have ownership, everyone else thinks: I don't need to worry about it.'*

*'If you don't incentivise the pursuit of purpose [in performance assessment], it won't happen.'*

## What is the best way to co-create organisational culture?

As organisations develop, their cultures need to evolve. Corporate affairs should be central to this process. A discussion around the 'sociability/solidarity' character of the cohort's organisations – broadly, how closely networked; how efficiently focused on key drivers of success – highlighted differences in how seriously culture is considered, and where responsibility for it lies.

*"Our culture is led by the CEO, and he is fanatical about it. We have a people team, but the internal comms team within corporate affairs will lead on the messaging."*

Sociability and solidarity are useful lenses through which to consider culture. As companies progress, scale up or shift strategy, the maximising of sociability or solidarity may be optimal for fostering an appropriate culture:

- For sociability: recruitment focusing on matching values, organising social interaction, breaking down hierarchies
- For solidarity: benchmarking in detail against the competition, instilling urgency in tasks, incentivising success with clear benefits

Culture is often left as an HR responsibility, where it can stagnate in a process-driven model. Corporate affairs has the command of narratives and the reach that can mould a more holistic and pervasive culture. Partnership throughout the organisation is key.

*'I've always felt HR does not do communication, and internal comms is a hostage to HR, through which they demonstrate to the business what they are doing for policy. But that makes a patchwork quilt of messaging in a binary way and makes a weird mixed culture, because there is no leadership. Because of the role we play in being the glue amongst leadership, we have the view across everything, and we can bring the messaging together, and orchestrate that messaging into the rhythm of the business.'*

*'HR realised that they couldn't do culture on their own, so now it is a shared responsibility with us and it works really well that way.'*





*'HR has made cultural ambassadors throughout the group, because they are thinking: is HR actually a barrier to disseminating culture? We work with them.'*

A positive culture aligned with societal and stakeholder expectations is increasingly important and powerful for employment and retention, as the battle for talent intensifies.

*'It is embedded in the company to work with the causes that [employees] care about. If there is a serious NGO that someone cares about, we will bring them on board. We've found that it is a really important part of recruitment, especially with the younger generation.'*

The importance of the challenge is clear, but there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

*'We have a codified universal culture, but we are going through a process where we want to give each of our groups a codified subculture. Innovators want to behave differently to people in quality control.'*

*'We have grown rapidly, but we have the same organisational culture. It has to adjust. Honestly, it's all over the place.'*

*'We are in a dynamic state because the organisation has had issues that have resulted in some major shifts. But it's extremely difficult, because the culture we are known for is highly networked, but we are becoming more centralised as a means of control.'*

*'We need to move from sociable to more "mercenary". We use more external reference points for what others are doing, reconfigure the value match between who we are and who we want to be.'*

The underpinnings of cultural transformation are best worked on 'back stage', where the groundwork of new connections and attitudes are laid that can enhance sociability and solidarity to drive change across the organisation when that plays out 'front stage'.



## CASE STUDY

## An entrepreneurial business needs to build a connected culture

*'From a strategic and commercial perspective, the company needs enterprise-wide culture change, and to move from a [long-established] start-up, really heavily fragmented, far from the close natural collaboration that you might imagine in such an organisation. Also there have been multiple recent changes in leadership. We have been looking for enterprise-wide opportunities, picking out a few topics where we can bring together procurement, supply chain, manufacturing... For me personally, its role-modelling, building trust, being very open. We are leveraging socialising opportunities, bringing people out of their silos: trying to have a community in the "back stage" space set up, to make progress on culture, professionalism, collaboration, enterprise-wide activity, so that when we step forward onto the "front stage", we're going to be in a great situation.'*

## An urgent cultural overhaul to drive equality and diversity

*We have had a number of reviews into behaviours, equality and diversity, and our board has given a warning to fix it or else. We did a lot of work on the culture. We have a clear set of values and standards: if the culture is wrong it doesn't mean the values are wrong. Behind the purpose is a narrative [aimed at] minimising the say/do gap. The whole organisation has to come together in groups on a certain day every few months to discuss diversity, inclusion and behaviour, and they are filmed. An individual will talk through what went wrong and why, and what it meant to them.'*

The academy discussed the recent travails of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the UK's foremost business lobbying organisation, where sexual transgressions and governance and cultural failings have led to the resignation of its Director General and endangered its licence to operate.

*'You're never too big to fail [with] toxic cultures within any organisation... it's had ramifications all around business. When this happened we turned around and said, "How are we?" When something like this happens, you have to turn the lens on yourself.'*

## Three key takeaways

1. Define your purpose and ensure that everyone in the organisation 'owns' it, even if it is the board that drives it.
2. Your purpose may already live within the organisation and can be revealed, so investigate. It doesn't have to be imposed. But it may be that different perceptions of the purpose within different parts of organisation need to be resolved.
3. Corporate affairs needs to become a principle contributor to organisational culture if it is not already: it is a natural role given its reach and its capacity for unifying messaging.



# How can corporate affairs make good corporate citizens, and where does ESG fit in?

*‘It is our superpower to influence companies to be good corporate citizens.’*

Maria-Darby Walker, guest speaker at the Corporate Affairs Academy dinner at St Edmund Hall, University of Oxford

Should corporate affairs own ESG – does it need to for the sake of its own future as an effective function? There is a clear connection between the embedding of purpose, above, and the place of ESG in strategy, reporting and incentives. Is the ownership of ESG a core responsibility that will assist corporate affairs partnerships within organisations, serve its role as a maker of good, purposeful corporate citizens, and raise the profile and status of the function? Or is ESG, like CSR before it, on the way out/evolving into something else? The term is undoubtedly experiencing backlash and doubts over its usefulness. Is the ESG ‘bucket’ fit for purpose?

*‘In my experience, owning ESG and sustainability does raise your profile within your organisations significantly. Before, my role was very much seen as a support role. Now that perception has changed dramatically, and I am perceived as someone who drives change for the company.’*

*‘It’s such a complex area. It’s lacking a compass to navigate it. And who better to navigate it than [corporate affairs], the people who understand how it impacts?’*

*‘Should you separate out E, S, and G, given you may score highly on E, but have very low S or G? Maybe particular UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) are more applicable, and a more useful benchmark?’*

The complexity of the ESG area is captured in the proliferation of relevant acronyms. That number is ever-growing, and is both illustrative of a standards ‘contest’, and the resultant challenge to understand the nature of the relevant reputational risk, gather accurate data, and produce appropriate strategies and messaging.

*‘Map your stakeholders, from the more concrete data sources to the more amorphous. Why? There’s a million acronyms out there, and to navigate that alphabet soup and not get distracted by the acronym of the day, it’s important to set out for yourselves what are going to be your sources of data, what we want to push out to our stakeholders and what we need to take in from them, to affect the messaging we want to create, how we influence our organisations.’*

A series of questions to help the function develop its approach to ESG:

- What are the ESG issues that relevant stakeholders focus on?
- Which way do they want to push us more on, which things are they more relaxed about?
- Are we behind the curve on any of these issues? Where are the gaps in our priorities?
- What do political parties want us to focus on?

If ESG is going to be taken seriously and particular goals are going to be meaningful, the issues must be owned across the leadership team, not in one area, and the links to strategic goals made concrete.

*‘I think it’s important to keep the board’s feet to the fire, on their toes on ESG as well as sharing their expertise – and getting the responsibility for ESG across your exco. It’s not with one particular function, it’s across the board.’*

*‘When you really start to have the metrics like carbon impact and social impact, you can work with the leadership to say, “Where are your potential blind spots? And how can you really stake out a position where you’re looking towards value creation?”’*



## CASE STUDY

## Counting the importance of the S (social) as an investor

*'We're taking the S and trying to define its economic value in local communities. We look at our individual investments and map the number of jobs that investment has created, the number of people in the supply chain... In some we've managed to get to the point where we can actually quantify the local economic impact and the monetary base. That kind of stuff really resonates with people. As an asset owner, we do seek appropriate disclosure from companies that we invest in, whether they be publicly listed via co-investment, GPPE-type structures or private entities. This stuff does matter to us, and it also influences what we invest in.... we are part of a huge peer network, and we all talk, all the time, and that peer network is worth trillions of dollars. So this stuff really counts.'*

Notwithstanding the fog of acronyms, it is increasingly key to set out your commitments and your performance accurately.

*'Hard credible data matters. You're not going to be subject to a greenwashing claim because you've told the world about data that is accurate and credible.'*

Given the complexity of the ESG landscape, it is important to understand in detail the expectations of all stakeholders so that whatever emerges in terms of standards, it can be related to the core relationships and KPIs of the organisation.

*'There's a danger that you are appealing to the socio-economic group that has the luxury of making those sorts of choices and for the vast majority of people they make the decision on price, and the necessities of life. And as a brand you talk about a sense of purpose or Net Zero, and they are thinking, "How do I put food on the table?"'*

*'That assumes that purpose-led brands are always more expensive. But there is some evidence in some areas that you are seeing changes in that.'*





## CASE STUDY

### Teaching the dangers of misinformation to the next generation

*'We partnered with a very large education NGO called Junior Achievement to deliver the class to high school students. We've delivered it now to over 6,000 students in 30 countries around the world. From a corporate affairs perspective, I think the reason why this is relevant, obviously you're giving back to society, but above that it enables us to do employee engagement on something purposeful. They really enjoyed teaching the class and engaging with the students. It's also a good way for us to make the brand known to people we would like to potentially hire in the future. It's good for government relations – we work with the European Commission and national governments actually, and how they could embed this programme in what they do with schools around the world. And it helps us to create relationship with the people I want to speak to when we have an issue and need to pick up the phone. And it's good for brand and reputation obviously.'*

*We've had kids asking the journalists, "How do I know that you're not fake news, in comparison to what this person is saying on Twitter?" And the answer: "Because I can tell you the whole story of how I have verified this information." And that actually worked for the audience of 15-years-old. For younger generations, it is going to be harder and harder with social media, and that attention span is shorter. And that's where I think governments have a really important role to play too.'*

As well as the organisation contributing where it is most qualified, the corporate affairs function can contribute specifically within its areas of expertise. Misinformation, as outlined in the 'Radar' section above, is a great societal ill. Contributing to education around its pernicious influence is a clear societal good that is also ultimately in the interests of the future of the function.

*'As a big multinational, we think we have a certain role in society. So, even though it's not a part of your core business, these are steps you should take to make sure that society as a whole knows what the danger and the effects of misinformation can be. We could lobby government, for instance by putting misinformation in the curriculum of high schools, and then to go as a company to schools and inform people about what the risks are.'*

*'It's like planting a tree to create shade – and I think planting a bunch of trees is even better, so you have a wide strategy. Educate people by creating programmes in school on: what is misinformation, how do you look at it, where do you need to be aware of it?'*

### Three key takeaways

1. Choosing between the appropriate E, S or G targets is a priority, both to cut through the fog of emerging standards and to manage expectations.
2. Making a meaningful contribution to ESG and sustainability can raise the profile of corporate affairs, and empower the function's contribution elsewhere.
3. ESG must be owned by the entire leadership of organisations, not siloed, and corporate affairs should drive that.



# Should good citizenship tip into advocacy, and how to deal with activist supporters and opponents?

How should corporate affairs identify and choose the issues on which to advocate, how activist should organisations become, and what can be done to demonstrate the legitimacy and appropriateness of selected activity?

Knowing your partners and the terrain is key before embarking on any advocacy initiative.

*‘Understanding the landscape is incredibly important, especially if you’re working within the context of a highly regulated industry. First and foremost, who are your competitors and where do they stand on the issue? What’s the opposition? If we come up with a comprehensive advocacy-activism programme, are they going to be against us? Are they going to do some backchanneling, and do a hit job behind the scenes? In our industry, this is the reality.’*

*‘The first step in any kind of advocacy or activism programme is really to understand the business that you’re operating in, and your reputation through the lens of character and capability, and understanding which of your stakeholders value which of those elements.’*

*‘Before you think about any advocacy or activism, understand how that would interplay with whatever activities you choose to take in that area, and the cohesive story across all your stakeholders.’*

*‘When you’re thinking about a social-activist type approach for an organisation, first, it’s got to fit within the wheelhouse of the organisation. If it doesn’t fit with something that the organisation is respected for, or has some knowledge base within, it’s a pretty bad place to start.’*

*‘Thinking about how any activist approach might land in the widest parts of your network is important, because if it doesn’t land everywhere, or really riles people up, then you’re in for a major issue.’*

Whether to choose to go ahead with advocacy depends on multiple factors including the regional variations, and timing – both in terms of the positioning of the issue, and the trajectory of the organisation choosing to advocate.

*‘Regional nuances are super key, because the same issue can be understood in many different ways across the world. Timing is another vital consideration: what is the stage of your business? Where are you on the business journey? Are you ready?’*

Pick your issues with great care, not because someone has a particular enthusiasm. Don’t assume that you need to make a contribution on every issue.

*‘Government affairs 1.01 is: if it doesn’t impact you, stay out of it.’*

*‘Do want there to be the coalition around an issue, or is it something that you have to go on your own? That decision has to be made in a very strategic fashion. A coalition takes time, and you have to understand where the competition stands; do you have allies within that framework?’*





## CASE STUDY

## Countering a persistent antagonist activist

*'A financial institution learned that an NGO was very active in criticising their attitude to climate change, as reflected in their investment priorities, even though that institution felt it was a high priority, and had 'done a lot of good things over the years'. The institution 'decided to silence them, in a way', by delivering and developing 'a cutting-edge climate action plan fully aligned with the science-based targets and all the best standards'. They also had meetings with the NGO, which told them, 'This is what we want you to do. And if you do so, we will hold you out as a great example of a financial institution that's leading the way.'*

*The institution published the report. Shortly afterwards, stickers started to appear on signposts around the city saying that the institution concerned was 'blowing up the climate'. The NGO directly accused the company of having loopholes in the plan. A month before the company's AGM, a letter was published in a prominent newspaper saying, 'We're going to initiate a major campaign, where we're going to put up posters all over the city saying how much you are destroying the climate.'*

*The corporate affairs team spent a lot of time considering a response: 'At the end of the day, it's a war on sympathy, right? So, we really wanted to embrace them and say, "Thank you for your passion and your engagement in this topic. That's exactly why we did the plan." And then of course also to gently push back on some of their claims.' They put this in a letter and sent it to the NGO in a way that 'could be published if it became a wider issue, because at that point in time, it would become a war on who could bring most allies. I think they realised that they didn't have the support, and it worked, because they actually didn't get traction on that campaign, and they never pushed forward.'*

Are there more reasons not to engage in advocacy than to engage, given the risks involved?

*'If you can't articulate it internally and get that buy-in, there is absolutely no purpose in trying to go ahead with anything externally. If there is an adversarial government in place, you could get into serious business trouble, lose your licence to operate, etc.'*

If you have decided to engage in advocacy, 'think about what you want to achieve, what are you going to use, and why are you really doing it', but as well as defining the landscape, be alive to the less predictable power of external supporters and the unexpected consequences of taking this path.

*'We had a third party do some research for us and we thought, "Why don't we use this to let people know what is happening within our system?" What they found out was that there were new species, fauna and flora, within the project that we had done. That was a point of interest for a lot of people, so we really hit home there.'*

*'Unexpected allies is something that I try to see when doing this sort of work. Who are the voices and people I'm not expecting to hear from? If you've got an unusual voice on your side, I think's really good.'*

When you face negative activism, consider the lessons in the past of your organisation, and of the experience others have had in this space, and be humble enough to ask them about it; explore the academic research, and properly interrogate the source of the negativity.

*'Sometimes we just think we are the only ones that have ever faced some negative activism from an NGO. Ask people, "Have you faced this before? How was it handled? What did work? What didn't?" Sometimes I think we are not humble enough just to go and ask.'*

*'It's always useful to try to find out who's funding an NGO, because most of these NGOs are reliant on donations or sponsorships. If there is an extra incentive behind this activism, then we're not seeing it up front.'*

The process of taking an advocacy position has to speak to the realities of the organisation, but it is possible to build the base of relevance from which campaigning can be authentic and meaningful.



*'We come under a huge amount of pressure from consumers and from our retail partners to advocate on certain topics. So, we have a term that we use internally which is about "define your authenticity gaps": do you really have a right to be here? One of our brands is a haircare product. They said, "We really want to advocate on mental health." They have spent three years starting to invest in mental health training for hairdressers etc., and now are launching a campaign. We have a very live discussion and debate in the internal organisation: how do you close that gap and build your advocacy? We take quite a long-term approach.'*

*'I think sometimes big companies, or the ones that we work at, we usually think that consumers may be naïve. So, authenticity is super important, because they're not naïve anymore. We need to be truly transparent and deliver a message that has credibility.'*

## CASE STUDY

### A case of misguided advocacy

*'X wanted to push their "force for good" message. They operate factories, and saving energy, being purposeful, saving water, was their focus. What they wanted to do was launch a forest, which has nothing to do with their operational procedures. Despite advice to the contrary – I said, "Don't do that, you'll get accused [of greenwashing] by the media" – they pushed ahead with it, with a large media event. Next week, the FT was calling to enquire, "Why are you planting a forest when you're causing all kinds of environment disasters in the neighbouring country?"'*





Partnership is a way to ensure that advocacy does not create conflicts of interest, either in the client relationship or the shared goals.

*‘We serve government, and we have to be very cautious about stepping into any type of advocacy space. The way we do it is through very extensive industry body association, and chamber partnerships. My team runs 12 of them. And that equates to [considerable costs] all associated with being part of these chambers and these industry bodies. But we’ve actually started a big audit of them, because we found we were adding more associations and affiliations with associations all the time without any real North Star. So, we cut about 30% of them, and really tried to focus in on who we partner with.’*

For larger companies, the risk of ‘tall poppy’ syndrome vulnerability is another disincentive to advocacy, albeit it does bring convening power.

*‘If you are a big company, you’re a big target as well. Advocacy can backfire on you instantly, so you need to be very careful just to navigate under the radar sometimes.’*

Relationships can be productive generators of alignment without the overt messaging and positioning that advocacy requires...

*‘We don’t do advocacy, but we meet with government and regulators. And for us, it’s more like an education exercise. We deal with very technical matters, and we feel we have something to contribute so they are on the same page as the people like us.’*

... but equally, the strong stories around advocacy can serve your partners and stakeholders in their work, too.

*‘We’re storytellers, taking all the great work that the business is doing, but being able to translate that into something that is meaningful for your everyday person... and give to those stakeholder groups, to local MPs, to customers. Because you’re giving them stuff that they can actually do something with, so it works as a two-way relationship in building that wider advocacy.’*

## Three key takeaways

1. Before embarking on advocacy, an organisation needs to have absolute clarity of intention that can be articulated in the same way internally and externally.
2. Ensure that any advocacy initiative adopted by the organisation fits within its ‘wheelhouse’, and is appropriate.
3. Partnerships can be very powerful and should be prioritised, particularly where the organisation might expose its vulnerabilities/endanger its licence to operate through advocacy.



# How do you help your organisation and your function build its resilience?

*‘Organisations that try to bounce back to where they were after disruption are not as successful – better to bounce forward.’*

Eleanor Murray, Senior Fellow in Management Practice, Oxford Saïd

Overlapping discussions around resilience, scenarios, culture, the corporate affairs function and the nature of leadership exposed some interesting fault lines between how individuals and organisations function in different circumstances and contexts. How to navigate to a place of strength?

An exploration of organisational resilience – what is its source, how it can be strengthened, and how can corporate affairs contribute? – focused on frameworks for resilience, notably V (volatility), U (uncertainty), C (complexity), and A (ambiguity).

A specific challenge was to assess how far the cohort’s organisations focus on/prioritise:

1. Past, present or future?
2. Reliability or adaptability?

*‘All our [group’s] organisations are focused on being reliable and less so on being adaptable, for resource reasons. But looking at past, present, and future, our organisations are vastly different. [As a financial organisation] X is focused on the present, very little focused on the future because of its financial position – if we don’t focus on the present, we may not survive to get to the future. But the other three organisations [two tech, one media] were really focused on the future because of the nature of their business.’*

The pressure to focus on dealing with immediate challenges is great, but by leveraging some elbow room to innovate, it can take away some of the mass of future challenges.

*‘We could all spend 24 hours a day firefighting. But being structured and creating processes that keep a lens towards the proactive ends up paying off later, by having fewer issues. But it does take discipline.’*

*‘Sometimes it’s really important to draw on your past: safety for operations is something we have to do all the time, mainly in our oil and gas business. It’s not the message that many of our stakeholders like to hear, but we do need to invest now in oil and gas. At the same time, in the future, we’ve got parts of our strategy now with things like EV charging that need entrepreneurial spirit, working in a more agile way, so we have to adapt.’*

If you have strong agile future thinkers, play to those strengths. One established service provider that had relied on its original business proposition for too long and was becoming irrelevant has reinvigorated itself through leapfrogging to future technology, thanks to retaining its founders and their agile thinking.

*‘X, one of the founders, does no day-to-day work. He does aspiration, looking at the future, trying to stay at the forefront. He’s brilliant at coming up with ideas.’*

The nature of the business/industry will define how the business prioritises different time frames, and its approach to how it runs the business.

*‘With businesses that are highly regulated, there is a focus on the present but also looking back to the past for authentication and validation for present issues. So it’s looking back at heritage and history.’*

*‘[As a disrupter] we constantly find ourselves living in the future, pivoting, kill things, kill ideas, even when those things have been working. So you find yourself constantly working and living in the future and planning as such.’*

*‘When you have companies “too big to fail”, that lack of competition can hold you back, defending the business that you have today, and make it challenging to [engage with] the future.’*





How you use your past to build current resilience is not always a straightforward challenge. However, being selective can allow the best of the past to inform current realities.

*‘There’s a narrative you give externally about your past, which may not be entirely honest, but there’s an internal discussion about what we’ve done, where we’ve been – you kind of go by milestones, rather than looking for the consistencies of the past.’*

For a company at the cutting edge, marrying the drive for innovation with the everyday realities of running a business well in real time does expose some conflicts that have potentially large reputational implications.

*‘Because we are so fast moving, we almost never look back. We haven’t got time. And our future is ubiquitous opportunities, and our present is trying to work out how you prioritise a ubiquitous future versus the requirement to maintain a capital structure for you to pay your workforce and invest and produce end-to-end workflows. So we have this huge trade-off between our innovative reputation and our sensible, mature, reliable reputation. We’re trying to work out where we put our resources and not to have our near-term resources competing with our long-term resources.’*

The volatile times dictate seismic shifts in organisational strategy, which moves the time frame in which people think, but also shifts the emphasis markedly from the strategic to meeting immediate KPIs.

*‘In our changing, fast-paced space, the strategy has evolved very quickly with time. But I think right now where we are is the whole industry relied on the markets for funding for so long, and everything has changed very quickly. There’s a lot less cash, a lot less opportunity. Now our focus is very much on performance, because the future depends on it.’*

*‘I worked with X and Y. These aren’t necessarily operating in industries that are regulated. With X, for example, the strategy was to break things fast and then answer questions. When governments would come and say, “You’re breaking the law,” we would ask, “Which one?” because those laws didn’t exist.’*



# How can organisations navigate evolving intergenerational norms?

A presentation from Laurence Meehan, Corporate Relations Director, Diageo UK, explored the different expectations of generations – principally the impact of Millennials, and Generation Z now joining the workforce – in the light of societal pressures such as the cost of living and the pandemic, and identified stress points in the world of work, often arising from conflict with the experience and expectations of older generations and leadership. Corporate affairs leaders have a contribution to make in recognising and resolving these conflicts, both for the organisation and the function itself; and particularly in the quest for attracting and retaining the best young talent. Laurence identified three key considerations:

## 1. Hybrid work environment

- Employees may not have experienced pre-Covid office norms.
- The expectation of going to the office can no longer be taken for granted. Given the remote-working alternatives, employees need to understand why this costly and time-consuming obligation is worthwhile.
- Younger employees are more inclined to prioritise organisational purpose over job security.
- Employees have to navigate an escalating communication overload. Closely focus on which comms channels and tools are being used – is there too much, and what is cutting through?

## 2. Personal wellbeing

- Extended working from home is a challenge for managing workload, with the attritional impact of an 'always on' mentality.
- New ways of working mean that post-Covid cultures are fractured or out of date.

*'The lexicon of mental health is much bigger – Gen Z's reporting on mental health is way higher than other generations. Being able to speak to it in your policies is really important as an employer... When I started it would have been hidden in occupational health, now it's very open.'*

## 3. Leadership and learning

- Huge – and on-going – societal and political change means people are looking for paternal leadership and reassurance; leaders need to be attuned to much more than the usual KPIs.
- Younger employees may have missed the 'passive' learning experience they would have gained in the past from greater interaction with leadership and stakeholders.





There is an impatience/dissatisfaction that is evidenced by turnover among younger generations 'voting with their feet', whether from the need to make more money, a sense of vulnerability, or in search of more purposeful organisations in tune with their outlook.

*'We had a complete root and branch look at our culture, and how we were designing it? How do we do it as inclusively as possible, how to motivate everyone within that culture?'*

Attempts to categorise individuals according to Generation X, Millennials etc., can be crude, oversimplifying, divisive and stereotyping, with class and other biases going unchallenged in the labelling process:

- Generational categories are not scientifically defined.
- Discussions about generation often focus on differences instead of similarities.
- Conventional views of generations can carry an upper-class bias.
- People change over time.

*'Everything has been done [prioritising, in order] people, purpose and performance and it has to be done in that order, and I am the guardian of that, because there was a view that we were looking at performance over people. So when we do our comms at the start of the week, it has to be in those buckets.'*

*'There's a lot of work being done on psychological safety, and that leads into trust and into, "Well you can work from anywhere so long as you do your job". It's about managers being more mindful of that.'*

*'We are really looking at when we bring our people together, is it purposeful, can it be done in a hybrid fashion, or where do we want people together? We have to do business integrity days together, and we want everyone in a room to do that, so how do we make it as purposeful as possible?'*

Rethink events to promote different kinds of engagement – to bridge gaps across functions and levels of the organisation, and with agendas that are not just work-task related.

*'With coffee roulette, you put your name in an Excel spreadsheet and get to meet someone in the business for half an hour, and you're not allowed to talk about work.'*

*'It's about understanding each other and moving away from a culture of people coming in and just working on their own.'*

Engage colleagues at a human level in the work environment, and give permission and space to explore what is going on in their lives.

*'We have started to do sharing at the beginning of team meetings.'*

*'We "check in" to meetings – it's kind of like an agreement between everybody that for that period of time we are going to be there and leave any issues in the room.'*

How to build resilience, especially among the likes of Millennials and Gen Z?

*'Through our culture work we are looking at empathy. I had to do a presentation to 200 people about imposter syndrome. It's not brand new, but the background has changed, and the expectation has changed.'*

*'Maybe they're scared that if they don't move up really quickly, they'll get overtaken, or they want to get a better salary because they're worried they won't get a house.'*

*'There is a sense that [these younger generations] are entitled.'*

*'I think every generation gets called entitled. And I think it is lack of effort in the generations above.'*

*'These [new generations] are going to destroy the work week as it is currently structured, which is an awesome thing. I say bring it! Let them do their thing and the workplace will be unrecognisable, in a much better way, and for the good of the company.'*

*'We do a lot of reverse mentoring. There has to be a real balance between [Gen Z] being a problem to be solved, and "let's see what these people can do".'*

Inclusiveness needs to extend to the older generations too, where they find their own norms being superceded, which may partially explain the unprecedented levels of over-55s leaving the workforce.

*'Are we being completely inclusive of those older workers. Are we doing enough for them?'*



# How resilient is the corporate affairs function itself?

How much does a successful corporate affairs function depend on its partnerships?

*'You do want to be with whoever your data sustainable assessment and financial person or teams are, because you want to be part of that discussion, and then you will be warden to that group. We have now a quarterly meeting. It's me, chief investment officer, the CEO, the head of sustainable investment, discussing strategy. And that is because we've always been side-by-side.'*

The corporate affairs function at its best contributes both proactively and strategically, as well as in its advisory and crisis response roles. But some of the cohort acknowledged that in the post-pandemic environment, that strategic potential is at risk of being negated by budgetary constraints and reorganisation. It will take an ability to demonstrate the function's contribution to the KPIs of the organisation, rather than just the function itself, to earn the prized seat at the strategy table.

*'We know we are materially important to CEOs, boards and leaders, but we are all grappling with this idea of what does a modern comms function look like in the context of resource constraints and all the other issues.'*

*'Studies show that less than 1 in 10 CEOs in 2023 expect an increase in any of our budgets and resources. In fact, 50% expect a decline. That is a pretty grim picture.'*

Critical initiatives for the function's leaders to ensure the function can make its case for adding value, partnership and resources include:

- The importance of building multidisciplinary, agile teams that are aware of the broader business and have business acumen.
- Culture as collaboration, and the trajectory of building teams cannot be disassociated from individual personal development.
- Live your responsibility as an individual who works with your team as an integrated unit. And what is your shared commitment and vision for that integrated unit?





*‘Unless you can articulate that shared commitment and vision as communications function, people aren’t going to follow you.’*

The role of corporate affairs requires a particular kind of personal resilience, with its mixture of universal involvement, but varying between intense involvement and being on the periphery as not integral to other functions in the business.

*‘We do all spend quite a lot of our day clearing up other people’s messes and being shouted at. And we’ve got a couple of things that contribute towards that emotional burden. One of which is the role of clearing up, and the other one is isolation – a lot of us are the only person with this professional profile in their organisation, and in some cases, in their city or region.’*

As a function there is room for greater professionalisation, and driving greater legitimacy in the areas the function needs to build its credibility to make a consistent strategic contribution.

*‘The ability to get on the top table depends on not just believing in the role, but other people perceiving that this is an important role.’*

*‘We want to push the business. We want to make ourselves relevant because we are the ones who are trying to understand the context where we operate. We need to have more credibility within our business. So that’s the thing that makes me anxious. How can I push the business? How can I tell them that this is going to backfire on us? Or how can I say this is important in terms of ESG, because we’re listening outside. But I think that’s the thing that makes us anxious, and emotional.’*

Capturing the value and impact of the function is an ongoing challenge, and the discrepancy between organisations and how they approach this speaks volumes about the amount of work still to do in this area for some leaders of the function. For some there is too little chance to demonstrate value, and for some there is too much to deal with.

*‘Who gets to the level of one slide once a month, on the exco or once a quarter on the exco, or managing the quarterly review, to demonstrate everything that we do?’*

*‘We’re the opposite: we get 14 priorities. It’s too much to measure, but we get once a quarter at exco, quantifying against 14 performance targets. So we just haven’t found that to be a way to be able to demonstrate our value in a language that others outside the function understand.’*

*‘This is the reason why I strongly believe that corporate affairs has to have strong business acumen, problem-solving capabilities.’*

*‘I want to believe we can take a page from HR colleagues to position ourselves as a business partner, and some of us are familiar with our position of being an entrusted advisor. I just want to challenge a little bit to say, do you think it’s a credible pathway for us to have a seat at the table setting strategy, or should we fall back in the positioning of DNA work?’*

*‘Every day we stop a “bomb” from going off, we get things done, we’re the glue, we decode. Now, we have to be confident enough about that to demonstrate our value. We have to be confident that we can demonstrate that gradually. I think we can.’*

*‘We’re all preoccupied by demonstrating our value base. It hits the bottom line, it decides how much resources we get, how much budget we have to spend. Somewhere along the line, whatever activity you are undertaking has to be understood by a peer group of executives that it links to something that will eventually make us sell, or help our customer. Then that’s up to us to work out how we get that journey and explain it to people in the way they can understand.’*



# How should corporate affairs leaders navigate uncertainty?

*‘Leaders can’t take care of others if they can’t take care of themselves. In a world that is increasingly described as a state of permacrisis, we need to build a lot of reserves.’*

Michael Smets, Professor of Management at Oxford Saïd

Organisational resilience, functional resilience and personal resilience go hand in hand. In an exploration of ongoing research he has co-authored on how leaders lead in the face of uncertainty (see the foundational *CEO Report*: [www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-09/The-CEO-Report-Final.pdf](http://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-09/The-CEO-Report-Final.pdf)), Professor Smets (see above) and the cohort explored useful approaches to tackling the benefits and constraints of confidence and anxiety, and how to ensure individuals function in the sweet spot of validation and challenge, preparation and awareness.

Having a framework for conversations that enable participants to know what kind of emotional area they are in can be a useful tool for providing support.

*‘When people are in a state of heightened emotion, we have buttons that say, “Is this a rant or is this a solution conversation?” We signal very highly, if this is a rant conversation, I’m just going to sit here and listen to you. At the end, I’m going to say, “Okay, is there anything I can do to help you?” 98% of the time the answer is, “No, I just feel better now and I think I can deal with it.” Actually 2% of the time it’s like, “Yeah, could you just have a word with so and so, ask him to stop being so annoying”, whatever it is. But giving permission to rant is a huge benefit because then it comes out the right way.’*

*‘I’ve found that if you can reframe your anxiety into excitement – I suppose it’s like switching risk to opportunity – it means you can handle your anxiety a lot better.’*

There is an important distinction between pressure and stress, one being a potential driver and the other a disabler.

*‘Stress is exactly the same set of circumstances as pressure, except you feel bad emotions about the same set of circumstances. When we’re sense checking around emotions we say, “Are you feeling pressure or are you feeling stress?” Distinguish between the two, brainstorm and hope it gets easier.’*

In global organisations, the bar is set at different levels for emotional interaction, and adjusting your antennae and your tolerance to allow for that is useful both personally and for your business area. Understanding the emotional quotient in decision making, and embracing it without giving into it, is an important positive step.

*‘Early in my career, my boss was reading my performance review, and said, “You are just too emotional. Just too passionate.” I guess being South American is maybe one reason. How to deal with being authentic and expressing emotion but also considering that there are different cultures in your office that probably will feel a bit different about it?’*

Experience or intuition-driven decisions often have a questionable audit trail behind them. In a society where decisions need to be legitimated more than ever, you need to prove that your decision-making process is a valid one.

*‘When you say, “In my experience, this is how it works out,” the problem there is, if we accept that the world is changing faster than ever before, yesterday’s experience may be a poor guide to today... When you find yourself making a decision that is predominantly driven by intuition or experience, that’s when you are at risk.’*



The different emotional quotient around decision or risk play out differently in different areas of a business, and can lead to a group paralysis if not resolved.

*‘We’re going through a big exercise about making better decisions. The board had determined a new risk appetite statement. It’s all about cross-team discussions, trade-offs, etc. On the one hand we have our cyber security team, and they have very low risk tolerance to anything, and we have the investment team, and they are hungry for a lot of new tools and data analytics. Traditionally what’s happened is, the tricky discussions and decisions that actually need to happen always float up to the leadership team who say, “We do not have time for this.”’*

*‘No matter how dire the circumstances are, there is always a good element that can be learnt by change. The sooner you can find that for yourself, the better you cope with the adversity and the better the outcome.’*

## Three key takeaways

1. Balancing the focus on past, present and future, and understanding how reliability and adaptability should be prioritised, will help to fashion a more resilient organisational template.
2. Prioritise people in your strategies, beware stereotyping, recognise the emotional component in the workplace and learn to use the good and avoid the bad.
3. The world of work needs to be remade for emerging generations of employees, without excluding the older generations. How corporate affairs helps to fashion internal engagement is critical to this.





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[www.sbs.oxford.edu/caa](http://www.sbs.oxford.edu/caa)

For any Enquiries

**Thanuja Perera-Childs**

Business Development Manager

[execed@sbs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:execed@sbs.ox.ac.uk)

M +44 (0) 7713089618

Saïd Business School  
University of Oxford  
Park End Street  
Oxford, OX1 1HP

[www.sbs.oxford.edu](http://www.sbs.oxford.edu)

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