



Building a High-Impact Corporate Communications Function: A Practical Playbook

A Strategic Roadmap for Building a Best-in-Class Department

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Introduction:

How can we benchmark excellence in corporate communications? And why is it important?

When it comes to measurement, the corporate communications function is an anomaly in most organizations. The traditional metrics — cost, productivity, efficiency, quality — matter, but they don't measure the value of effective, strategic communications. Communications metrics, such as open rates on internal communications or media placements for external outreach are very important — especially when tied to analysis. But they're only part of the picture. They don't fully represent the strengths and value of the corporate communications function.

So, how can we benchmark excellence in the corporate communications function? And how can we ensure:

- Benchmarks are representative of the strategic value of corporate communications to its organization
- They identify actionable and attainable opportunities for improvement
- Standards are objectively measurable
- Applicable across sectors and to departments ranging from one professional to a broad team

In seeking answers to these questions, we also took into account that in many organizations — even large, multi-billion-dollar corporations — leadership does not fully understand corporate communications. And the corporate communications may report to a department to which they should be a partner and not a subset, such as HR or even legal.

We created a self-assessment that corporate communications professionals can use to:

- Position themselves to be best in class
- Achieve excellence
- Demonstrate the success and impact of their work to the rest of the organization
- Identify opportunities for individual and department professional growth
- Advocate for themselves.

We drew upon our experience working with corporate communications departments and colleagues across for-profit, nonprofit, government, public-private partnerships, higher education, as well as the expertise of the Slice team — many of whom worked in corporate communications before joining our agency.

10 areas that define excellence

Based on that we identified 10 areas where best-in-class corporate communications departments and professionals:

1. Crisis readiness
2. Internal-external communications alignment
3. Change communications
4. Spokesperson readiness
5. Corporate social responsibility
6. Reputation awareness
7. Measurement and analysis
8. AI and innovation
9. Organizational integration
10. Corporate intelligence

If you're a corporate communications professional willing to honestly undertake a self-evaluation of yourself and your department, and open to making yourself vulnerable to evaluation by others within your organization, it's time to get started. The process will make it clear where you need to spend your time and energy to improve as a strategic corporate communications expert to your organization.

Chapter 1:

The Corporate Communications Excellence Rubric

Our rubric is simple. It's a green, yellow, red traffic light system to evaluate yourself and your team. Green is "go;" you can move forward confidently in that area. Yellow is "caution;" you have a lot of things right, but need to be aware of the gaps and how they limit your effectiveness in that area. Yellow identifies areas for improvement. Red, of course, is "stop;" this area is missing (it's almost like you're starting from scratch).

The 5-step process for building and using the rubric

Step 1:

Step one is very simple: decide which of the 10 areas are most important to you and valuable to your organization. The 10 areas represent an ideal, but few of us work in an ideal environment. Depending upon your organization's priorities and structure, some of the areas may be out of your control. Focus on the things that matter most and that you can control. Do the same for the key components within each of the areas that you are measuring.

Step 2:

Decide if you want to survey your team or your key stakeholders, or both, and commit to having an open and honest review. If you're assigning a "green" rating, you want to truly assess that you're meeting those key components regularly all or most of the time. Also choose if you want to conduct those reviews through surveys, conversations, or a combination.

Step 3:

Analyze your results. Be very clear in each of the areas as to why you're green, yellow, or red. When you do that, you can identify where you're coming up short and where you have strengths to leverage.

Step 4:

Make your plan. Identify the components you want to prioritize for improvement, and how you'll get better. Decide which you can delay or even ignore. And absolutely double down on demonstrating your strengths.

Step 5:

Start executing on the plan. Put resources toward improvement, keep focused, and make sure those components are part of your team's improvement plans, your improvement plans, and your professional goals. Schedule time six months out to assess your progress.

The rubrics also evaluate the way the organization supports the corporate communications function, and its communications culture. When stakeholders evaluate you and your team, they may also be evaluating themselves. This can make the evaluation a tool to strengthen a culture of communication, but it won't create one where it is lacking or not championed by the leadership team.

Chapter 2:

Crisis Readiness

Of the ten areas of excellence, crisis readiness should be at the top. It is one of the key indicators of best in class. Crisis readiness means you're ready to step in — in real time — to immediately provide the communications leadership and execution needed to:

- Secure people and property
- Maintain the trust of your organization's stakeholders
- Ensure business continuity
- Protect your organization's reputation and freedom to operate.

GREEN

You're fully ready to respond to a crisis.

- You have a written, detailed crisis communication plan that includes holding statements, a streamlined process for developing, approving, and distributing messages to each stakeholder group, and clearly defined roles to make that happen. The plan has been approved by the executive leadership team.
- The plan is synced to your organization's incident management plan.
- Everyone on the crisis communications team is trained on their roles.
- You review the plan every six months, and update it when necessary.
- You've conducted table top training and practice sessions, ensuring everyone is familiar and comfortable with the process and their roles.

YELLOW

You have most of the pieces in place to respond to a crisis. There may be some delays and challenges along the way, but you have enough in place to mitigate risk.

- You have an approved, written crisis communication plan, and maybe your organization has an incident management plan.
- The plan has not been recently reviewed, but you're confident it's still relevant.
- Some of the individuals who have roles on the crisis communications team are new to the organization or their positions, and are untrained or unfamiliar with their crisis communications roles and responsibilities.

RED

You're not prepared to respond to a crisis and your organization is at risk.

- You don't have an approved, documented crisis communications plan.
- Your organization has not discussed the risks it faces, and is not fully aware of the damage that can cause.
- There's no clear crisis leadership or understanding of who does what.

Chapter 3:

Internal-External Alignment

This is the consistency between internal and external messaging, and their alignment with the organization's goals, brand attributes, values, mission, and purpose.

GREEN

You're very aligned. People are saying and hearing the same messages inside and outside the organization.

- Every external campaign or initiative has an internal component.
- Every internal campaign has a potential external component or impact.
- Team members are inspired and empowered to advocate for the organization.
- Team members are fully engaged and understand how they contribute to the organization's goals, initiatives, and success.
- The internal and external communications team and their partners are communicating with each other and coordinating their efforts. They have the same understanding of goals, the brand, and the values framework. They meet regularly to strengthen that alignment, brainstorm ideas, and identify ways to work together really, really well — including storytelling across audiences.

YELLOW

Your internal and external messaging is mostly aligned, with no major disconnects.

- Internal and external teams might meet occasionally, or share ideas informally.
- The reporting structure may not support collaboration, but doesn't stand in the way of it either.
- Team members feel engaged, but could have a better understanding of how the work they do is connected to the bigger picture.
- Some initiatives — especially the most important ones — are integrated, but not all.
- There are opportunities to improve the way external messages and initiatives are understood and bought into by the organization's team members.
- Opportunities to active team members are advocates are missed, but team members are not detractors.
- The organization could do a better job collecting internal narratives for external storytelling.

RED

Internal and external messaging is inconsistent, disconnected, and maybe even dissonant.

- Internal and external communications teams and functions are siloed, with no overlap or shared initiatives.
- The messages team members receive inside the organization don't support or maybe even conflict with what is said externally.
- Team members are disengaged, negatively affecting productivity, retention, and recruitment.
- The way the organization acts internally doesn't match what it is trying to project externally.
- Team members are not inspired to advocate or defend the organization, and they may be detractors.

Chapter 4:

Change Communications

Change communications is the strategic process of guiding and supporting your organization's people and affected stakeholders through significant transitions in structure, leadership, processes, policies, goals, or business models. Since changes will happen in any organization, this is a vital corporate communications competency.

GREEN

You can help facilitate a smooth transition, resulting in broad acceptance and minimal resistance.

- You have a proven communication process to move people step-by-step through a change, and that process is supported and adopted by the leadership team when a change is happening.
- Corporate communications is part of a change communications team that is aligned throughout the organization.
- You have thoughtful communications plans that recognize change can sometimes be difficult.
- You understand the importance of meeting people where they are, and can anticipate their questions and concerns.
- You know that it's critical to communicate to each stakeholder group or affected individual within the organization what's in it for them.
- You're a master of thoughtful, strategic, and empathetic communication and you're very, very good at it.

YELLOW

You can support an overall successful transition with broad, though maybe not enthusiastic acceptance. There may be small pockets of resistance and periods of fear, but not enough to have a significant negative impact.

- You have some change management experience and a solid understanding of the fundamentals.
- The organization has a general understanding of the change management process and recognizes that corporate communications involvement is important.
- You have at least a functional working relationship with others on the change management team.
- You're empathetic, but may not fully understand each stakeholder group. However this does not stand in the way of communicating effectively. You can be counted on to do at least an OK job messaging internally and externally.
- The organization could do a better job collecting internal narratives for external storytelling.

RED

You're dealing with change as it happens, making announcements but not supporting change management.

- Internal and external communications teams and functions are siloed, with no overlap or shared initiatives.
- The messages team members receive inside the organization don't support or maybe even conflict with what is said externally.
- Team members are disengaged, negatively affecting productivity, retention, and recruitment.
- The way the organization acts internally doesn't match what it is trying to project externally.
- Team members are not inspired to advocate or defend the organization, and they may be detractors.

Chapter 5:

Spokespeople Readiness

Effective communication requires more than the corporate voice, internal announcements, and press releases or statements.

GREEN

You have a group of internal and external spokespeople and advocates who are partners in external and internal communications. You don't need to rely on your CEO for every situation.

- You have multiple spokespeople who understand key messages and the organization's goals, including storytellers and subject matter experts. They've been approved by leadership and you can match them to topics, situations, and audiences.
- This includes people trained in internal and external communications, media conversations, presentation delivery, and community relations.
- They've been taught to adjust their message presentation to different media, including print, broadcast, podcasts, and social and digital forums.
- You have at least a few who have been trained in high-pressure crisis scenarios.

YELLOW

You have at least one spokesperson you can call upon when needed, ideally with an alternate or back up.

- Your spokespersons who have been trained in the past, but may need a quick refresher before going before the media or internal or external audience.
- You may be relying too heavily on your CEO, owner, or other high-level spokesperson, and don't have flexibility to match spokespersons to situations.
- You've identified subject matter experts, and can draw upon their knowledge. You can develop written statements and responses attributable to them, but they may not be ready for media interviews or public presentations.

RED

There's no identified spokesperson and you're not ready to provide someone for a media interview or to act as public spokesperson.

- Your CEO and other leaders are not trained or haven't been recently trained as spokespersons.
- There's a lack of media interview readiness across the organization, limiting your ability to respond to media inquiries. Your media interactions are limited to releases and attributed statements at best.
- You don't have someone who can represent the organization in a crisis situation.
- Most of your internal communications are through email or announcements, with little or no face to the messages.

Chapter 6:

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

It's no longer enough to provide a product or services that people need or want, create jobs, and have a positive economic impact. A best-in-class corporate communications function communicates the organization's values, how it acts responsibly and ethically, its positive impact on society, and its efforts to operate sustainably while protecting the environment. All of those are part of the organization's overall value proposition and a stakeholder expectation. Effective CSR communication enhances and protects your reputation, helps differentiate your brand, supports recruitment and retention, and builds mutually beneficial relationships.

The organization is actively, transparently, and credibly demonstrating and communicating its corporate responsibility values, goals, results, and commitments.

- The organization has clear values and its community involvement and CSR initiatives are aligned with those values.
- The responsibility to employees, customers, and the community and how they serve them is clearly and consistently communicated.
- The organization sets and reports on corporate social responsibility and sustainability goals, and makes those goals a leadership accountability.
- CSR is communicated consistently internally and externally, and incorporated into executive communication plans.
- Corporate communications has a plan to promote CSR initiatives and accomplishments through a surround-sound, omnichannel approach.
- The organization creates a meaningful annual report, supported and amplified by corporate communications.
- The corporate communications department understands what goes into CSR reporting, and how to turn the organization's initiatives into effective campaigns and engaging storytelling and not just metrics or milestones.

The organization is telling good stories about positive things it is doing and demonstrating a commitment to stakeholders and the environment, and strives to be socially and environmentally responsible, but may not have formal goals. Social and environmental responsibility are highlighted in its communications, but not consistently.

- The organization is regularly doing good things in its community, including donations, sponsorships, and volunteerism. It may even have signature events. The organization formally recognizes the importance of community involvement, but that may not be part of a clearly articulated CSR platform tied to the organization's values and vision framework.
- The organization is actively trying to reduce its environmental impact.
- Corporate communications effectively promotes the above activities externally and internally.
- The organization has clearly stated values that guide its actions, and those values are communicated internally and externally.
- The organization has public-faced statements about its commitments to sustainability, responsibilities to its stakeholders, ethical behavior, and compliance, but may lack goals and reporting.

The organization does not project an active commitment to social responsibility or sustainability.

- The company may participate in charitable activities and sponsorship opportunities, but those are isolated events.
- Social and environmental responsibility is not a significant factor or priority in internal or external communications.
- The organization doesn't have social or environmental responsibility goals, and considers compliance sufficient accountability.
- Success is measured and communicated internally and externally in measurements of profitability and productivity.
- There is almost no connection between the way it markets its products or services communicating how it operates.

Chapter 7:

Reputational Awareness

Reputation management has become a communications buzzword. But reputational awareness is what puts corporate communicators in the driver's seat. With that awareness, reputation management is, at best, reactive and perfunctory.

The organization and its communicators have clear reputational goals and initiatives — beyond other marketing and communications goals — and continuously monitor the organization's reputation and potential risks. The emphasis on reputation begins at the very top of the organization.

- Everyone in the communications process is focused on having — and protecting — the strongest, most positive reputation possible.
- They actively and formally monitor internal and external threats, including those related to their industry and in their relationships with their communities and stakeholders, and are proactive in protecting their reputation.
- They develop and execute specific campaigns to enhance and protect the organization's standing across all stakeholders.
- They understand the difference and interdependency between marketing brand health and corporate reputation.
- There is cooperation between communications, marketing, HR, health and safety, and environmental teams.
- Promoting and protecting reputation is an active part of annual communications planning.

Management and communicators understand the importance of reputation; they “get it.” The organization has and wants to keep a good reputation.

- The communications team has a functional knowledge of the importance of reputation management. Leadership recognizes that corporate communications is a vital part of the crisis response team (see chapter 2).
- The organization wants to have a good reputation, but they may lack a clear awareness of what defines their reputation and the risks.
- The organization does some regular assessment of their reputation in the market, and understands its importance to the bottom line, but is mostly concerned with transactional stakeholders, especially customers.
- There is some coordination between communications and other departments, but that is mainly driven by the presence of a threat or a desire by corporate communications' internal clients desire to promote an accomplishment.
- They have stagnant goals; they are focused on maintaining a good reputation.

The organization is not actively aware of its reputation nor are they taking steps to protect or enhance its reputation.

- They have no clear idea of how others perceive their reputation, other than gut feelings or what they hear anecdotally. Or, worse, they think how they perceive themselves is how others also see them.
- They do not see the connection between reputation and the bottom line, and think as long as the numbers are good, then everything must be good.
- They don't ask themselves, “What are the critical risks to our business and our reputation and how can we mitigate those risks?”
- Corporate communications is siloed from other departments.
- They lack intentional external and internal communications programs to protect or improve their reputation.
- The communications team lacks skills and experience in reputation management.

Chapter 8:

Measurement & Analysis

Measurement and analysis are more than reporting on what you've done; they are vital planning tools. With a strong measurement and analysis process, you have the data to make informed decisions about content and placement and to have an active understanding of your audiences and competitors. Through measurement and analysis, you establish benchmarks to confirm your strategy and to make adjustments when necessary to stay on track with your goals.

GREEN

The organization has a clear and regular reporting process, and the communications team and the leadership team understand the power and impact that analytics has for them. Best-in-class organizations have dedicated analytics resources who are measuring results and delivering insights in a way that powers strategic thinking.

- They look forward to getting the data.
- The data is tailored for different stakeholders: those who want a one-page summary and those who want details; those who want to dig through the data on a spreadsheet and those who want graphs and charts.
- Most importantly, the data informs decision-making.

YELLOW

These organizations typically have monthly or quarterly reports on such factors as corporate reputation, media placements, social media mentions, ad results, and website traffic.

- They try to pull some insights and have a relative sense of how well they're doing.
- However, they lack a process to discuss the insights and to make changes in terms of content, tactics, and strategy to stay on track with their goals.

RED

Those in the red have little or no regular reporting on their communications and marketing efforts, or their competitors.

- They're not having discussions about the metrics and they're not identifying and acting upon informed insights.
- Their decisions are based on gut and assumption without the data to back up those assumptions or the tools to know if they've made the right decisions.

Chapter 9:

AI & Innovation

Our field has been constantly evolving and innovating, responding to social and economic shifts, emerging media, and technology. Nothing, however, matches the magnitude and speed at which AI has, and will continue to, reshape how communications professionals work. There's so much that could be said about this topic, but for now we're going to focus on an AI policy rubric. Those who have a policy will control how they use AI, those who don't risk being controlled by it — or worse, falling behind.

GREEN

Organizations at the top are using AI strategically, responsibly, and ethically. They have a clear and regularly updated AI policy. This policy recognizes that the way AI impacts communications and marketing teams is different than the way it impacts others in the organization, and there are unique considerations for the use of AI in the creative and communications processes.

- Conduct regular training and document processes.
- Continuously evaluate other and new technologies.
- Research best practices for corporate communications and marketing.
- Prioritize and encourage internal R&D and idea sharing (this is absolutely critical).

YELLOW

Organizations in the “yellow zone” are doing many of the same things as those in the “green zone,” but they’re not as intentional about it. They don’t have the same sense of urgency and their efforts are less structured.

- They have a corporate AI policy, but it may take into account the specific needs of communications and marketing.
- Their communications professionals are starting to use AI, and they’re doing so ethically and responsibly, but lack a strategy.
- Members of the communications team evaluate some of the features in their technology stack, but the process is random. They’re eager to learn, and share ideas amongst themselves, but the organization doesn’t have an R&D process or formal training.

RED

The organization doesn’t have an AI policy. They aren’t using AI, or worse, they’re using it without guidelines to ensure:

- The accuracy and quality of their work.
- The credibility of their communication.
- The security of confidential data and intellectual property.

Through resistance and/or lack of support, the communications team is stuck doing things in the same way, year after year.

Chapter 10: Organizational Integration

Organizational integration is about the “power play:” has the corporate communications team positioned itself in such a way that both leadership and the other business units see value in what corporate communications does? Is corporate communications integrated with other departments? If not, this is a domino issue. If you make progress toward organizational integration, it becomes easier to progress in the other nine areas. Tip this one, and the others follow. If you’re behind in this area, it can hold you back in all the others.

Corporate communications is the central point where different parts of the organization come together to make sure that messages and actions are aligned, that strategy is clearly communicated, and that every department is communicating to their audiences in a way that is consistent with the brand and its values.

- Senior management has signed off on and champions the corporate communications strategic plan.
- The corporate communications function is represented at the senior management level; giving communications a seat at the table. They’re in the room when major organizational changes and plans.
- Corporate communications is consulted by every part of the organization; communication is factored into decision-making.
- Everyone knows that communications go through the department; corporate communications directs the strategy and ensures message alignment before the communication goes out. They ensure communication is done right, done well, and with a high level of consistency.

The leadership team recognizes corporate communications strategic value, but that perspective is not shared by all the business units.

- There is a strategic communication plan aligned with the organization’s strategic goals. Ideally, it has been reviewed and signed off by senior leadership.
- Corporate communications is in the know of major issues, and they are involved in making major announcements. However, they may not get the details until it’s time to develop the communication.
- Individual business units tend to do their own thing, with no mandate to include corporate communications. The degree of partnership between corporate communications and business units is inconsistent.
- The corporate communications team is frustrated in its efforts to ensure consistent messaging and effective communication.
- This makes it difficult for corporate communications to advance organization and reputational goals.

The corporate communications function is siloed and treated as order-takers rather than partners.

- There is no clear corporate communications strategy, or if there is a plan, it hasn’t been reviewed or endorsed.
- Strategic communication is not a priority nor its value recognized.
- The corporate communications team doesn’t have metrics to show its value.
- Corporate communications is often the last to know, and if they’re consulted at all, it isn’t until the very end after the decision has been made.
- The corporate communications function has no representation at the executive level, and thus no influence over decisions, planning, or policy.

GREEN

YELLOW

RED

Chapter 11:

Corporate Intelligence

Corporate intelligence refers to the knowledge of what's happening internally and externally that could affect the organization; it's a combination of historical knowledge, awareness, and a vision for the future. Becoming a central knowledge resource for the organization puts a corporate communications function at a higher level, but getting there requires doing well on the other nine benchmark areas.

Corporate communications is a unique position to become that central resource because they can reach across the organization and its audiences. They see what's happening, and can ask questions. Good communicators are naturally curious, and they know how to synthesize information.

GREEN

At this level, corporate communications is recognized as the primary holder or organizational knowledge. They are highly trusted because of their internal knowledge and external insights; leadership at all levels know they can get information from corporate communications that they can't get anywhere. The corporate communications team:

- Know what's going on with all the business units, the administrative functions, and the business as whole.
- Know what's going with customers, investors, and other stakeholders, as well as within their industry.
- Are the ones that others go to because they have their finger on the pulse of most things.

YELLOW

The corporate communications team is valued for their knowledge, but not recognized as the authoritative source.

- They know what's happening externally, they see the trends and what's shaping the market. They see what competitors are doing. But:
 - A lot of the information is anecdotal, and
 - Not necessarily based on trend analysis or data collection or historical knowledge.

RED

The corporate communications team is not providing any noteworthy level of corporate intelligence.

- They don't have a finger on the pulse.
- They don't have a high level of awareness of:
 - what internal or external audiences are saying
 - what stakeholders are worried about
 - where the communications opportunities are,
 - or what's going on with competitors
- They execute what they're instructed to communicate, and are unable to provide knowledge, context, or perception to guide communications efforts.



Using Your Results

Don't be frustrated if you're not green across the board; few departments are. That doesn't mean you're not doing good work, or bringing value to your organization. The rubrics are a tool to help identify — and choose — growth opportunities for the department, the people on the team, and the organization as a whole. It's a way to say, "here are areas where we can do better and here are areas where we need more resources." It also reveals where improvement is dependent upon support and cooperation from others, from the C-suite to business units and administrative functions.

There's a good chance you won't fall squarely within green, yellow, or red for every benchmark. You may have some characteristics of each level. Choose the ranking that most accurately describes your department most of the time.

Don't try to tackle all the areas for improvement all at once. As we said in Chapter 1, focus on those areas that have the most value to your organization. In some areas, you may be constrained by factors you can't control. For example, it's very hard to achieve a high level of organizational integration in a siloed organization.

Of course, if you're solidly red in an area that has high value to the organization, you'll want to put your attention there first.

Slice Communications can help

Most corporate communications departments are very lean. An agency partner who works as an extension of the corporate communications team can provide the resources and expertise needed to level up. We've helped communications teams in the for-profit, nonprofit, government, public-private partnership, higher education, and cause-related sectors, and many members of our team had decades of experience leading corporate communications before joining Slice. Our expertise aligns directly with each of the ten benchmarks. Visit our [website](#) to learn more, or [contact us](#) to start the conversation.



Additional Resources

[Slice University](#) is a growing depository of knowledge to help you elevate you and your department.

Here are a few of the webinars, articles, and other resources we think you'll find useful:

Webinar recordings:

[CSR in the Spotlight: Beyond the "Walls"](#)
[Why All Internal Communications Is External Communications Mastering Communications for a Sustainable Future](#)

Articles:

[The AI Advantage: A Guide to AI in Marketing](#)