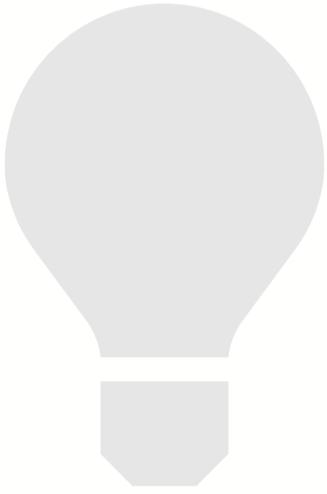


# SMART COMMS



Creating value in  
a changing world

A Ready To Go Comms Publication

“Smart Comms is not so much a how-to-survive guide for communications professionals, it’s a how-to-thrive guide, giving people the essential tools and thinking they need to succeed in the modern landscape.”

Simon Jones  
Chairman, LG Communications

Published by reputation counsel Ltd.  
52 Newbold Road  
Desford  
LE9 9GS

Visit our website at [www.readytogocomms.com](http://www.readytogocomms.com)

Copyright © Mark Fletcher-Brown 2017

Mark Fletcher-Brown asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

ISBN 1-904793-10-X

Design and layout by Jack Statham

[www.jackstatham.co.uk](http://www.jackstatham.co.uk)

All rights reserved.

This is an open access document. The terms are that copyright remains with the copyright holder, but users may download, save and distribute this work in any format provided (1) that ready to go comms is cited; (2) that the web address [www.readytogocomms.com](http://www.readytogocomms.com) is published together with a prominent copy of this notice; (3) the text is used in full without amendment [extracts may be used for criticism or review]; (4) the work is not re-sold; (5) the link for any online use is sent to [readytogocomms@icloud.com](mailto:readytogocomms@icloud.com)

# About this note

This is a difficult time for communications. Council communication teams will continue to thrive where they add value. Understanding what that means where you are is vital.

This note is based upon working in the public sector for many years, leading teams, reviewing functions, supporting staff, directors and chief executives, mentoring, challenging and questioning. It's also derived from listening, learning and recognising the weaknesses and failings in my own work.

A number of colleagues offered advice and suggestions on earlier drafts of this note. Thanks to Debbie, Hilary, Jack, Jan, Kate, Louise, Marc, Mark, Simon and others – you know who you are.

Mark Fletcher-Brown  
Ready To Go Comms

Ready To Go Comms offers communications support and solutions at affordable prices. Visit our website for free posters and other useful stuff.

# Contents

Smart Comms ›	5
Creating value ›	6
Inside out ›	11
See the whole board ›	15
Get into pole position ›	18
The right skills ›	21
Scarce resources ›	27
USP ›	33
Outcomes ›	40
Your ROI ›	43
Disruption ›	50
Politics ›	53
Limited exposure ›	56
Counterfactual ›	60
Resilience ›	63
Reading ›	67
Footnotes ›	70

All chapter headings are hyperlinked.

# Smart Comms

With unprecedented pressures on public finances, councils are looking at what they can afford to deliver and what they can't afford to cut. Everything's under scrutiny.

Smart Comms is a series of suggestions on ways communications people can create value for their organisation by leveraging their position, their knowledge, their time, their skills, their ability to learn, their understanding, nous, creativity, time, and intellect, as well as their personal resilience, to help deliver key outcomes for their councils.

# Creating value

If you're not adding to organisational value,  
you're draining it.

When public value is under constant scrutiny and the pressures on resources are as great as they've ever been, all budgets will come under scrutiny.

The risk is that if you're not adding to organisational value, you're draining it.

As financial pressures increase senior leaders are considering the size, reporting arrangements, and scope of everything.

Questions are being asked of all non-statutory services and even, in some cases, of statutory services too.

- Are they needed?
- Could the organisation or service users live without them?
- Could they be delivered in other ways?

### **Protecting comms**

Protecting your service may depend upon a number of factors. First, is it a political priority? Second, does it offer value for money? Third, does it deliver a return on investment?

Whilst communication may deliver political benefits, reminding citizens of council achievements, it can be harder for politicians to retain any back office function when front line services are under threat.

The value of communication might once have been measured in terms of the level of awareness of key services, the avoidance of bad news and the perceived reputation of your council. Now may be the time to look at new metrics.

If you are going to create real value you need to understand what matters to decision-makers.

## Priorities?

Priorities may have changed.

Many of the things that your communities used to be able to take for granted will simply have to go. Even where cuts may not be so severe, there is still a demographic time bomb; more people now live longer and their needs are great, and will become greater still.

What counts as value is probably going to be measured differently.

Whereas a 10% increase in the number of your Twitter followers might once have been a significant milestone, now helping to enable more people to live independently with fewer service interventions might be a better measure of real value.

Importantly, you need to understand how senior leaders measure success so you can contribute towards that in a meaningful way.

## What matters here?

You should know what the priorities are both for the organisation as a whole and for key figures such as the chief executive and the Leader of the Council.

Here are some things that might now be key deliverables:

- Balance the budget and create sufficient financial flexibility to enable the business to be re-engineered to create new delivery models
- Drive down the demand for high cost or non-core services
- Share services to reduce unit costs and to increase investment from elsewhere
- Prepare the ground for change
- Create the context within which other providers (private, voluntary or charity) could deliver services
- Increase volunteering as a way of alleviating pressure on services

- Build awareness of self-help solutions
- Anticipate crises and other events that could affect the perceived value of the council or the credibility of its services (and senior officers)
- Build partnerships that enable costs to be reduced through joint delivery
- Recruit and retain talented staff
- Improve levels of happiness in the organisation (a factor affecting productivity)
- Downsize the organisation without the loss of performance or quality
- Increase discretionary effort and productivity amongst staff
- Decrease the levels of inappropriate sickness absence

Your chief executive might want you to:

- Anticipate potential reputational or communication-based issues and produce early solutions or options
- Provide a source of data about how key audiences perceive current challenges, the organisation, and the leadership
- Be an early warning system to enable the chief executive to get ahead of any problems before they escalate
- Understand the extent to which staff groups have confidence in the political and managerial leadership
- Understand the barriers to excellence that exist within the organisation
- Be crisis management ready
- Create communication channels that enable full engagement with key audiences as a way of managing the impact of change

- Be seen to be useful as a team and wholly contributing to corporate goals

### **Decision-makers' bottom line determines your focus**

If you are to both create value and be perceived as such you need to understand how value is added and measured.

That becomes *your* bottom line. Ideally, every member of your team should be able to see a direct link between their work and the key deliverables. Even where you do add value there may be still be a question about the level of return on the council's investment in communication.

# Inside out

The deeper your understanding of the organisation, the better you will be able to meet the diverse needs of its managers, leaders and in particular, its members. But you may arouse suspicion. One head of communications I encountered working in health simply couldn't get close to her organisation's service heads because they feared she would leak key information to her former colleagues in the media.

I've worked with many teams who are busy, focused and productive but isolated. They don't get out much. They rely on email, texts and phone calls. I've always advocated meeting officers and members face to face and preferably, in their offices. You really start to understand people and their priorities when you spend time with them. This chapter offers some tips on deepening your understanding of your council and the key people within it.

Let's face it, local government is complicated. There are hundreds of services operating in different ways within different legislative arrangements, varied by local policy and led by individuals who may have historical, personal, political or other reasons for leading them the way they do.

The more you know about your organisation, the better you'll be able to create value.

### **Meet people where they work**

Getting out and meeting people will enable you to better understand the detail inside the organisation. Being in managers' offices and meeting their staff will allow you to pick up vast amounts of information about the way they work here. Always build relationships with support staff. They know what matters. And they can offer advice on the best way to approach senior people.

### **Read around**

Read everything. Committee papers. Executive papers. Policies. Anything you can get your hands on. Get yourself on the distribution list for the senior leadership team. Read it all. That's what drives the business. The content will, of course, be critical. More, you'll understand, through the way that ideas are framed and phrased, a lot about organisational culture.

## **Relationships, relationships, relationships**

Be on first names terms with people in the know. There is no real substitute for building relationships with the people who are running things – and their key lieutenants. Some of what you need to know about the emerging risks and on-going dangers will not be on paper. It will be in the heads of influencers and decision-makers.

Where you earn trust, they'll bring you in, recognising that in order to do your job well you need to understand the things that worry them.

Some middle and senior managers will have been in the organisation forever. They will know the lie of the land. They will help you to interpret the public moves that senior figures make. They will know where people have worked together before, how such histories impact on the way they work now and what complex favour-trading relationships might produce next. If you take things at face value – and it is tempting to do so – you'll miss all the complexity of what goes on around you.

## **Listen**

Find everything interesting. Local authorities are often fascinating. Dedicate time to knowing your organisation, as well as you know your profession. Listen to the things that senior officers focus on. Understand their thinking processes. Go to the council chamber and listen to the debates. Be able to second-guess how key individuals will react to different situations.

## **Eyes wide open**

Who talks to whom? Who meets with whom? Become adept at reading the runes. Key decisions are not always made behind closed doors. Influencing takes place in plain sight. Be out and about. Observe. Learn. Infer. There is much to be picked up in the corridors, in the spaces between meetings, in the huddles and in the car park. It's all out there. All you have to do is watch and listen.

## Why now?

If you haven't fostered relationships before, then middle and senior leaders may be confused by your sudden hail-fellow-well-met approaches. Not only might there be a natural suspicion of outsiders but sometimes, especially if you are from a media background, reticence about talking to "journalists". One head of communications I encountered working in health simply couldn't get close to her organisation's service heads because they feared she would leak key information to her former colleagues.

## Be heavy

Local government officers weigh each other up all the time. Accessing senior decision-makers' thinking often hinges on being seen to be a heavyweight – someone with a strong understanding of the organisation, your professional area and nous. Look at the way that senior people act towards each other. Note their use of vocabulary. Mirror their body language. Dispel any suspicion that you are lightweight or flimsy.

## Ground rules

You should understand the boundary between the officer and member worlds. You will need to exercise care in how you manage information between these spheres. Sharing things inappropriately could cause you no end of problems. There are risks in running with the fox and hunting with the hounds. Apparent split loyalties will cause trust to bleed.

Nobody may accuse you of breaching confidences – unless they have clear evidence that you have leaked private conversations or discussions at meetings - but you may find that doors will close.

# See the whole board

Make sure you're looking at what decision-makers are looking at. Where you understand the world as they see it, you're more likely to be able to add value.

To add value to senior decision-makers' lives, you need to see the world as they do so. You need to understand what matters to them, particularly as it changes.

Keep up to date with current thinking and debates in public services. You'll find material in the MJ, on the sites of key think tanks and in the public sector pages of the nationals. Read the HSJ. Keep abreast of the IPPR and the IFS. This will help you to appear to be a serious local government officer rather than a communications person who happens to working in a council until something else comes along.

## Immersion

So what do you know about the devolution agenda? Think about the role that communication might play in bringing together different layers of democracy and help to overcome the barriers that have successfully kept councils apart for years. Understanding local pressures, personalities and sensitivities will be important in helping to create a solution to this emerging challenge. If you are not already thinking about devolution, do. Talk to comms officers who are already doing this work. Understand what they've learned and think about how you might apply that at your council.

Another complex challenge is the integration of health and social care. Health is a different world in many ways. Communication, whilst valued in local authorities, may not be so appreciated in health where teams are far smaller and staff paid less well. You may find yourself working with senior health colleagues. They may measure value differently. Before participating in any session, talk to people who work with health colleagues about how to present yourself in the most effective way.

As the public sector is squeezed, relationships with the police, with head teachers, with local enterprise partnerships, with colleges and with universities will all need to be considered. Are you sufficiently familiar with those worlds so as to be able to make an informed contribution? If not, get out and network. Talk to colleagues in each of these fields. Understand their challenges. You might find that you

---

have something to trade: your understanding of the political landscape and the intricacies of operating in a complex environment may be of interest to those operating in less fraught worlds.

### **Look at how other councils are tackling the big challenges**

Your council will not be alone. Find out how other communication teams are tackling the issues your organisation faces. Make contact with people who can offer you insights – and reciprocate. Don't reinvent the wheel. Most of what you face is likely to have been faced and overcome by others. Learn from them.

You will find articles about emerging practice and case studies in the local government media and on think tank websites. Make contact and find out more. And when you are in a position to share your successes – and your failures from which there is often more to learn – do so.

# Get into pole position

To survive and thrive in a volatile and uncertain world, you need to get to the front of the grid.

As well as being good at comms, other things may have an impact on your ability to add value. Here are some suggestions that may help you to get into a position to do this.

## **Fit in**

Overall, you and your team should feel as if you are meant to be there. If senior leaders don't feel comfortable being around you, they're far less likely to confide in you or to invite you into meetings where they will talk openly about difficult things. So think about the ways in which you can signal your cultural fit. This might include the way you dress and act, as well as the words and phrases which you use to express your ideas.

## **Demonstrate the right attitude**

It is, of course, possible to have the right skills for the job but the wrong attitude. I'd imagine that most organisational leaders are looking for people who will focus on solutions, who are eager to learn, who are respectfully challenging, who will get things done, who are able to get on with others, who are not "yes" people, who will move at speed, who will be keen to get below the surface of tough things and explore them and who will be likeable.

Are you clear about what attributes are prized in your organisation? Do you know whether you and your team demonstrate them? You could seek out feedback from colleagues.

## **Likeability**

Being likeable helps; it can buy you latitude. You are more likely to be tolerated or forgiven where you are easily liked. Odd, unfair but true.

You may want to think about whether you and your team are naturally likeable and approachable. If so, make best use of this quality. If not, think about which behaviours you could demonstrate that will endear you to others. If you are unapproachable or prickly, consider how this might impact on your perceived value.

## Respectful challenge

Part of your role will be to ensure that senior decision makers are advised of risk and opportunities. Sometimes, that will mean challenging decisions or thinking. Some leaders do not like to be challenged, even respectfully. If in doubt, challenge in private.

## Fixers

Some people become very useful. They look around at the problems that senior people wrestle with and they put forward solutions. They anticipate need. They understand the ways that senior people think and they make problems go away. These people are often called “fixers” and they can become as close to indispensable as anyone’s likely to get.

You’ll see these people in your organisation. They may have started life in one service but they will have been brought across, sometimes seconded, to work on “corporate” things. They’ll be the key meetings. They’ll be on one side of decision-makers. They’ll be adept at understanding the deliverability of difficult decisions because they’ll know the lie of the land, they’ll be aware of bear traps, they’ll know who has scores to settle.

Strangely, there may be more doors open to potential fixers than you might imagine. If you think you can become a fixer, knock on a senior leader’s door and grab 30 seconds. You’ll have to persuade their PA to give you the time. But if you can’t do that, then you’re not a fixer anyway.

## Skills matter

Ensure you have the skills that your organisation may expect of someone in your role. You could look at the government’s excellent communications framework as a jumping off point.

# The right skills

“Dear Mark,

Insurance is not an interesting subject but you’ve managed to turn what could have been a good story into a monument to boredom.

Please try again.”

---

It's vital that you have the skills that senior leaders would expect you to have. Key skills could include an ability to do the following:

- Think strategically
- Think tactically
- Think ahead
- Be creative
- Be solutions-focused
- Be able to scenario plan and at all times have options for action
- Deal with journalists, bloggers and high value social media people
- Understand how people make judgements (enabling you to package messages for different audiences)
- Build relationships
- Be design-aware
- Act quickly, where required
- Be sure-footed and able to demonstrate excellent judgement
- Demonstrate political nous
- Communicate with clarity and confidence
- Listen well
- Write copy for a variety of internal and external audiences
- Pay great attention to detail
- Develop communication channels that are capable of changing as demand changes

Equally, there could be some “hygiene” qualities that might be expected of you. These might include the ability to:

- Take instructions
- Learn
- Seek and act on honest feedback
- Reflect on your practice
- Understand the organisation
- Understand the legal and policy framework within which you work
- Work with colleagues to develop a deeper understanding of the current and future pressures on the organisation
- Keep confidences
- Be trustworthy
- Respect boundaries

### **Getting critical feedback**

Once you have a sense of your own attitude and skill set, it's important to know how good you are. It can be hard to get critical feedback. Time pressures and fear of negativity may prevent us seeking it out.

But we need it. Sometimes we are simply too polite to each other for our own good. I keep in mind a letter I had from the Deputy Editor at the Times Educational Supplement years ago when I freelanced for the paper. It followed a piece I'd written on insurance for schools and it read: “Dear Mark, Insurance is not an interesting subject but you've managed to turn what could have been a good story into a monument to boredom. Please try again.”

It was helpful and caused me to focus repeatedly on what good looked like, not least because unhappy editors do not commission work.

I routinely send stuff I write to colleagues and take on board suggestions and comments. At times, feedback has caused me to abandon ideas altogether.

### **Know whether you're good at what you do**

You may have a team standard against which you measure yourself. If you do, regularly check the standard of your work. If you don't, why not put together your team best practice guide so that every team member can compare their work to it and learn.

There maybe organisational standards for some of the work that you do. Take a look at what counts as excellent in your organisation and ensure that you do not fall short.

Invite external challenge. Ask colleagues, people you both respect and admire, to spend time with you and to critically review the work of your team. Don't use these opportunities to show-boat or to try to impress them. Invite judgement. It may be painful.

This approach can work for many obvious communication areas such as writing, creativity, design, campaign development, media handling and the like. It can be more difficult to get feedback on your ability to demonstrate political nous, how you offer advice, whether you are able to build relationships, and your ability to influence or tell truth to power.

You may find that shadowing more skilled colleagues would help you reflect on your own approaches. Mentoring, coaching, role-playing and inviting critical feedback may also help.

### **Seek out the brilliant...**

Some people are particularly good. Follow their work and emulate it. There's a lot of fantastic work in the private sector. Take any and all opportunities to watch up close those who are stars. I have found that people who are both very good and personally secure about their work are gracious and keen to share thoughts and ideas. Read the things

that great people have written – David Ogilvy, Sir John Hegarty, Peter Mendelsund.

You will find excellent resources on the Government Communications Service website.<sup>(1)</sup>

## Development time

In some professions, continuous professional development (CPD) is a precondition of being able to continue working. Some professions must do at least 35 hours per year. This becomes particularly important when you consider the rate of change in some fields. In medicine, for example, it has been estimated<sup>(2)</sup> that the average doctor would need to read 85 research papers per day in order to stay abreast of developments. Communications is changing. How many hours do you think you would need every year to stay up to speed?

CPD might involve going to lectures or workshops for example. It might equally include working with a coach or mentor. Reading new material in your chosen field might also help. Importantly, development should give you the chance to both acquire new skills and reflect on your existing practice.

You could use your team as a learning resource. Simply look at the core skills that each team member has and share those through workshops or team meetings.

## Borrow from everywhere

Look at other people's work, particularly those who are better than you, and try to understand what they did and how they achieved results. You should read around your subject and in related fields. I've included a reading list at the end that you may find helpful.

There are some excellent resources to draw upon. [LG Communications](#) has a resource section on their website. Visit that regularly. They also run training and development programmes which, if you can find

the time, you should attend. A number of organisations run awards schemes. These can be helpful in your own work, giving you something on which to focus and allowing you to benchmark against your peers. But they can also be helpful after the event, providing you with names of people who are working in your field. Follow up awards with calls to winners and runners up. Invite them over and learn from what they've done. Be sceptical – as you would expect others to be of your work – and try to find out what really worked and really didn't.

### **Have a development plan**

Ideally, you should have two plans: one for the team and one for yourself. This should set out what your goals are for the coming year and how you intend to fulfil them. It should be linked to your personal appraisal, which should, in turn, be linked to organisational goals.

Don't make the mistake of "getting away" with development, getting by with the minimum effort and effectively faking it. It's easy to convince ourselves that we're at the top of our game. Few people are. And fewer still are able to stay there without support, reflection and learning.

# Scarce resources

Unless we know what a good return on our scarce resources looks like we'll never be able to decide whether we're really offering value.

However many resources you have they will always be limited.

When funds are tight, it's important to make the best of all of your resources. Remember, if you're not adding value you could be draining it.

### **Audit your current time use**

You should know how you use your time. You probably don't. If you've worked for a private sector firm, then you will know that your time can be divided into billable units. For lawyers, such units may be only 6 minutes long, meaning that you should be able to extract 10 units out of every hour of available time.

The easiest way to audit your time is to use a simple spread sheet that would allow you to log how you spend every 10 minutes throughout the day. The key here is honesty. If you spend 10 minutes chatting over coffee about the latest episode of your favourite programme, don't put this down as networking. It's chatting and should be recorded as such.

If you do this as a team, you should use common categories.

You might include the following headings:

- Meetings with officers
- Meetings with members
- Writing products (news releases, blogs, tweets)
- Writing documents (strategies, reports)
- Phone time – external
- Phone time – internal
- Creative time
- Catch ups

- One-to-ones
- Team meetings

Audit your time for a week. This will give you a sense of regular patterns that may exist.

Once you have your first log, think about whether you are getting a good return in terms of what you are trying to achieve.

### **Don't let yourself off the hook**

One of the problems of self-managing is the danger of letting yourself off the hook. We can all become adept at rationalising our decisions after the fact. Some tasks can stretch to fill the available time. Should writing a strategy take half a day or 2 months? I've seen both and sometimes they look the same.

Don't have dead time. Squeeze every minute of value out of the day.

### **Understand your work habits**

Unless you are already an exceptional and productive individual, you will hopefully discover something new following your time audit. You will be able to reflect on when you get the most stuff done. Also, you will recognise how long you can work in a sustained way before you start to lose focus and wander off on the web looking, obliquely, for something or other. Check your web browsing habits and your texts to look for patterns of time-wasting. (Yes, I know you can justify every visit to the BBC or the Daily Mail website but we both know that you're just fiddling around).

To be optimally effective you need to be able to “manage yourself” – that is, know what makes you tick and use that information to enable yourself to get things done. So if you find that you are able to get things done when the office is quiet, either get in early, stay late or work from home when your tasks require total concentration (unless you find out that you are more easily distracted when you are at home).

You should also think about how to mix the tasks you have to do during a day so that you have time to plan work, do it, review it and give yourself time to recover before you take on something else. You might like to do a series of short tasks to give you a sense of achievement before you take on more challenging pieces of work.

Switch your email and twitter off when you are focusing. Every interruption will cause you to lose focus. It has been estimated that it can take 15 minutes to get back on task after taking a phone call. You might find that you are unable to concentrate at all at any point during the day such is the nature and frequency of other interesting things to look at.

But be realistic. Don't set yourself up to fail in your work planning. That could dispirit you and cause you to wander even further off the point.

Keep in mind that we can all find ways of justifying our actions. But when you look at how you actually spend your time, are you really convinced that you're firing on all cylinders?

### **Focus on increasing your productivity**

If you are going to increase your productivity you will need to focus on the detail of your work. Look at each element in turn and think about how you could have worked differently.

For example, if you go into the properties box of a document on Microsoft Word, you will see when you created the file, how long you have worked on it and the number of edits that you have made.

You could review some of your recent features, blogs, speeches, or news releases. If you've written a short piece (say 300 words), how long did you actually spend on it? Similarly, if you've been tasked with creating a campaign or leading a project, where did the time go?

You could, of course, give your time a price and consider how much each piece of work would have cost your council charged at your hourly

rate. You might consider whether you've been good value for money in any given day or week.

Broadly, though, if you learn to focus, think about when you are at your most productive and keep to task, you will decrease time wastage and increase output with no loss of quality.

### **Set yourself productivity targets**

Nothing will change unless you change it – or unless someone else forces it upon you – not something you want.

So, if you find that, on average, you spend an hour writing a short feature, a blog or a news release, find a way to reduce that time to 40 minutes – or less.

If you have a regular blog to write, set aside just enough time to complete it. Then reduce that time by a minute each time till you reach the optimum time.

### **Focus, focus, focus**

You may be fearful that if you get all of “your work” done quickly, that there may be a need for fewer members in your team. Don't fret about this. Productivity is the name of the game – and there is always more work than there is time available.

If you increase productivity across the team, then you are effectively bringing in new resource at no additional cost. In the *more for less* world we now live in this is music to the ears of senior managers.

It makes you less, not more, vulnerable.

But remember that it's not activity alone but focused outcome-driven value-added activity that counts.

## Increasing team productivity

Ironically, even if you increase your own productivity alongside your colleagues doing the same, you may not be optimally effective as a team.

You need to look at your processes and how you handle your team workload. In some teams I've worked with, improving team productivity has meant sharing out tasks so that all members' work is interchangeable. This can mean an end to specialisation but it makes the work mix richer and it increases team resilience.

## Adrenaline junkies read on

Are you clear about what you really want out of work? Sometimes our work can be driven by our need for particular things or experiences.

You may be someone or you may know people who are driven by the need for adrenaline buzzes. It can be exciting to chase live news stories, to be constantly on the phone with journalists or to be flying at four hundred miles an hour in the middle of a crisis.

It can be equally exciting to be constantly interrupted during the day by phone calls or texts. We may like the buzz of tweets forever popping up on our screens. We may also like to be involved in conversations about who is doing what, even though it may have no bearing on our actual work.

Understanding what we want out of work is vital, not least because such wants will affect our choices during the day and determine how we prioritise our tasks. Our drivers also impact directly on our colleagues. Sometimes, the way we work can make others' work harder.

Ideally, you should try to align your inner drives with your work priorities. The danger in being an adrenaline junkie in a quiet thoughtful office is that you will become a disruptive influence, constantly seeking tension and attention.

# USP

No one in your organisation should understand communication, reputation management and behaviour change as much as you and your team but unless you're able to carve out that space as your own, others, with far less expertise but far more chutzpah, will usurp your place.

No team of professionals in the council should understand communication, reputation management and behaviour change as much as you. *It's what you do.*

But unlike other professions, such as law and medicine, communication is one area where everyone appears to be an expert. So if you are to be taken seriously, behave seriously. Lead the thinking and action in your council by adhering to the principles of evidence and honest evaluation.

### **When you walk into the room...**

Think about what words you would want senior people to use to describe you. Those words may not leap into consciousness just yet but think about your future offer and write down what you would want those words to be.

Be realistic. At present, you may not even register. You might be “someone who works in the press office, I think” – if you're lucky.

So consider how you would want to be perceived. One lawyer I worked with described himself as “Mr. Wolf”, the character from Pulp Fiction. He knew that he was the man who gets called when senior people want problems to go away.

Senior communications people often talk about wanting to be at the top table. Broadly, that means being intellectually capable of grasping the fast-moving complex debates about what to do about seemingly intractable problems as well as dealing with the vast weight of daily business. So to be seen as helpful, useful, and value-added in that context, you would want the words “someone who needs to be here now” to jump into senior leaders' minds when thinking of you.

Part of the self-positioning challenge is to understand why anyone would want to have a communications person present anyway. When time and attention are short, it's about how you add value on a second by second basis. If you are invited to contribute to discussions and you say nothing sensible, you both waste key decision-making time and confirm that whoever invited you misjudged things seriously.

So think hard about how you want to be perceived. Then consider what you would have to do, how you would have to behave, and even how you would have to speak and dress to be perceived in this way by the senior leaders you have to deal with.

### **Evidence-led?**

Demonstrate how an evidence-based and insight-led approach to delivering communication advice and action is considerably more robust and reliable than the application of common sense. Whereas other areas of professional life are rooted in a single and sometimes large body of carefully gathered and garnered knowledge, communications is a far more disparate field, drawing upon a wide range of knowledge bodies.

Demonstrate your value by leading and shaping discussion in the areas of reputation management and based on evidence.

### **Put it in writing**

Be sufficiently confident in what you do so that you can commit your words to print. All too often in the rush to get things done, we can trot out verbal advice. But those you are advising may want to mull your thoughts. They may want to check your appraisal of the situation, your understanding of the risks, your assessment of the best forms of words to use, your insights on those individuals who may escalate matters and your conclusions. Demonstrate your commitment to excellence by fleshing out your arguments, by citing research, by bringing insight to the table – in writing.

### **Challenge wrong-headed thinking**

Be able to challenge. It can be hard to offer robust advice that decision-makers may not want to hear. But it may be a sign of your own insecurity that you say little or nothing when you should be speaking out. You will have to choose your moment. And you will have to be mindful of the risk. But if you don't speak out, who will?

## Use development to position yourself

One way of being seen to be good at what you do is to train others. For example, if you know how to write features or blogs, run training sessions on this for other officers. If you are a good presenter, help others to get better. Public speaking is one of the things that many people, who are otherwise confident, fear. Or you could help colleagues develop their social media skills or learn to engage their own staff. The more that people respect the value of what you are able to do – because you appear to know what you are doing and can add value to their lives – the less you will have to fight to be listened to.

## Be strategic

Write papers for your senior leaders. Show how a communication-based solution can help address the big organisational challenges. Don't wait to be asked. By the time they get around to asking for your ideas, if they ever do, someone in policy, human resources, finance or strategy, will have got there first and shaped the future of the organisation.

So if organisational leaders are to consider the challenge of driving up discretionary effort (getting people to work harder and deliver more value whilst offering no additional funds) set out your thoughts on how this might be done. If you wait to be asked, you might never get the call.

## Review your team products

What does your current product range look like? Are they the kinds of things that make emails from the team *must-reads*? Or are they broadly ignored, consigning you to the must-do-better dustbin of council detritus? Or do you simply keep your heads down and deal only with what comes your way?

If you and your team get any attention from senior leaders and key politicians, you may be judged solely on the work that you do – the products you create, manage and send out. It may be unfair that a spelling mistake on the council internal newsletter makes you look as

if you have poor attention to detail but if key people only see one thing from you and it has a glaring error, that is what will happen.

Here are some products you may already have:

- A daily news briefing showing the issues that the council may have to comment on
- A trends bulletin showing what council news or activity has attracted positive or negative media/social media attention
- A regular pulse survey showing how people are feeling in the organisation, segmented by directorate and salary level
- A restricted distribution note on emerging “issues” and noting who is leading
- A daily digest of council coverage
- Evidence-led advice notes on handling internal and external issues
- A reputation pulse survey showing how the council is currently regarded by external audiences, and issues that are concerning different external audiences
- An early warning flag for senior leaders when a problem is about to emerge
- A person at the end of the phone 24/7 who is able to advise on complex communication and reputation matters

There may be others that could be useful:

- Scenario plans for a variety of challenges the organisation could face
- A Plan B file that could be brought into use when untoward events occur or when your Plan As fail
- Unannounced crisis training events requiring the senior leadership team to react as they would have in the event of a real one
- One-to-one development sessions for senior leaders

## Attention

Whatever your products are, you will need to get attention for them if they are going to have any impact at all.

Every day, senior leaders will have a series of potential attention slots into which you could pitch your core products.

Here are some examples of attention slots:

- Walk and talks - the walking space between meetings where you can “catch up” with senior leaders and brief them on key issues
- Car park chats – catch up slots once you have identified where senior leaders park
- Downtime – guidance from senior leaders’ PAs on the ‘best time to have a word”, accessed by building excellent working relationships with all support staff
- Texts – helpful suggestions, prompts and messages
- Reading pile – senior leaders will have reading piles and may get to these in early morning or Sunday afternoon slots. You’ll be in competition with shed-loads of other documents so your stuff will really have to stand out – or be hyper-helpful
- Phone slots – some senior leaders will do a great deal of business hands-free in the car so knowing when to catch them and making sensible use of this time could help you to have an impact

## Killer content

My working assumption is that content is king. If you produce something so compelling that it will be sought out and shared, your stock will grow.

So, if you only had five minutes of attention, what could you produce that is so compelling that readers will seek it out? What if you only had

10 seconds of attention in a week, what products would cut through and grab that?

If you want to be seen as a high value individual or team, then you might want to look at what your short time products look like. You could start by focusing again on your key stakeholders, clients, senior officers and lead members.

What could you provide that might give them a better sleep at night?

# Outcomes

Focus on what matters to those who pay for your service and ruthlessly evaluate your successes and failures. Where you succeed, share. Where you fail, learn and improve.

One of the key ways to improve what you do and to add more value to your council is to embrace evaluation. You should not only know what works and why but why what doesn't work doesn't. It is, of course, easy to gloss over the bits of our work that don't fly.

Or worse, we don't even ask the question.

Try to think about your work in terms of the extent to which it delivers on the outcomes that matter to the organisation.

So on media relations, for example, you might already look at whether you manage to get coverage of your key messages and pictures of key individuals in the press or on TV. You might consider on Twitter the number of shares a post has had.

Evaluation should enable you to judge whether you have achieved what you set out to achieve.

### **Outcome-focused measures**

These will depend upon what your team has been charged with achieving, something that should be set out in either your council-wide communication strategy or in relation to specific, discrete pieces of work.

You could be asked, for example, to achieve any or all of the following:

- Increase awareness of council services amongst specific audiences
- Increase the demand for a particular service
- Change behaviour in an area – e.g. increase recycling, decrease fly-tipping
- Dampen the demand for a particular service (to alleviate budget pressures)
- Alter the way services are perceived

In each case, you would need a baseline. You won't be able to determine whether you've increased awareness of something unless you know

what the starting point is or unless you have reliable proxies (such as current demand as measured through email, phone calls or web hits).

Don't be tempted to retro-fit your results. And avoid, at all costs, any temptation to spin or put a positive gloss on your findings. Do that, and you will be helping no-one, least of all yourself, as you will be closing off learning and embracing self-delusion.

## **Analytics**

Today's analytics give us insights that were not possible just a few years ago. We can now see how many people visited our web pages, how long they spent there, and where they went next. We can see where there were peaks in interest and better understand why this may have occurred. We can also see our flops in the cold light of day. Embrace this. Whilst we may at times be tempted to delude or misdirect others, don't do this to yourself.

Importantly, knowing what doesn't work matters as much as knowing what does. And in both cases, knowing why is central to the improvement to our practice.

## **Use the measures your senior leadership team use**

This may be both scientific and instinctive. Scientifically, they may evaluate your input in terms of the achievement of core goals such as whether you have managed to recruit more foster carers or help schools attract more pupils.

But they may use soft measures such as whether they believe that there is too much "noise" about a particular issue on social media.

Both count. Understanding how the people who pay for your services determine whether you're worth the money matters.

So now we'll look at whether they get a return on their investment in communications.

# Your ROI

Look back at every day and ask the question: “Was I worth the money they paid me in terms of the units in which they measure success?”. Use the answer to increase your personal return on investment tomorrow.

In an earlier chapter, I wrote about return on investment being measured in terms of both the key organisational and individual senior leaders' or key members' objectives. In other words, your value can be determined by the extent to which you either deliver directly on those objectives or measurably (and visibly) contribute to their achievement.

It can be hard to keep those metrics in focus as you get on with the job. Posts are often specified to deal with on-going work – media relations, social media, campaign development, team leadership – rather than being tied to specific outcomes. Besides, you might think, such goals can be pretty vague anyway – make a difference, improve lives and so on.

But if you start to think of your time in terms of whether you are delivering a return on the investment that the organisation is making in you, then it can help you to focus your efforts, your development, your energy and your commitment on what really matters.

### **What's your Return Per Day?**

All too often our work is driven by habit and an ability to justify our actions. So you might have a team meeting every Tuesday that lasts an hour. There'll be 15 minutes beforehand to get your thoughts in order and 15 afterwards to chew the fat. You might make a couple of calls – another 15 minutes gone. Then there'll be a couple of meetings with directorates where you mainly listen. You might have a quick meet to throw around some ideas on a campaign but since there's no current deadline, or apparently a rush, nothing much comes out of it. The rest of the day is taken up with sending email and surfing the net.

Okay, what's the return on the day?

Answer: not sure.

Not that you won't be tired. But nothing might have been business critical. However, since no-one is asking you to account for every 10 minute block of time, it might be hard to determine whether it was worth spending the money.

If the organisation were to commission time use measured in terms of core business objectives they might conclude that if there were many days like this the organisation could afford to employ fewer staff with no marked difference in outcomes.

### **Outcomes, outcomes, outcomes**

So let's look at the day again.

Imagine that you're looking at tomorrow. You will want to ensure that the organisation is able to derive real value from their investment in you for each day, week, month and year that they pay for your time.

#### *The pre-meeting*

If you spend 15 minutes preparing for the meeting, is this a good use of your time? Are you simply checking that you're not going to be caught out for not doing what you said you were going to do? Will this add any value at all? What are the best possible outcomes? And are they worth the cost?

#### *The meeting*

Should it take place? Will anything of value be delivered? Does it need to be an hour? Has everyone done what they should have done before it gets underway? Is anyone taking minutes? Are they used to hold staff to account for their actions? Do such actions in any way relate to overall organisational objectives? Could the meeting take place bi-weekly and add more value? Is a meeting the best way to get things done? What are the best possible outcomes? And are they worth the cost?

#### *Post meeting*

Is there any value in chatting? Is it more than this – is it progressing meaningful business? If so, how are you capturing the discussions or decisions? How will you measure the value of this time? What are the best possible outcomes? And are they worth the cost?

#### *Meetings with directorates*

Are you clear why you are going and how you are going to add value? Are you taking good notes so that should you have to take absence someone could step into your shoes and continue seamlessly? Do you regularly brief your colleagues so that they can contribute? Are your hosts clear why you are there? Would they pay your hourly rate to get you there if you were not employed? Are there clear objectives? Are they SMART objectives? Do you review your effectiveness at such meetings to determine whether you are the right person to go? Do you review your skill level against the purpose of the meeting? What are the best possible outcomes? And are they worth the cost?

### *Emails*

How much time are you spending writing emails? Is this the best medium? Could you pick up the phone or bolt this onto another meeting or drop in? How much time are you spending reading and responding to emails that add no value at all? What are the best possible outcomes? And are they worth the cost?

### *Campaign meetings*

If you don't have a clear objective, clarity about the time-scale, how the work fits with corporate objectives and a deadline, why is the meeting taking place? If you are developing a campaign, how much time should you give such meetings? If the organisation were paying directly for the development of a campaign how much would they be prepared to pay? Have you valued the staff time and the opportunity cost of the development of each meeting? How much overall does it, on average, cost for the creation and execution of each campaign? What are the best possible outcomes? And are they worth the cost?

### **Agreeing ROI units**

It can be hard to tie your work to a clear corporate goal. But you can identify a clear corporate need, something that senior leaders and executive members would consider vital – or even critical.

So, if you were managing a media team, your core units of delivery could be:

- Increasing the perceived value of the council brand (PV)
- Diminishing the risk to brand through damaging content (RTB)

Each day you come into the office your focus would be on increasing the number PV units and decreasing the possibility of RTB units. So when you look at a team meeting, a visit to a directorate, the need to respond to emails or calls, all the time you could ask yourself: is this going to make it easier for me to increase PVs or decrease RTBs?

The units of measurement may change depending on your position in the communications function.

A director of communication's value might be measured in terms of:

- Increases in team productivity (and happiness since it's a related factor) (TP)
- Contribution to the delivery of the corporate strategy (DCS)
- Contribution to increasing the level of discretionary effort council-wide (a shared area of work with human resources/organisational development/leadership) (DE)
- Anticipation of and resolution (using advice and influence) of potential reputational risk (RR)
- Delivery of behaviour change (shared with business leaders) (BC)

Each area would have a unit of delivery and metrics that would enable the post-holder to determine whether he or she has realised a return on the investment in his or her salary.

So if you were to look at one area as an example: discretionary effort (DE). This can be defined as the difference in effort that an individual could make in work compared to that which they are required to make. In this instance both the director of communications and the director

of human resources have this as their number one priority, not least because the council is cutting staff.

At present, prior to the Communications/HR intervention staff may work at about 65% of full effort. In other words, about 35% of the time is under-utilised. This may take the form of attending non-essential meetings, or poorly structured time use, or taking far longer to complete tasks than could be reasonably specified.

So Comms/HR run a campaign designed to change this. Their *One Thing* campaign drives up discretionary effort from 65% to 75%. So across a managerial and leadership of say 50 staff they've delivered additional value.

*Pre-intervention*

50 staff each delivering 3.5 productive days each week = 175 days/week

*Post-intervention*

50 staff each delivering 4 productive days each week = 200 days/week

Or an increase of 25 productive days/week

ROI

Let's say that working together the campaign took 6 days. So for an investment of 12 days, the directors of communication and human resources achieved a return on investment of 1,200 days/year (assuming 48 weeks each year taking account of holidays).

If they were transacting in DE units, that is a return of 1,200 units for an investment of 12 units – which might be considered a good return.

### **What are your ROI units?**

Spend some time looking at the corporate goals and discuss with your manager how he or she would measure the return on their investment in you. Set yourself a baseline – your current ROI. Then set out your

---

targets for the coming year. Aim to deliver a higher rate of return on a month-by-month basis.

Use this to reject or divert work that does not contribute to a return on investment. For more on this kind of thinking look at Daniel Goleman's book on Focus or Greg McKeowan's book Essentialism (both in the reading list).

# Disruption

Retaining the ability to surprise can save you at a time when decision-makers may be inclined to discount or second-guess predictable interventions. Creativity is central to effective communication management thinking. Use it to disrupt and challenge; new solutions are sometimes those that can only be seen when you're standing in the middle of the stream, far away from either bank.

What happens when people can predict what we might say or do? It can work in our favour in that we can have an influence when we're not in the room – senior leaders think along the lines that we would have advised had we been there.

But it can also work against us – we may not be invited into key meetings on the grounds that people would know what we would have said had we been given half a chance.

Predictability can be an enemy when resources are tight. Your value may not be so easily realised when your way of thinking is already “priced in”. You may move from being a *need to have* service to an *it's been nice having you* team.

There are ways to counter the threat arising from predictability.

### **A disruptive influence**

You will have read about disruptive technologies and the way that disruption leads to innovation in business. Disruption can force us to completely rethink how we approach things. Netflix disrupted video thus rendering established brands worthless. The iPhone disrupted the phone market creating a new market and approach to how we communicate (and spend our time).

To be disruptive in communication aim to change how people see communication. Challenge established “truths”. You could do this even where the results might be personally threatening: if all senior leaders could think like comms people would that be better for the public services?

### **Be creative**

This should be one of the defining characteristics of a comms person, in my view, but it's not always at the top of the agenda. If you've lost your creative spark, immerse yourself in others' work. Read around. Lateral thinking by Edward De Bono is a good place to start. Go to the

---

Creative Review website. Re-read anything by David Ogilvy. Look at the best commercial work and apply that kind of thinking to your work.

You might find that your council is not so keen on things that don't feel council-ly. You might have had many knock-backs and found that your creative juices have been drained. It happens. Keep pushing back and challenging the boundaries. If you feel that your creative edge has been blunted, go away as a team and come up with something that will shock, surprise and delight your senior leadership team.

### **Be impactful**

If you find that your impact is limited, change what you do. You may find that people, particularly if they like you, are reluctant to criticise your work. But if what you do is having no effect on what matters, it's best to find out early.

Again, it's back to how others measure value. And if you are failing to add value, you'll want to know about it. We can learn a lot from failure but in a tight financial climate senior leaders may not want to finance this kind of learning for very long.

# Politics

Understanding politics can be a minefield. Nothing is as it seems. Take small steps, listen attentively and watch not just what people do but where they do it and in front of whom they do it. Even then, you may not get it all.

Understanding politics is possibly the hardest part of the work. If you are a junior communications officer, you may not have much exposure to politicians but as you take on more senior roles, this will increase. You will see reference in job specifications to the need for “political nous”. The interface with local and national politicians is one of the reasons why this matters.

There are three things you need to keep in mind always when working with politicians.

First, elected members have primacy. They have a mandate to represent local people and their deliberations will have a direct impact on the services that the council provides. They are decision-makers. Officers are broadly advisers (there are some statutory exceptions).

Second, don't take everything at face value. Politics is often called the “art of the possible”, the means by which impossible things get done. It has, following Von Clausewitz, been described by some as the pursuit of war by other means. Politicians will legitimately use any and all legal means available to pursue their goals.

In any given political environment, there will be historical roots to the current relationships. You will not necessarily understand or be able to grasp all of these in the first instance. To understand an individual councillor's motivation, you would need to know far more about him or her than just the party to which they belong. There will be current and previous alliances, current and previous links with the authority, realised and failed ambitions, current and future aspirations, challenges, and opportunities to consider.

Third, never take any actions that might cause elected members embarrassment.

Such is the potential complexity of any local political environment, it is very easy to stumble into things in an effort to be “helpful”. So be guided by those who know the local domain.

## Basics

You should understand the governance in your organisation. That means knowing which committees have which powers, their scope, their membership and their challenges. Attend meetings if you are allowed. And if you are not invited, talk to those who are.

Read what members write. Listen to their public statements. Look at manifestos. Read speeches, blogs and articles. Know what's going on nationally, in government and in opposition. Read commentators' work.

Broadly: tune in.

## Warning areas

Councillors are entitled to know what is going on but there are usually established protocols to ensure that they are briefed appropriately. But like all individuals they may want an edge. Some may want to know the inside story – the emerging issues, the challenges, the thinking behind papers coming to committee and so on. It's only natural. We all assume that someone knows more than we do – and we want to know what they know.

But giving hints or sharing information, whilst it may appear welcome and helpful, will simply make it harder for you to do your job in the longer run.

Simply put: senior officers will stop telling you things for fear that you'll leak them, inadvertently or otherwise.

You should also be wary of helping councillors whose party you support. Like civil servants, you should be politically neutral. Be even-handed and support your elected members irrespective of their political affiliations and work as hard as you can for whichever party is in power.

# Limited exposure

Minds are often made up on the basis of limited information. We can all be skewered by limited exposure syndrome. If the only thing you say at a senior leadership team meeting is ill-thought-through and silly, you could be framed by that remark for the rest of your career.

We make up our minds often on the basis of the information available. This is called the availability heuristic. We could go and look for additional information to confirm or challenge our view but for the most part we're either too busy or too lazy and so we take what's in front of us.

So it is with senior leaders. If they only ever see you rushing along corridors looking out of breath and flustered, they'll conclude, in the absence of other information, that this is who and what you are. And if you are lucky enough to be invited to the senior leadership table and your first comment is silly, not only might you never be invited back, that utterance may forever frame you.

### **A seat at the table**

One way to help decision-makers feel assured about the future is to contribute to discussions at senior leadership team meetings. That's the place where anxieties are, whilst not exposed fully, more visible. Being on the senior management board has long been the Holy Grail for communication staff. As a head of communications you may already have been invited and make a regular and meaningful contribution. Even if you don't go regularly, you will nonetheless know something about the ways to behave.

If you don't go or find it difficult to get space at the table, you might find this next part helpful.

Being at these meetings and being useful may be entirely different things. Airtime is precious. If you feel insecure around that table you will not be alone. It's prime performance space. You will be in the company of some of the most astute, clever, focused and wily people you're ever likely to meet. But they too might be nervous, conscious that they may be misunderstood or thought to be off the pace.

Understanding chief officers' culture is critical. They may not be a team as such, but a bunch of people thrown together, all competing with one another and each thinking they could do others' jobs, including the chief executive's, better than the incumbents.

So if you get to go – even for an item on something relatively straightforward – think before you speak.

Get advice first. One chief executive I worked with told me that if I wanted to bring ideas to the table I should say “I would like to share initial thoughts with colleagues”. The wording mattered. It took account of their sensitivities. And when you speak, bearing in mind that you may not be asked back – or worse, you may be asked to give up your space for someone else – add value. Say something sensible. Your contribution should add value to the discussion and not be blindingly obvious. There’s too much to discuss and insufficient time to give everything an airing. Fatuous remarks will stick in their minds and remind them why they don’t usually seek out contributions from communications people.

You may be stepping into a minefield. This team will have a history. There will be many agenda in play. There may have been pre-meetings, pre-negotiations, horse-trading and planned tactical moves. You may not be aware of any of this. So it’s very easy to wander into the middle of something and be unhelpful.

### **Do your homework**

Even where you have been invited in to discuss a communications-related matter you should try to read the other papers. You may be present when other matters are being discussed. Knowing what’s being talked about and appearing to be tuned in will reassure the other team members.

### **Write things down**

When you have reviewed the papers and when you are clear about the points you want to make, note down your planned contribution. This will give you time and space to consider the best way of putting things. It will also give you an opportunity to reflect. The best passing remarks or off the cuff statements may have been gestating for days before being uttered.

## Check things out before you go

Chief officers' discussions can be tense. Sometimes matters must be tabled at their meetings before they go anywhere near the members. There may be no consensus about an issue but a determination that the chief executive's view will prevail whatever the views expressed. If that were the case, think about how helpful your blurted out observation might be considered if the result is that you question, inadvertently, something that has already been decided.

Answer: not very.

# Counterfactual

Knowing what would happen, what would be missing or what simply couldn't take place if you were not there is important. Whilst none of us is indispensable, being aware of the unique contribution we can make can help us to stay focused on what matters.

One of the key measures of your added value is what would happen in the organisation if you were not there – both as an individual, and as a team - the counterfactual.

That's certainly a question that senior leaders will ask in terms of weighing up your relative value. When they've determined the possible consequences of your absence, they'll then ask: can we live with it?

If you are to survive the inevitable budget cuts, your value-added contribution has to be both indispensable and increasingly important.

There was a time when being good with the media was a critical skill. Senior leaders lived in fear of negative front pages. They knew that if they were in the papers then it could spell the end of their political or managerial careers. Not so much now. Bad news is an occupational hazard; it's almost impossible to cut services without creating noise.

In one sense, it is important to think beyond communication. See yourself as someone in the business of delivering outcomes. These may be behaviour or attitude change outcomes. Or they may be in the art of offering advice to senior leaders so that you influence their thinking. When senior people see you as someone who they want or need to have in the room before they take key decisions, your future will be safer.

But senior leaders change. Just as you are vulnerable, so are they. If you are going to stay in work, you need to keep yourself connected and useful to both today's leading players and tomorrow's. With every person, you must add value. If your presence and input is neither here nor there, then you are replaceable – or even dispensable.

You need senior leaders to know that if you were not there:

- Cuts would be harder to make
- The council would be more poorly regarded
- Behaviour change would not take place
- Staff could be less productive

- Decision makers would be less sure-footed in their decision-making
- They would not know how different audiences thought
- They would not be able to gauge how to present issues internally or externally
- They would not feel confident or supported

Indispensability itself is not achievable. None of us are. But if you concentrate hard on the things that matter to the people you work for, then you'll be safer than not.

So focus now on the counterfactual; what would not happen if you were not there? Make that part of your core offer.

# Resilience

Some years ago I interviewed Sir Rhodes Boyson. When asked whether he was uncomfortable with a strident view he was expressing, he said no because “I know who I am”. At that point, I didn’t.

Change is tough. It affects everyone – even those who are leading it. Some research shows that we experience the same range of emotions – pain, anger, guilt, and fear – during change as we would if we were affected by a physical disaster. We may feel we’re coping but the uncertainty can be unsettling. It can undermine our confidence, our performance and our peace of mind.

Knowing how you are affected by change matters, not least because if you feel too besieged by it, you may find it difficult to do a good job. It will not be helpful to be perceived as a low performer precisely at the point when your organisation is demanding the reverse.

There’s a ton of material out there that will offer you advice on how to be resilient. I would recommend that you find it and read it. In the meantime, here are some pointers and observations picked up from working with teams and people that have coped with change, those who have not only survived but thrived.

### **Know yourself**

Some years ago I ran a session on personal reputation management in Manchester. The participants, who were heads of communication, were asked the question, “Who are you?” in the course of the session. Revealingly, most had never considered the question before. It may feel self-indulgent or narcissist to even ponder this subject but it matters. If you don’t know who you are, what your values are, what drives you, what you like and don’t and what you will or won’t tolerate, then it can be difficult to navigate your way through the choppy waters of change. On what basis will you make judgements unless you address these kinds of questions?

To find out who you are, look at what matters to you and at why you do the things you do. You might conclude that you are public value oriented because you work in the public sector, but is that why you do what you do? Are you attracted to the status, salary or position? You may want to make a difference but how will you know whether you have? Whose life do you want to change? And why?

Spend some time with yourself and ask yourself some of these hard questions. I first encountered these questions when interviewing a former government minister, Sir Rhodes Boyson, as a journalist. When asked whether he was uncomfortable with a strident view he was expressing, he said no because “I know who I am”. At that point, I didn’t.

### **Look after yourself**

Another obvious but often missed behaviour – self-care. If you are physically fit, sleep and eat well and can balance personal, family and work life whilst managing your stress load effectively, you are more likely to be able to cope with pressures arising from change. If you are on the edge before change begins, then it could easily push you over.

You should know what depriving yourself of the basics does to you. If you don’t sleep, for example, does your judgement suffer? Are you more likely to be moody? Will it cause you to dash off poor work? It could be that your behaviour is already impacting on your performance. If so, sort it before you get into the midst of a change cycle.

### **Safe space**

There are likely to be times when you will need to talk through the implications of proposed change but you may be nervous about sharing your concerns with colleagues. They, after all, may be similarly affected. There are dangers in expressing unrefined views at work, most of which you will be able to readily imagine. You will probably discover that people do not always behave as expected when change is raging through an organisation.

So find someone you trust and make your conversations mutually supportive. If you feel that anything you say will be treated confidentially and you can offer the same in return, you will be able to find respite, advice and potentially some solutions to the challenges you face.

Staying connected, during change, will help you. Often we don’t know how we’ll react to such circumstances until we’re in them. It can be

harder to want to seek out support when we feel besieged. Better to keep networks in place prior to such challenges. You'll be on hand to help others too.

### **Self-interest**

When the chips are down and there are fewer jobs than there are staff, self-interest will emerge. People have mortgages to pay and other commitments. When these factors change colleagues' behaviour you may be tempted to take it personally. In reality, unless we've been through it before, we probably won't know what we'll do when our job is on the line. Try to understand how others may be affected and don't allow resentment to obscure your vision.

### **Focus on others**

You might find that you are displaced by change. Sadly, this happens. But stay focused on who you are and what you can do for others. As you leave the organisation or change jobs your work can still add value. Your approach and ways of working will cause key people to recommend you to other potential employers. When applying for work elsewhere, references will matter. As will the passing remarks that senior people can make to each other about key staff.

These are challenging times for the public sector. When organisations downsize, decisions can reflect harsh economic realities rather than value judgements about people's worth. Your perceived value will matter since it is that which will bring you future opportunities and employment.

The upside of change is that it brings opportunities. Being change-ready is one of the keys to surviving uncertainty and to thriving in a world where you really don't know what's going to happen next.

Good luck.

# Reading

This note is a prompt for thought. Hopefully, it will have given you a taste for more. My advice would be keep reading and learning. Read the blogs of people who work in the sector. Look at Comms 2.0, read Paul Masterman's stuff, follow Ben Page and listen to Alex Aiken.

Also, keep an eye on [www.readytogocomms.com](http://www.readytogocomms.com). We'll be publishing new stuff regularly, including free posters that you may want to use.

And read the works that underpin much of our daily work. Here's a starter for ten list. But keep your Amazon account on tap – there's new stuff to read every day.

Ariely, Dan, 2008, *Predictably irrational: the hidden forces that shape our decisions*. Harper Collins, London.

Atkinson, Max, 1984, *Our Masters' Voices: Language and Body Language of Politics*. Routledge, London.

Brooker, Christopher, 2004, *The seven basic plots – why we tell stories*. Continuum, London.

Carlzon, Jan, 1989. *Moments of truth*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Ballinger Publishing.

Christakis, Nicholas and Fowler, James, 2011, *Connected: The amazing power of social networks and how we shaped our lives*. Harper Press, London.

Collins, Jim, 2001. *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap and others don't*. Random House Business Books, London.

Drucker, Peter, 1967, The effective executive. Pan, London. (A good reference for time audits.)

Ford, Martin, 2016 - The Rise of the Robots - Technology and the Threat of Mass Unemployment. Oneworld Publications, London.

Gawunde, Atul, 2011, The Checklist Manifesto. Profile Books, London.

Gilovich, Thomas, Griffin, Dale, and Kahneman, Daniel, 2002, Heuristics and biases: The psychology of intuitive judgment. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Gladwell, Malcolm, 2000, The Tipping Point: How little things can make a big difference. Little Brown, New York.

Goffman, Erving, 1989, The presentation of self in everyday life. Penguin Books, London.

Goleman, Daniel, 2013, Focus: The hidden driver of excellence. Harper Collins, New York.

Gray, Muir, 2011, The resourceful patient. Alden Digital, Oxford.

Harari, Yuval Noah, 2016: Homo Deus, a brief history of tomorrow. Harvill Secker, London.

Hegarty, John. 2014 Hegarty on creativity: There are no rules. Thames and Hudson, London.

Kahneman, Daniel, 2011, Thinking fast and slow. Allen Lane, Penguin, London.

Kotter, John, 1996, Leading change. Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Massachusetts.

Layard, Richard, 2005, Happiness: lessons from a new science. Penguin, London.

Levin, Robert, 2006, The power of persuasion: How we're bought and sold. Oneworld, Oxford.

Maister, David, Green, Charles, and Galford, Robert, 2002, *The trusted advisor*. The Free Press, London.

Machiavelli, Nicolo, *The Prince*. Penguin, London.

McKeown, Greg, 2014, *Essentialism – the disciplined pursuit of less*. Random House.

Ogilvy, David. *On advertising*. Vintage, London.

Olins, Wally, 1989, *Corporate Identity*, Thames and Hudson, London.

Pinker, Steven, 1999, *Words and rules: The ingredients of language*. Wieden and Nicholson, London.

Slovic, Paul, 2000, *The perception of risk*. Earthscan, London.

Surowiecki, James, *The wisdom of crowds: Why the many are smarter than the few*. Abacus, London.

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas, 2007, *Foiled by Randomness: The hidden role of chance in life and in the markets*. Penguin, London.

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas, 2008, *The Black Swan: The impact of the highly improbable*. Penguin, London.

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas, 2013, *Anti-fragile: Things That Gain From Disorder*. Penguin, London.

Tavris, Carol and Aronson, Elliot, 2015, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions and Hurtful Acts*. Mariner Books, New York.

Theobald, Theo and Cooper, Cary, 2004. *Shut up and listen: The truth about how to communicate at work*. Kogan Page, London.

Thaler, Richard H and Sustein, Carl R, 2009, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. Penguin, London.

Underhill, Paco, 2008, *Why we buy: The science of shopping*. Simon & Schuster, New York.

---

# Footnotes

(1) [www.gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/professional-development](http://www.gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/professional-development)

(2) Quoted in *The Resourceful Patient*, Muir Gray.