

The Executive Communication Standard



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

An executive summary and critical analysis by David Murray, founder and executive director of the Executive Communication Council and the Professional Speechwriters Association



EXECUTIVE
COMMUNICATION
COUNCIL



Presented by

July, 2022

Dear Executive Communication Professional—

I've been around the business you work in for 30 years. That business has changed a lot over the last 10 years—mostly, in the last three, as CEOs and other corporate leaders were disoriented by stakeholder capitalism (and stakeholder activism), and then deluged by profound communication mandates demanded by the pandemic, social unrest and political polarization.

That forced metamorphosis has left everyone who works in exec comms—and lots of people served by exec comms—wondering: What is exec comms, now?

What's normal? What's excellent? What's innovative? And maybe most important: What's next?

The Executive Communication Council has just completed the first major study of the executive communication industry, and while the full results are exclusively available to the ECC member organizations who funded it, those members generously wish for all exec comms practitioners to share the essential insights.

This report is my executive summary and analysis of the six major findings in the Executive Communication Standard.

Should these results give you pause or raise more questions about your executive communication practice, lead researcher Sharon McIntosh and I are always available for conversation and consultation. Just get in touch with me, at david.murray@prorhetoric.com to schedule a call.

David Murray, Founder and Executive Director
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1.

Early norms are emerging, but a shared definition of executive communication is elusive.

Yes, you read that right. For the 20 leading exec comms executives who participated in in-depth interviews (before 150 more responded to a survey), the most difficult question to answer was, “What is executive communication?”

“Your job is to take care of the CEO,” said one, “to build their legacy.”

“Go-to comms business partner for each exec,” said another, “and work varies by exec.”

“Crafting and driving messaging in support of leadership voices and ensuring they are on brand, support business goals, and true to their personal and professional personas,” said another.

Various practitioners’ definitions were sufficiently diffuse that ECC researchers took it on themselves to draft a hybrid, working definition of executive communication:

“Executive communication is the practice of helping leaders deepen relationships with important audiences to advance organizational goals and improve corporate reputation.”

(Additions or subtractions to that? We’d love to consider your thoughts. Email me at david.murray@prorhetoric.com.)

Wherever we land as a profession, individual exec comms practitioners must define the purpose and scope of their work—or less invested communication colleagues and less thoughtful clients will define it for them.

2.

Most executive communicators *love* what they do, accepting trade-offs and generally embracing the 24/7 adrenaline rush.

Warning: This is not necessarily a good thing, at least in the long run. As writer Marshall Goldberg says, “What got you here today, won’t get you there tomorrow.”

Same goes for folks who thrived in exec comms over the past few years by being available round the clock and across the calendar to deliver clutch exec comms content and gut-feel counsel to leaders lurching from one crisis to another.

You were awesome. Pat yourself on the back. And then, if you’re one of the majority of practitioners who told us you want to remain in exec comms, take a deep breath, and realize: Whether your clients know it or not, you owe them more than smart hustle now.

You owe them *depth* of thinking on the issues of the day. You owe them a *vision* for sane and sustainable leadership communications in an insane and unsustainable time. You owe them *thought leadership* (more on that in a moment). You owe them *strategic planning*, and *demonstrable results* (more on that, too). You owe them rhetorical *perspective*.

Those are the essential offerings of a communication counselor, and if executive communication is to continue to grow in importance in modern organizations—as members of the Executive Communication Council fervently believe it should—exec comms practitioners are going to have to slow their pace and make some space: For thinking, for research, for planning.

Exec comms folks will always have to be responsive. But exec comms *teams* must be firehouses and think tanks, both.

3.

Success no longer hinges solely on writing skills; it now requires exceptional interpersonal, talent management, business and broad communication skills.

Even back when “executive communicator” was just a fancy word for “speechwriter,” the range of skills in a great one was vast: Fine writing was mere table stakes for someone who had also to be a crackerjack researcher, a shrewd interviewer, a corporate diplomat, a CEO ego whisperer and a meticulous stage manager.

Now? Now, the writing is an even smaller fraction of skills that include cross-corporate collaboration, people management, deep business acumen, strategic planning and deft socio-political literacy, just for a few.

Emotional intelligence, in executive communicators, is more highly valued than intellect.

“Speechwriting helpful,” read one conclusion in the study, “but can be outsourced.”

And with that last line, the study’s authors believe, executive communication has strayed too far from its rhetorical roots. Any executive communication group that doesn’t have at least one serious writer on the staff—someone who can write compelling, sustained leadership communication for speeches and opinion pieces (even if they’re rarely needed in today’s tweet-heavy, TikTok exec comms environment)—is a battleship armed with pea-shooters.

Make sure you have a real writer on board—and that you give that person the headspace she or he needs, to produce something exceptional, when something exceptional is needed.

4.

As stakeholder demands increase, exec comms must evolve its processes, practices and strategies to become a critical communication discipline.

Exec comms pros told us *overwhelmingly* that they think the frequency of leadership communications to all audiences—community/influencers, investors, government officials, employees, customers/consumers and industry audiences—will increase or stay the same.

And almost three-quarters of exec comms pros see their discipline gaining strategic importance in their organization.

Yet far less than half said they do annual planning in exec comms, and even fewer measure the results of their work in any rigorous way.

Measurement is “the last thing I have time for,” said one. “Feels like the ghost in the corner,” said another, “good intentions but not enough time.”

“Is my CEO happy?” was the most common measure of exec comms success.

As exec comms teams grow to support multiple executives across the organization, those kinds of measures aren’t going to sustain your group through any serious downturn and a serious round of budget cuts.

If you believe your exec comms is making a real strategic difference for the organization, you’d better figure out a way to prove it—soon, and sustainably.

5.

Although no common operating model exists, a trend toward a matrix model is emerging.

The traditional model was: A sole practitioner supports the CEO—reporting, usually, to the chief communication officer. Other executives are supported, meanwhile, by various internal/external comms managers. Individual leaders drive planning and messaging, often based on the speaking invitations or other communication opportunities they receive.

Which resulted in inconsistent, strategically diffuse messaging for the leaders, and limited career growth for the exec comms pros.

The more modern, “matrixed” model is: The exec comms team owns the corporate narrative, which is shared by all the players, who support various c-suite executives with all communications activities.

Though this model requires more centralized budget for exec comms, it can yield much more coordinated and cohesive leadership comms, deploying various leaders to build relationships with strategically chosen stakeholders. The model also offers more dynamic career options.

The matrix model is where many organizations are headed, but the traditional model is still where many organizations remain.

And ECC member discussions in the wake of these findings concluded that exec comms structures will always depend largely on the nature of the organization they serve. The test of their integrity is their ability to withstand changes in leadership, without wholesale changes in the executive communication apparatus.

6.

Thought leadership remains the “holy grail” of exec comms—not fully realized by most organizations.

Another term whose definition many respondents debated—and whose value some questioned. “Navel gazing for narcissists,” one called it. “We’re too busy for that.”

But most exec comms pros aspired to achieve what one defined it as, “being out in front on issues and proposing solutions to our industry’s pain points,” and what another said was, “POV on something more important than your organization.”

Whether by a series of keynote speeches, social mission manifestos, LinkedIn posts or CEO podcasts, most exec comms pros sought to create a coordinated campaign to help their leaders “inspire stakeholders to act for a greater good.”

And most exec comms pros felt they and their teams have fallen short, so far.

But as stakeholder capitalism continues to evolve and leaders continue to demand (and truly need) more strategically rigorous exec comms support, leaders of exec comms teams will be increasingly compelled to create better processes in the wake of the crisis fire drills of the last couple of years—if the executive communication discipline is to maintain and build on its dramatically increased stature in the overall corporate communication picture.

For exec comms professionals, there is much more work to do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David Murray is founder and executive director of the [Executive Communication Council](#) and the [Professional Speechwriters Association](#). He's also editor and publisher of the monthly magazine *Vital Speeches of the Day*, which has been publishing the best oral communication in the world since 1934.

David is author of the popular communicator's manifesto *An Effort to Understand: Hearing One Another (and Ourselves) in a Nation Cracked in Half* (Disruption Books, 2021).