Reputation in The Age of Exposure

What it takes to lead when expectations are high, the world is fragmented, judgement is accelerated and retreat comes with its own risk.

A report by Hawthorn Advisors

NEW RULES APPLY

HAWTHORN

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Foreword: Leading in the Age of Exposure



In the early years of my career, communications was often an afterthought in the C-suite. News more often travelled by the day, than by the second. Audiences relied on fewer sources and behaved more predictably. Information was easier to contain.

Now, that world feels impossibly far away, a relic of a slower, more controllable age. As information travels faster and the boundaries between channels, audiences and personal and professional life continue to blur, decision-making has become more complex.

With fewer boundaries around public life, leaders have had to develop a thicker skin. But they have also had to learn how to make decisions under a level of visibility and pressure that would have been unimaginable to the leaders of my formative years.

At its worst, this intense scrutiny comes at a cost, preventing tough decisions being made and impacting the bottom line. But at its best, reputation being prized at the top table has a hugely beneficial impact. Businesses that care deeply about how they are seen from the shop floor to the corridors of Number Ten often make more well-rounded decisions. And many unethical practices have been rightly consigned to the past.

Getting that balance right, though, is far from easy. And the stakes are high. As our research shows, the cost of failure may ultimately be borne by the UK's future talent and business pipeline.

Today, two-thirds of C-suite leaders say the level of personal scrutiny attached to senior roles makes listed-company CEO and C-suite positions significantly less attractive than they were five years ago. More concerning still, 40% say it would reduce their appetite to list a business in the UK.

The consequences extend well beyond talent. Reputational concerns are slowing innovation for two in three leaders and delaying, reshaping or blocking major commercial decisions for three in four. The same proportion say a reputational event has had a measurable commercial or financial impact on their business over the past five years. Many fear a single misjudged comment or leaked internal message could cause immediate and permanent career damage.

Ducking the limelight is not really an option. Building a personal profile is less an egotistical pursuit, than a business necessity. Half of the leaders we surveyed go further, saying that a visible social-media presence is now a key part of a CEO's responsibility to create business value.

Yet despite that commercial importance, the CEO's reputation is still too often the Cinderella of corporate reputation, receiving far less time, attention and investment than the wider corporate brand. Leaders who retreat from public engagement risk appearing distant or unaccountable. Worse still, they leave a vacuum for others to fill.

For leaders navigating this new *Age of Exposure,* these are the principles that endure.

NEW RULES APPLY

Above all else, good c-suite communicators understand the need for clarity.

They know what they stand for, articulate it plainly and have the courage to act consistently with it. Leaders who do that over time create a framework within which even the most difficult decisions can be understood.

They build trust before they need to draw on it.

Investing in relationships, creating context, and accumulating goodwill that will carry them, and their organisations, through more difficult moments.

They have a degree of tolerance.

They accept that not every decision will be popular and learn to distinguish between criticism that is uncomfortable in the moment and damage that is genuinely consequential over the long term. For founders in particular that can be a difficult transition, as a once-celebrated start-up grows into a larger business facing greater scrutiny, higher expectations and inevitably more criticism.

They know when to speak, and when not to.

Silence is itself a communications choice, with its own benefits and risks. The aim should not be to have a view on everything, but to know which moments genuinely require one.

They actively seek out challenge and candid feedback.

The higher leaders climb, the smaller the circle of people willing to tell them what they may not want to hear. That makes trusted advisers who are prepared to question assumptions, challenge thinking and offer unvarnished advice indispensable.

The world I started my career in is not coming back. News will not slow down, audiences will not become simpler and scrutiny will not recede. In the Age of Exposure, the answer is not to try to recreate the control leaders once had, but to build the judgment, resilience and trust required to lead without it.



John Evans,
CEO and Founder, Hawthorn Advisors

1

State of the Nation: Leadership under scrutiny

We are entering a new era of leadership exposure. Scrutiny is no longer something that comes and goes with a crisis. It is constant, personal and increasingly consequential.

This summer, we spoke with leading UK business figures and surveyed 150 CEOs, Founder CEOs, CFOs and COOs at organisations with revenues above £500 million and more than 1,000 employees to understand how reputational risk is changing.

Their message was clear. Nine in ten leaders believe CEOs and senior executives are now more likely to come under fire for decisions around culture, values and morality than for business performance.

And that pressure is already changing how businesses operate. Nearly three-quarters say reputational concerns have delayed, altered or blocked a major commercial decision in the past 18 months, while two-thirds say they sometimes slow innovation and prevent businesses from making changes. Seven in ten have experienced a reputational event with a measurable commercial or financial impact in the past five years.

The effects extend to the leadership pipeline. Almost two-thirds say the realities of personal exposure are making listed-company CEO and C-suite roles significantly less attractive than they were five years ago, while one in three say they are themselves less interested in being a CEO in the current environment.

There are signs that boards are responding too. Three-quarters indicate their belief that candidates who have already demonstrated an ability to handle public pressure are now favoured over those with stronger technical or operational credentials.

And there are implications for the wider economy. More than half say greater reputational exposure would reduce their appetite to pursue a future listing, with 40% saying it would specifically make them less likely to list in the UK.

Taken individually, these may look like rational responses to a more demanding operating environment.

Taken together, they point to something more significant. An ***Age of Exposure*** that is beginning to influence how quickly businesses move, which risks they take, who wants to lead them and where they choose to grow.

91%

believe CEOs and senior executives are now more likely to come under fire for decisions around culture, values and morality than for business performance.

73%

say reputational concerns have delayed, altered or blocked a major commercial decision in the past 18 months

71%

have experienced a reputational event with a measurable commercial or financial impact in the past five years

63%

say the realities of personal exposure are making listed-company CEO and C-suite roles significantly less attractive than they were five years ago

33%

say they are themselves less interested in becoming a CEO in the current environment

75%

say that candidates who have already demonstrated an ability to handle public pressure are now favoured over those with stronger technical or operational credentials.

52%

say greater reputational exposure would reduce their appetite to pursue a future listing

40%

say it would specifically make them less likely to list in the UK

Quantitative research methodology

Survey conducted by Censuswide among 150 UK-based CEOs, Founder CEOs, CFOs and COOs at organisations with revenues of more than £500 million and over 1,000 employees. Fieldwork was conducted between 14 and 17 August 2026.

2

How did we get here?

Interest in the people behind businesses is nothing new. Some leaders have always understood that visibility can be an asset.

In Britain, figures such as Sir Richard Branson and Dame Anita Roddick helped turn the business leader into a public personality in the 1980s and 1990s. They stepped beyond the boardroom, spoke directly to the public and became part of the story themselves. At the same time, however, the rules of corporate life were changing around them.

The Cadbury Report of 1992 raised the bar with new rules on corporate governance, while the Greenbury Report of 1995 brought executive pay into much sharper public focus. From that point on, visibility became less of a choice.

Chief executives were no longer simply running businesses behind the scenes; they were increasingly expected to explain themselves, represent the company and withstand greater scrutiny.

Since the turn of the century, we've seen the world connected by the internet, the dot-com crash, a global financial crisis, the fall of the Twin Towers, a pandemic and the rise of robots. CEO communications over these many waves of change can be seen as a series of overlapping but distinct eras.

Each era has been shaped by its environment, rewarding a different style of communicator.



Pre-2000

The communication landscape was controlled by a small number of gatekeepers who stood between the CEO and the public, but there was no expectation to be public facing.

This era rewarded operational mastery and restraint, with the CEO playing the role of custodian of the institution without necessarily being its front man.

Embodied by: Arnold Weinstock, Managing Director of GEC, 1963 to 1996; James Hanson, Chairman of Hanson, 1964 to 1997; Ian MacLaurin, Managing Director then Chairman of Tesco, 1973 to 1997



The Celebrity CEO

2000–2015

The rise of the internet gave everyone the chance to tell their own story, with the rise of CEO influencers who made corporate storytelling a personal craft.

We saw the emergence of the "personal brand", theatrical keynote speeches, and mythical rags-to-riches stories.

Embodied by: Stuart Rose, CEO of M&S, 2004 to 2010; Martin Sorrell, CEO of WPP, 1986 to 2018; Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple, 1997 to 2011; Justin King CEO of Sainsbury's, 2004 to 2014



The Activist CEO

2015–2022

We saw purpose become entwined with strategy, as the public came to expect leaders to use their power, influence and status to take a stand on matters of public interest; with the pandemic only accelerating the trend.

Conversations about ethics, diversity, climate change, and social justice were brought into the corporate domain, and silence began to be penalised.

Embodied by: Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever, 2009 to 2019; Marc Benioff, CEO of Salesforce, 1999 to present; Brian Chesky, CEO of Airbnb, 2008 to present; Indra Nooyi, CEO of PepsiCo, 2006 to 2018



The Everywhere CEO

2022–now

The Everywhere CEO is the product of the Age of Exposure.

Leaders are no longer judged solely on how they run the business, but on what they say, what they stand for and how they respond to the world around them. Geopolitics, culture, regulation, politics and social change all now arrive at the CEO's door.

With every move open to instant scrutiny from multiple audiences, leaders are becoming more watchful, more cautious and more compelled to test every decision from every angle.

They're expected to be everywhere, know everything and have a view on everything, while operating in an environment where saying the wrong thing can matter as much as doing the wrong thing.

3

Risky business

For the Institutional CEO of the 20th century, today's operating environment would be the stuff of nightmares.

Pre-millennium, the moments of highest reputational risk – earnings calls, major announcements, media appearances – could be mapped out in detail and prepared for well in advance.

Anything that occurred outside of those choreographed moments was better contained within the walls of the business, and the bar an issue would have to clear to enter the public domain was high.

For today's CEO, this is alien. Their landscape is characterised by complex, overlapping and often conflicting reputational risks.

Governance, financial controls, health and safety, company culture, cyber-security, AI adoption – every new era has layered new expectations on the old, each one a risk factor about which the modern CEO must be constantly vigilant.

The social media revolution removed the gatekeepers who once stood between the CEO and the public, and with them the buffer of time and distance that allowed a business to consider its response.

54% say it is increasingly difficult to calmly assess a crisis - senior leaders are judged by the outside world instantly

> [In previous decades] the tolerance for bad behaviour, anything from bullying to sexual discrimination or late-night drinking on expenses, was very different.
>
> Those things were common, and now all those behaviours would be on the front page of the Daily Mail.
>
> Boards and executives today are much more conscious of these risks, and standards are rightly improving.
>
> *Tracy Clarke, Non-Executive Director, Haleon plc and Inchcape plc*



Which factors have created major or moderate reputational risk for leadership in your organisation in the last five years?



Over half (54%) of those we surveyed agree that a single misjudged comment or leaked internal message is now more likely to cause immediate, permanent career damage, and 59% say the boundary between a leader's personal profile and the corporate brand has collapsed.

But the spotlight is only one source of pressure. Around it sits a complex and shifting mix of external forces, from regulation and geopolitical instability to cyber threats, investor activism and political polarisation.

What is striking is the breadth of the challenge. More than seven in ten leaders identified each of the major issues we tested as creating significant reputational risk over the past five years. Reputation is no longer shaped by a handful of predictable flashpoints, but by multiple pressures hitting businesses at the same time.

59%

say the boundary between a leader's personal profile and the corporate brand has collapsed.

54%

agree that a single misjudged comment or leaked internal message is now more likely to cause immediate, permanent career damage

> After the financial crisis, there was a shift away from focusing purely on stakeholder relations to a much wider group of stakeholders. It is right that you aren't blinkered. Otherwise you prioritise short term profits and investor returns, and ignore the 10-year view.
>
> *Patrick Jenkins, Associate Editor, Financial Times*





The Everywhere CEO

The Everywhere CEO answers to more audiences than ever before, whose expectations of the person at the top can vary wildly.

Commitments to fiscal discipline can please investors but alienate employees. Activists may reward a progressive stance that antagonises a section of the customer base.

No decision made by the leaders of today is siloed to just one set of stakeholders or area of the business, and the reputational risk of each is compounded by the speed at which decisions must be made and communicated.

What most characterises the Everywhere CEO is not simply the volume of scrutiny, but its changing nature.

Leaders are judged not only on what their businesses deliver, but on how they behave, what they stand for and how they respond beyond traditional measures of performance.

In 2026, a leader can meet every financial target and still find their position threatened by a comment, decision or standard of behaviour that might once have passed unnoticed.

4

A charged environment

When reputation is at stake, leaders must weigh the benefits of owned channel control against third party credibility

A broken hierarchy

The LinkedIn post reaches more of the people who matter than a newspaper interview. The podcast gets more engagement than a TV interview. The specialist newsletter is enormously influential within a particular community or sector. The TikTok clip can propel a simple comment to millions of people. Yet the FT, BBC or Times still carry a credibility that those channels don't, particularly in times of crisis.

And all the while, AI is hoovering up the content, splicing it all together, ranking it and spitting it back out as fact.

The media landscape is extraordinarily messy. But fragmentation is only half the story. In truth, the hierarchy has broken down. Credibility, reach and influence are very often independent of one another. So why do more than half (56%) of the CEOs and CFOs we surveyed say their appetite for traditional media interviews has increased over the past five years, at the very moment that traditional media's monopoly on attention has weakened?

Consciously or unconsciously, they have recognised something important: bypassing journalists comes at a cost. Because if everybody can publish, who validates what is true? Credibility and trust are earned, above all, through exposure to scrutiny.

55%

of those surveyed said that most CEOs have little visibility over how AI tools summarise or describe them

51%

of those surveyed say C-suite use of direct investor webcasts and briefings has increased

> Scrutiny is fair and right. Crispin Odey is a good example and I'm proud that we exposed him. But we only wrote after 6 months of work, investigating the allegations and standing them up from multiple sources. In a similar vein, it was the FT that uncovered the President's Club.
>
> It's really important that scrutiny exists and challenges what is acceptable in business.
>
> *Patrick Jenkins, Associate Editor, Financial Times*



Judged by the company they keep

In the Age of Exposure, it's not just CEOs at risk, any stakeholder can be accused of guilt by association if they are seen engaging with people who are out of favour with the public.

This is particularly acute for politicians. A healthy economy is essential to a healthy country - there's no world in which lawmakers can avoid engaging with business leaders – but in today's environment, politicians know that any suggestion they are aligning themselves with a CEO that has fallen out of favour will be brought up on the doorstep.

This issue is compounded by our panopticon society. A few decades ago, a politician could credibly claim to be entirely in the dark about a potential reputational issue faced by a CEO or a toxic workplace culture unless it made its way to the pages of the national media.

Now, everything is recorded, everything is posted and everyone is expected to know about it.

Investors are not immune either. Asset managers answer to their own clients and beneficiaries, and in the ***Age of Exposure***, they too are judged by the company they keep.

A fund seen to stand behind a leader whose conduct has become a public issue can quickly find its own stewardship called into question.

The result is less patience and more pressure. It's little wonder that half (51%) of those we surveyed say C-suite use of direct investor webcasts and briefings has increased, as leaders work to keep the market onside before doubt sets in.

Employees as audience

Employees, meanwhile, have become one of the most influential audiences a leader has, and one of the hardest to satisfy. They expect their leaders to share their values, and increasingly they expect to be heard when they don't. Almost four in five (78%) of the leaders we surveyed report tension between taking values-driven stances and avoiding backlash from stakeholders and employees.

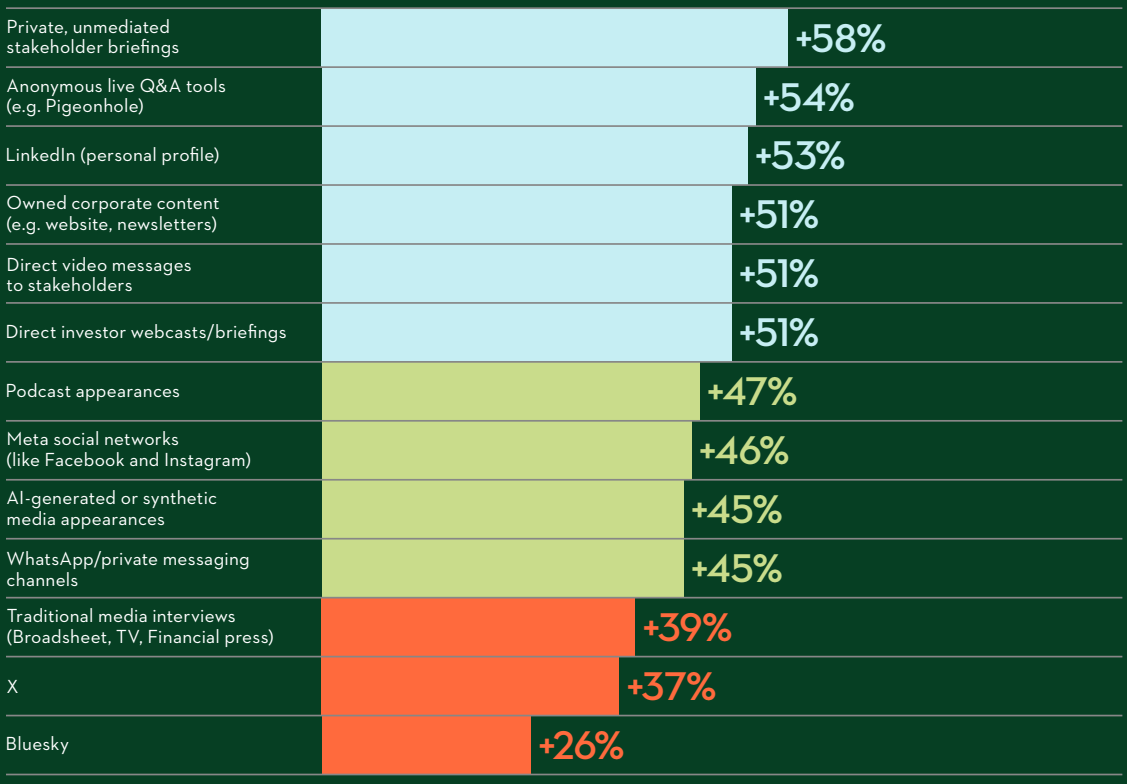
As the scrutiny from politicians shows, how a CEO treats their workforce is now a reputational question in its own right, watched closely by those far beyond the company's walls.

Today there are many more ways for the inner workings of a company to become a matter of public debate and a reputational issue. Slack screenshots or video recordings of town halls can find themselves in the public domain at the intentional or erroneous click of a button.

While employee advocacy can be an asset, it takes just a few disgruntled staff to take to Glassdoor or Blind and you'll find every LLM is now aware of their grievances.

For leaders this means that internal communications channels must be treated with the same care, and with the assumption that a leak will happen. Jamie Dimon's leaked town hall remarks at JP Morgan were a reminder to other leaders about how quickly an internal message can become a matter of public debate. Any message delivered to employees must be stress tested for how it will be received by external audiences.

Compared with five years ago, how, if at all, has the C-suite's use of the following channels increased or decreased in your organisation?



When it comes to communicating with employees, the sequencing and channels used to deliver news – especially bad news – need to be carefully considered. We're starting to see more businesses reduce or entirely remove the time between announcing things internally vs externally, or pre-emptively going public with HR matters, like Tobi Lütke of Shopify did[1] when announcing the company's AI strategy.

This trend is likely to continue, as we see the clear division between internal and external fade away.

Digital channels: From broadcast to narrowcast

A decade ago, if you were on Facebook and YouTube, you had the chance to reach more than half of the digital world. Fast forward to 2025, and Reuters' annual digital news report[2] shows you'd now need to be on five other channels in order to reach an equivalent audience. The result is a more fragmented audience, spread across more channels than ever. No single platform offers the reach it once did, and AI is accelerating that fragmentation further.

Many leaders face a paradox when it comes to building their online persona. A clear majority (61%) believe engaging directly with critics or criticism online is more likely to make reputational problems worse. Yet almost the same proportion say a chief executive who avoids digital channels risks appearing detached, unaccountable or hidden.

That leaves leaders caught between the fear of getting it wrong and the equally strong belief that silence is no longer a realistic option for businesses in the public eye.

Caught between these competing forces, many leaders default to 'broadcast' mode. But that runs against a founding principle of today's digital world - reciprocity. Most valuable digital channels are built for two-way exchange, inviting dialogue between those speaking and those listening. That can feel intimidating, but it also creates opportunity.

As our data in the chart on page 16 shows, leaders are not retreating from digital channels. In fact, their use of digital channels is increasing across the board, reflecting the need to be present in more places as audiences become more fragmented and communication formats multiply.

Yet, the data also shows signs of a shift in how that presence is being used. Rather than chasing maximum reach, leaders appear to be moving towards a form of narrowcasting, prioritising smaller, more defined audiences and channels where they can build deeper, more meaningful engagement with the stakeholders who matter most.

The increased use of Pigeonhole and digitally hybrid meetings speak to opportunities for reciprocity and immediate feedback from stakeholders, but also to the use of channels where you can cut out the noise and communicate only with those who matter.

The increased use of LinkedIn also signals a strong preference for keeping things siloed – moving away from Facebook and X where you can speak to everyone at once, and towards channels like LinkedIn and Reddit[3] where you stay with professional or interest based audiences.

1 Lütke, Shopify CEO on X

2 Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025

3 Reddit Q2 Reports, covered in Social Media Today, August 2026

5

The rise of defensive decision-making

Reputational risk is making business more cautious and Britain less ambitious

Two-thirds (66%) of senior leaders told us that reputational considerations now factor more into CEO-level strategic and commercial decisions than they did five years ago, and for good reason; a clear majority (71%) of leaders said they had experienced a reputational event with a measurable commercial or financial impact in that same time period.

The potential for backlash is tangible and acute, and not something on which any modern leader can risk being caught out.

Reputation is increasingly shaping core business decisions, yet the people best placed to challenge and advise on those risks are not consistently at the top table.

Nearly seven in 10 leaders (66%) say reputational considerations carry more weight in CEO-level strategic or commercial decisions than they did five years ago, yet four in ten (42%) say corporate affairs is still not actively involved in critical business decisions.

Reputation may be rising up the agenda, but reputational counsel is not always rising with it.

65%

say that reputational risk is now formally considered by the Executive Committee alongside commercial and operational risk

51%

agree that reputational considerations now heavily dictate decisions that would once have been treated as purely commercial, operational or legal

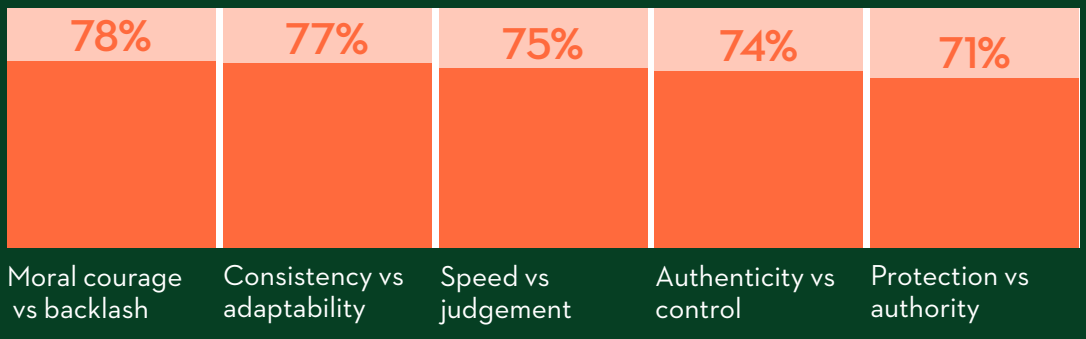
> These processes are slowing down the decision making. If you're not careful you could end up with businesses which generate more filters to protect corporate identity and corporate behaviour than actually run the business.
>
> *Andy Clarke, Former CEO of Asda*



Compared with five years ago, how much do reputational considerations factor into CEO-level strategic or commercial decisions?



Leaders reporting tension or delay



Part of what makes today's environment so demanding is that reputational risk is no longer confined to obvious flashpoints.

Over half (51%) of those we surveyed say critics and opponents are now more likely to turn ordinary commercial decisions into public reputational battles. Once that happens, there's little time to regroup.

The majority (54%) said it's increasingly difficult to calmly assess a crisis, because leaders are judged by the outside world instantly, and three quarters (75%) reported tension between moving fast enough to fill a narrative vacuum and exercising the rigorous judgement a decision deserves.

If any decision can be weaponised, every decision must be vetted. It's no surprise, then, that businesses have responded by building reputational checks into the decision-making process itself.

But, rightly or wrongly, these additional safeguards come at a cost. Reputational checks are increasingly embedded into commercial decision-making, adding more filters, more stakeholders and more opportunities for a decision to slow or stop.

51%

say leaders in their organisation want to invest more in media, digital and AI monitoring than 5 years ago

22%

say leadership in their organisation are now more cautious when engaging with the media than 5 years ago

21%

say leadership in their organisation now use owned channels more than going to the media

58%

say that a CEO who relies mainly on traditional media coverage to build credibility risks appearing behind the curve

> In a hostile environment, where your share price can be taken down by 10% or 20% by a Tweet, it's easy to see why people say nothing and do nothing,

John Flint CBE, Chair WWF-UK; Former CEO, HSBC and The National Wealth Fund; Board Member and Advisor



> The time comes when you have to put yourself in harm's way. You have to be willing to stand up and say 'no'. Right now, few people are spending any reputational capital.
>
> *John Flint CBE, Chair WWF-UK; Former CEO, HSBC and The National Wealth Fund; Board Member and Advisor*



> When you take a leadership role, you must decide whether you are prepared to do what is in the interest of the company, which means making courageous decisions. Because markets are very short term and that can make you more risk averse. Your job as CEO is to make the difficult choices that build long-term value.
>
> *Alison Rose, Senior Partner, Charterhouse Capital Partners; Former CEO, NatWest Group; Board Member and Advisor*



> There shouldn't be a zero tolerance for mistakes. Thomas Buberl, the CEO of AXA, spoke candidly in an interview with me recently about not getting everything right during Covid. In that case, he was helped by having a solid foundation.
>
> *Patrick Jenkins, Associate Editor, Financial Times*



That defensive positioning is understandable. No leader can afford to ignore reputational risk. But when caution becomes the default response, the effects extend beyond an individual boardroom. Innovation is deferred, investment becomes harder to justify and ambitious decisions become easier to avoid.

What begins as prudence for one company can, when repeated across the economy, become something more consequential. Every listing deferred, investment delayed or innovation shelved may be a sensible call for the business that makes it.

If exposure is now a permanent condition of leadership, the question is not how to avoid it, but how to lead through it.

6

Who will lead next?

Leaders today must make decisions faster but also face more regulatory hurdles and public scrutiny.

They need clarity of message but must make some considered or instinctive choices about the right channels to disseminate these messages. Every decision and every silence is judged in real time and becomes etched in the information ecosystem, which sits increasingly outside of the leadership's control.

These challenges have an inevitable consequence for the UK's future pipeline of talented leaders. Almost two-thirds (63%) of those we surveyed said that the current environment had made the job significantly less attractive than five years ago.

The decision-maker, the communicator, the face. Today's CEO must give more of themselves to the role than ever before. The question is therefore not simply whether the top job retains its appeal, but whether the profile of the people willing, and equipped, to do it is changing.

Not everyone we spoke to believed the talent pipeline was under threat. Several argued that the scale, influence and rewards attached to the biggest leadership roles will continue to attract ambitious candidates. But there was much greater agreement that the capabilities required of those candidates are shifting.

For boards, that means broadening the definition of what makes someone ready to lead. Technical competence and operational experience remain essential, but so too are judgement under pressure, resilience, communication and the ability to operate under sustained public scrutiny.

Whereas the Institutional CEO would have been primarily assessed on technical grounds, the Everywhere CEO will live or die on their resilience to the blinding spotlight of public scrutiny. A clear majority (75%) of the people in our study believed that boards are now more likely to favour candidates for CEO who have demonstrable experience in handling public pressure, over those who come in with greater technical or operational proficiency,

The harder question is what happens when the reputational risk sits with the CEO or senior leadership itself. Boards are expected to give leaders enough "air cover" to make difficult calls, but they are doing so in an environment where public judgement can harden before the facts have been tested. Several of those we spoke to felt this has made boards quicker to intervene and, in some cases, more willing to sacrifice a leader in order to contain the wider risk.

The CEOs who thrive in the Age of Exposure will be those who treat scrutiny not as a by-product of leadership, but as one of the conditions under which modern leadership must now be exercised.

We're living in an exposed world, the pressure of which I think is becoming almost untenable.

Charlotte Crosswell OBE, Chair and Non-Executive Director



As a leader there is a growing expectation that you should have a view on an increasing number of things that aren't linked to the company.

You must decide, in a diary that is 80% established, what you want to talk about and what you want to be relevant for you. And then manage the rest.

Alison Rose, Senior Partner, Charterhouse Capital Partners; Former CEO, NatWest Group; Board Member and Advisor



The bar for Boards should be the point at which the CEO becomes a liability to the company, and that threshold has lowered in the last 20 years.

Patrick Jenkins, Associate Editor, Financial Times



There's no lack of appetite I'm seeing for the CEO role. They're not frightened off by the operating environment, they want to run an organisation.

The chief executive is a very lonely position, you can't take into your confidence the people who work for you, so having a group of trusted advisors is really important.

It's also really important that these advisors tell you what they really think, sometimes that's the uncomfortable truth.

Andy Clarke, Former CEO of Asda



It's a trade-off and a lot of good leaders will step aside because they, or perhaps even their families, don't have the appetite for the spotlight.

John Flint CBE, Chair WWF-UK; Former CEO, HSBC and The National Wealth Fund; Board Member and Advisor



7

The way ahead

There are no hard and fast rules in leadership.

But at its heart, navigating a fast-changing environment still comes down to the enduring principles of good leadership communication.

The leaders who do this best are those who communicate with PACE.



Perspective – knowing where to focus.

Not every issue needs a view, and not every battle is worth fighting. The value lies in recognising what truly matters, where your voice can make a difference, and when to use it.

Acceptance – building tolerance for criticism and reputational pressure.

Staying composed, avoiding reactive communications, and knowing the difference between temporary discomfort and genuine reputational risk.

Clarity – establishing what you stand for and communicating it consistently.

Building a clear set of principles over time gives employees, markets and stakeholders a framework for understanding even the toughest decisions

Ego-check – having the humility to invite challenge.

Surrounding yourself with trusted advisers who will tell you what you need to hear, not just what you want to hear, and bring an independent perspective.

Michael [O'Leary] is a salesperson par excellence. He has assessed that all that matters for his customers is price, and he makes a virtue of it. Speaking your mind and having a focus is important.

Patrick Jenkins, Associate Editor, Financial Times



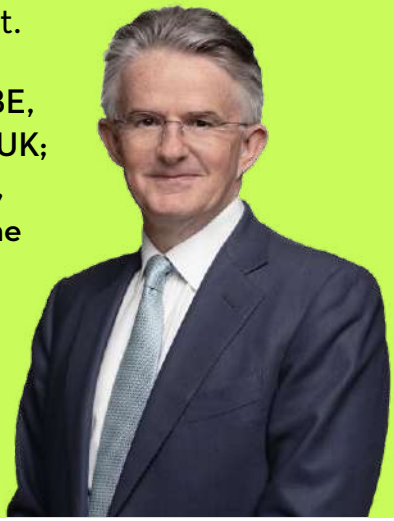
If you look at strong leaders, you see them exercising judgement on what is right, and what they think is right, even when those decisions are controversial.

Tracy Clarke, Non-Executive Director, Haleon plc and Inchcape plc



If you just communicate the decision, people make up their own minds. Explain how you got there and you've invited people into the tent.

John Flint CBE, Chair WWF-UK; Former CEO, HSBC and The National Wealth Fund; Board Member and Advisor



Silence can have a worse outcome, because the void invites speculation.

Salonee Gadgil-Wilson, Head of Digital, Hawthorn Advisors



8

The new rules

While the principles of good leadership communication endure, the way leaders and their advisers apply them must evolve with the environment around them.

Here, we set out our top five ‘new rules’ for effective engagement and reputation management today.

1

Embrace fragmentation

As channels have proliferated, one big audience has become a thousand small ones. Major media still matters, but it no longer dominates. Mainstream has become many streams as podcasts, newsletters, trade titles, social platforms and specialist communities all shape opinion, search and generative AI.

News is increasingly encountered second-hand too, through feeds and networks operating at mass scale. With no single gatekeeper, leaders must be more deliberate about the audience, channel and message for every intervention, and how each contributes to their wider reputation.

2

Treat LLMs as a new intermediary

LLMs, AI summaries and agents are becoming the new gatekeepers of reputation, increasingly sitting between every other channel and the audiences you want to reach. They are neither a standalone channel nor a stakeholder in their own right; they are an interpretive layer across the entire communications landscape.

Every intervention now has to work for both machine and human audiences. Start by understanding how the bots currently see you, because that view now often defines what others see, too.

3

Make personality the premium

The proliferation of AI-generated content means audiences are deluged across every channel with generic, inauthentic material they can spot from a mile away. In this environment, personality is at a premium.

Fewer, higher-quality and more memorable interventions matter more than simply trying to drown out the competition. Don't try to match them in column-inches. Beat them through true, human insight.

4

See every forum as a stage

Today, audiences respond more strongly to individuals than institutions, and leaders themselves have become a critical communications channel.

That means showing up in formats they may never have needed before, from podcasts and short-form video to more direct, unscripted engagement, and building the skills to perform credibly across all of them. The standardised media training of old is no longer enough.

What is needed now is a more serious investment in developing leaders with the range to perform across formats, audiences and settings

5

Build an orchestra around the soloist

Individuals now carry more influence, and it is not just leaders who have a voice. Employees, customers, partners, industry figures and third parties all have channels of their own and can shape how reputation is formed.

The strongest narratives are heard from multiple directions and reinforced across media, social, internal and external networks rather than delivered once from the top.

That means thinking beyond the big announcement to the shareable content, formats and proof points that allow a story to travel authentically through others.

Hawthorn's Leadership Profile and Reputation Programme

Our Programme helps senior executives build a clear, credible and resilient reputation over the long term that delivers commercial business value.

Effective leadership communication starts with strong foundations. Our programme begins with a comprehensive Leadership Communications Audit, assessing how executives are presented across internal communications, public speaking, media, stakeholder networks, owned and social channels, search, AI and wider third-party affiliations.

This assessment is set against peers and best practice to identify gaps, opportunities, reputational exposure and clear points of differentiation.

The result is a clear communications strategy defining the audiences that matter, the narratives to build, the platforms to prioritise and the relationships to develop.

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From there, we deliver a tailored programme spanning narrative development, media and stakeholder engagement, executive profiling, owned channels, internal communications, speaking opportunities, Select Committee preparation, and media and presentation training.

A dedicated resilience workstream runs alongside this, strengthening defensive narratives, preparing leaders for scrutiny and building the protocols needed for crisis and reputational management.

The programme is led by senior advisers with direct experience across media, politics, government and business, including former senior broadcasters, political journalists and corporate affairs leaders. That experience allows us to combine strategic counsel with a practical understanding of how leadership communications are interpreted by the institutions, audiences and networks that matter.

For more information about Hawthorn's leadership programme and questions about the findings and analysis within this report, contact:



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We are Hawthorn.

Creative problem-solvers for complex communications challenges.

An independent communications consultancy, we advise leaders and organisations through complexity, scrutiny and transformation. From London, New York and Abu Dhabi, with trusted partners around the world, our team of more than 80 professionals combines global reach with senior, hands-on counsel.

Our strength lies in our people, strategic thinkers, creative minds and trusted advisers who bring different perspectives to the same challenge. Together, we combine judgement, intelligence and creativity across crisis and reputation management, disputes, corporate affairs, public policy and investor relations.

We work with some of the world's most recognised organisations, from Forbes, News UK and Fox News to Mastercard, Kering and Maybourne Hotel Group.

A spotlight on some of our trusted experts and authors of this report.

John Evans, Founder & CEO



John founded Hawthorn after more than two decades advising senior business leaders on reputation, litigation and complex communications challenges. He is particularly known for high-stakes reputation work and has been recognised by both Spear's and Chambers.

Victoria Wallin, Partner



Victoria has spent more than 20 years advising major organisations on reputation, campaigns and complex issues. Her experience spans high-profile brands and institutions including Pfizer, Heathrow and Wimbledon, as well as some of the UK's largest property businesses.

Steve Atkinson, Partner



Steve brings a valuable combination of banking and communications experience, having spent three decades at Standard Chartered. His roles there included Group Head of Investor Relations and Communications, Corporate Affairs Director and Group Chief of Staff, giving him first-hand experience of advising through periods of intense financial and reputational scrutiny.

Ross Hawkins, Partner



Ross joined Hawthorn after almost 20 years at the BBC, where he was a political correspondent covering elections, referendums and major moments of national political upheaval. He now brings that understanding of politics, media and public scrutiny to his work with CEOs and boards.

Mark Burr, Partner



Mark advises businesses on the intersection of politics, policy and reputation. Before joining Hawthorn, he led public affairs for News Corporation in the UK and Europe, giving him extensive experience of operating in highly scrutinised and politically sensitive environments.

Jon Wynne-Jones, Partner



Jon has spent three decades working at the sharp end of media and reputation, first as a senior national newspaper journalist and later in corporate communications. Before joining Hawthorn, he was Head of External Communications at dmg media and has extensive experience advising leaders through crises and intense public scrutiny.

Idil Oyman, Partner



Idil specialises in litigation, disputes and other high-stakes contested situations, with more than 25 years' experience in London and Washington. Her career has also included serving as Special Adviser to Lord Chancellor David Gauke and as Press Secretary to a US Congressman, giving her a distinctive perspective across law, politics and communications.

Tracey McLaine, Partner, Abu Dhabi



Tracey has nearly 30 years' experience advising governments, regulators, business leaders and royal households across Europe, the Middle East and the US. Her work has ranged from sovereign and regulatory projects to IPOs, acquisitions and major reputational challenges.

Amer Aïdie, Partner, Abu Dhabi



Amer Aidi is a Partner at Hawthorn Advisors, with over two decades of experience spanning government, tech, healthcare, and finance, leading high-impact communications and marketing functions across both public and private sectors.

Our report contributors:

Marianna Panizza, Senior Director



Marianna is a senior corporate affairs and communications adviser with particular experience in high-profile infrastructure and politically sensitive sectors. Before joining Hawthorn, she held senior roles at Heathrow Airport and the Rail Delivery Group, including Director of Communications and Senior Adviser to the Chair.

Jamie Plotnek, Head of Sustainability



Jamie leads Hawthorn's Sustainability & Purpose practice, drawing on more than 15 years' experience in climate, sustainability and corporate communications. He previously led major climate campaigns at the Climate Group, worked on sustainable sourcing and energy at Unilever, and held senior communications roles at the Carbon Trust; he is also a qualified barrister.

Salonee Gadgil-Wilson, Head of Digital



Salonee is a digital media strategist with more than a decade of experience helping organisations reach and influence hard-to-engage audiences. She began her career in publishing and now combines editorial judgement with a data-led approach to audience behaviour, channel strategy and digital reputation.

Emily Goodbrand Dillon, Associate Director



Emily is corporate communications advisor with more than 10 years experience advising clients on campaigning, strategic positioning and reputation building, with a particular focus on sustainability and purpose-led activity.

We would like to thank everyone who contributed their time, insights and expertise to this report. Their perspectives have been invaluable in shaping our thinking and conclusions.

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Charlotte Crosswell OBE
Chair and Non-Executive Director

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