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• Perceptions and positioning of communication departments

What top executives, middle managers and co-workers know and think about corporate communications and which strategies are used by communication leaders to strengthen their profile.

Results of a multi-method study in listed and private companies.

MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

Many communication leaders and their teams face an almost paradoxical situation today. On the one hand, it is often emphasized that corporate communications is becoming increasingly important for business success in times of digitalization and geopolitical conflicts. On the other hand, the appreciation and available resources for those in charge are hardly increasing and often shrinking. What are the reasons? And what can be done?

This research surveyed 1,147 top executives, middle managers and employees without leadership responsibilities in large companies about their perceptions of the objectives, tasks, and relevance of their communication departments. The results are as exciting as disillusioning. Only 50 % of top managers and 36 % of middle managers are convinced that the work of communicators helps them to fulfill their tasks. Nearly every second manager does not believe that the resources spent for communications are justified. And a majority of all respondents says that communication units need to better clarify what they do and how they create value.

There is an urgent need for action. This is why 32 senior communication leaders (chief communication officers or their deputies) in listed and private companies in Germany were personally interviewed to learn how they position their teams within their organizations to gain acceptance and influence. Differing opinions as well as concrete strategies were identified and are supported by illustrative quotes.

This report highlights practical implications and a four-step framework to solve the paradox. It is the most extensive study on the perceptions and positioning of communication departments so far and will hopefully stimulate further reflections in theory and practice.

The study was conducted by researchers and graduate students at the Chair of Strategic Communication at Leipzig University and supported through a grant by the Academic Society for Management & Communication. Anke Schmidt (Beiersdorf), Frank van Hoorn (Shell), Nils Haupt (Hapag Lloyd) and Thomas Voigt (Otto Group) helped to initiate and focus the project by sharing their CCO experiences.

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IMPRINT

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01 STUDY DESIGN

THE CHALLENGE

58 %



of managers and employees are not fully aware of the tasks of communicators in their own organization

Falkheimer et al., 2017

Only **66 %**



of top managers rate the work of communication departments as (very) relevant to success

Zerfass & Sherzada, 2015

International research over the last decade consistently shows:

- Communication departments in organizations are primarily perceived as content producers
- The perception of internal clients differs from the positive self-perception of communicators
 - This might explain why the appreciation, influence and budgets of communication departments are hardly increasing and rarely reflect the importance of communications in digital societies

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT?

A communication department can only create value and contribute to corporate success if

- it is appreciated by top management and other internal stakeholders,
- its deliverables, products and services are in demand and used,
- and if its business model fits the organization as a whole. (Zerfass & Link, 2024)



Internal positioning helps to ensure that ...

others in the organization understand the **role and value of communications**.

Simonsson & Heide, 2021

the **acceptance of communication work** is increased.

Johannsson et al., 2019

resources, influence and power within the organization are secured.

Volk & Zerfass, 2022

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND STUDY DESIGN

Perception of communication departments

?

What **perceptions** do top executives, middle managers and co-workers have of their company's communication department?



Quantitative survey

Internal positioning of communication departments

?

How do communication leaders **position** themselves and their departments towards top executives, middle managers and co-workers?



Qualitative interviews

Implications for practice



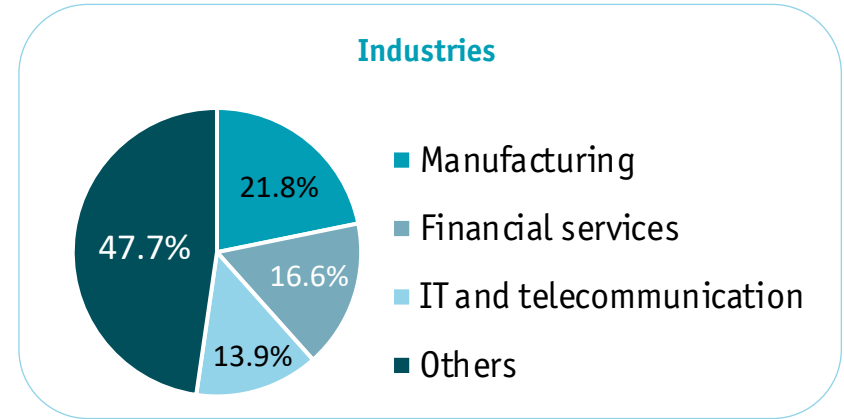
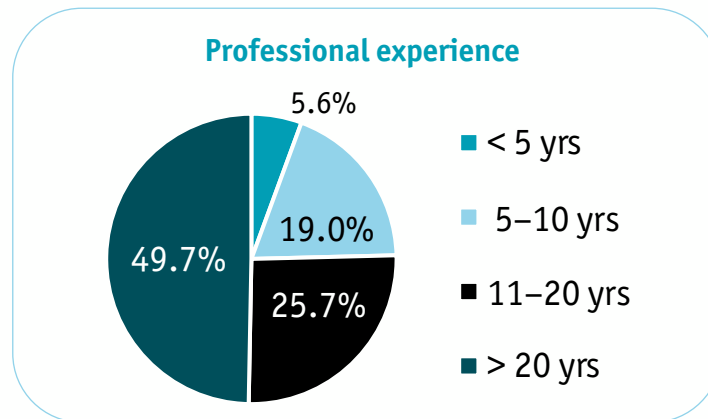
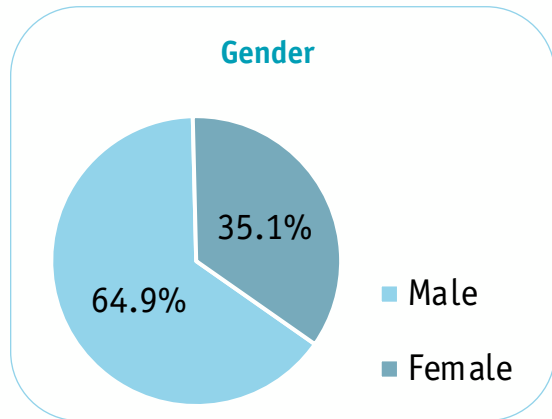
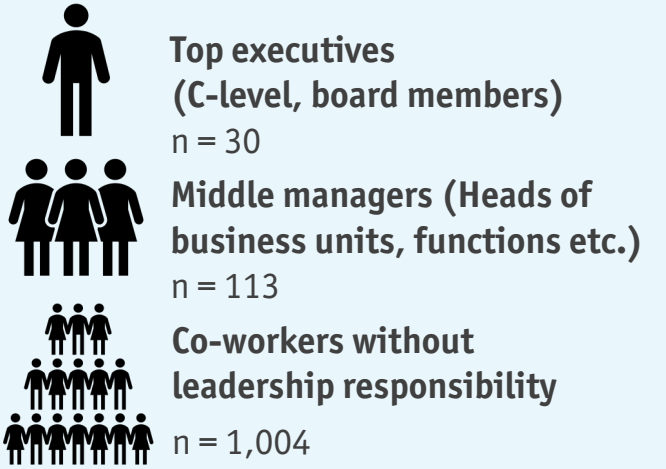
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02 PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENTS

QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

- **1,147 study participants** interviewed with a pre-tested online questionnaire based on established research and scales
- **Population:** Managers and co-workers in German companies with at least 1,000 employees and a communication department
- **Panel survey** conducted by market research institute YouGov
- **Survey period:** November 2023
- **Average age** of respondents: 44 years

Hierarchy levels

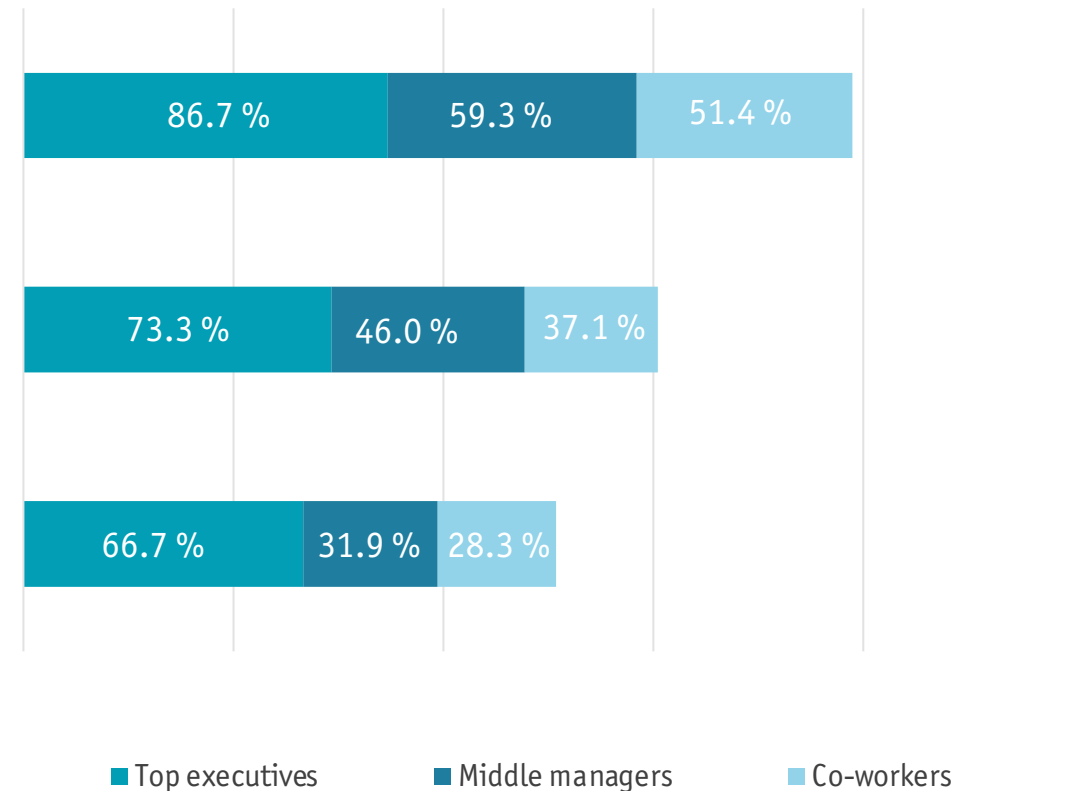


ASSESSMENT OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITIES

I am satisfied with our corporate communications

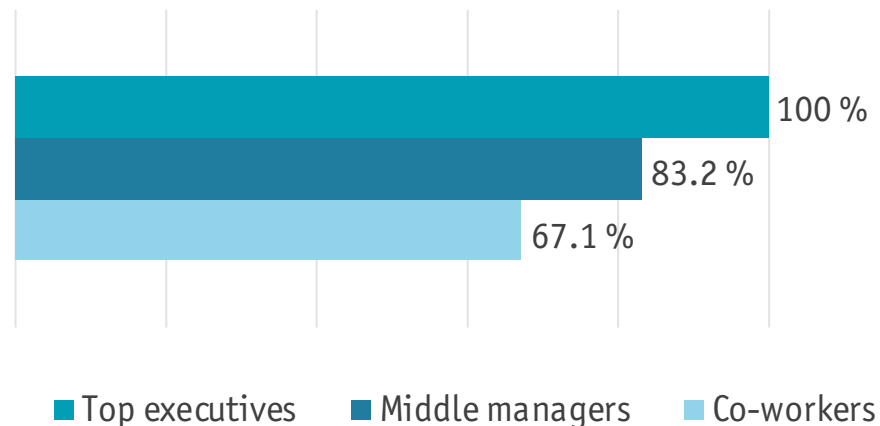
Our corporate communications are better than those of our competitors

Our corporate communications are better than our marketing communications



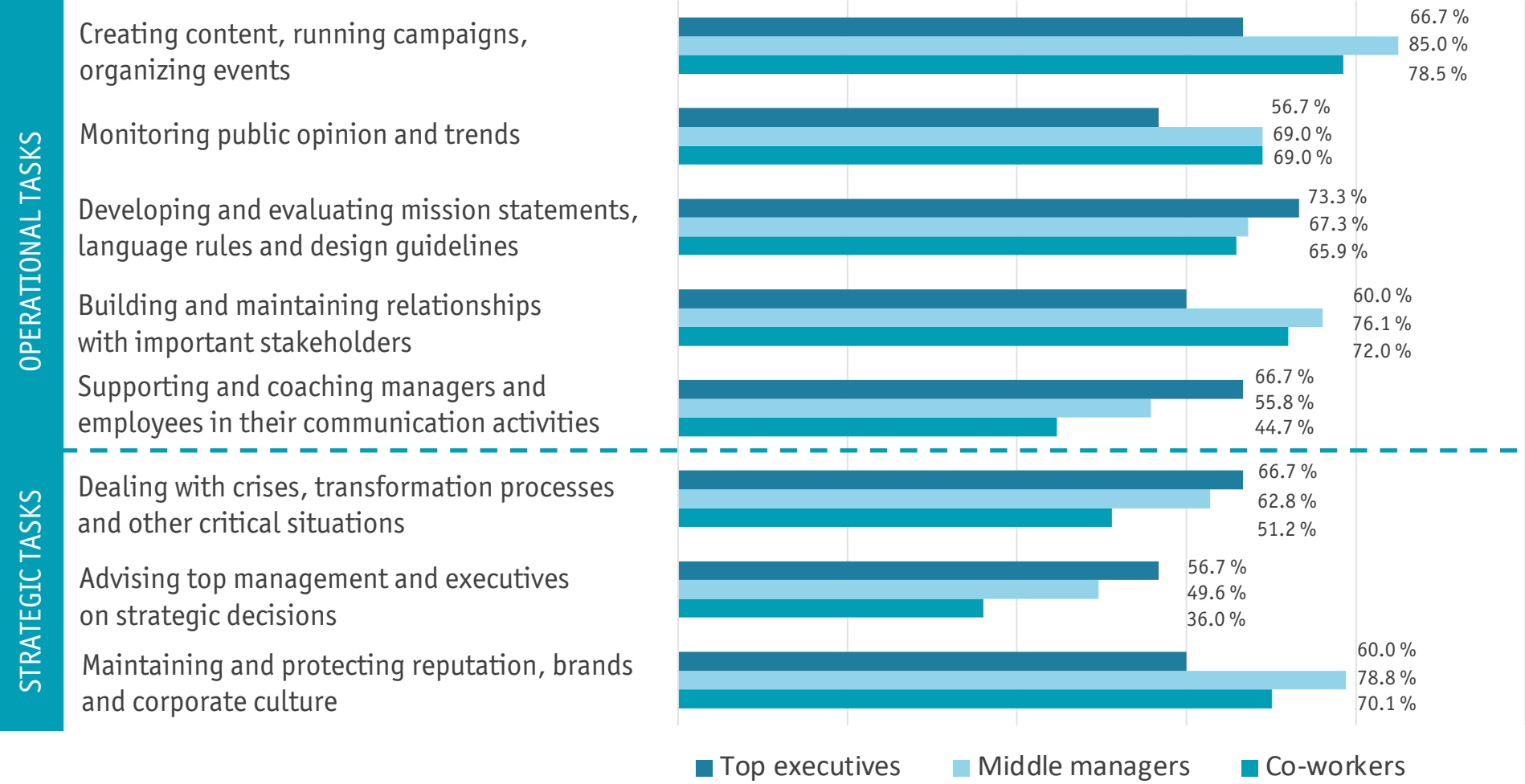
FAMILIARITY WITH THE COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

„I know who is responsible for communications in our company and whom I need to contact if necessary.“



- 97% of top executives and 80 % of middle managers, but only 57 % of co-workers state that they know **what the communication department does**
 - 80% of top executives, but only 58 % of middle managers and 40 % of co-workers are aware of the **objectives of the communication department**
- **Familiarity** with the communication department **increases with the hierarchy level**

PERCEIVED TASKS OF THE COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT



RELEVANCE FOR TASK ACCOMPLISHMENT

Only one in two top executives and one in three middle managers **see the work of their communication department as beneficial** to fulfilling their own tasks

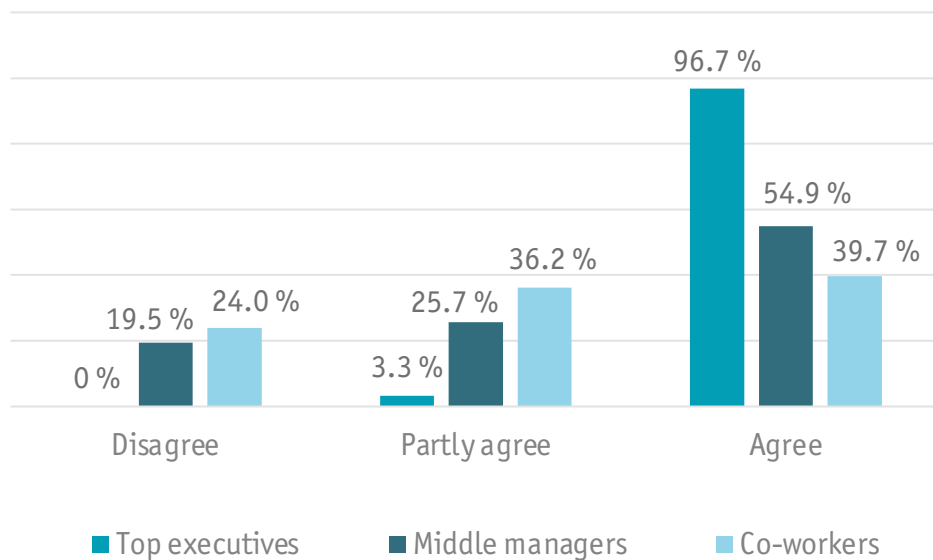
“The work of the communication department makes it easier for me to fulfill my tasks.”

50 % Top executives
36 % Middle managers
30 % Co-workers



APPRECIATION OF COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENTS

“The **standing** of the communication department in our company is high compared to other departments.”



- A **high level of competence** is attributed to the communication department by 57 % of top executives, 54 % of middle managers and 52 % of co-workers
- 53 % of top executives, 59 % of middle managers and 40 % of co-workers believe that the allocated **personnel and financial resources are justified**
- The majority of all respondents would like to see a **better clarification of the department's tasks and value contribution**

➤ **NEED FOR POSITIONING**

FACTORS INFLUENCING INTERNAL PERCEPTION

Proximity to the communication department

The **more often** respondents are **in contact** with the communication department, the higher is their ...

- **knowledge** of the department's responsibilities, tasks* and objectives*
- assessment of the **standing, influence** and **competence** of the communication department

Perceived relevance of communications in general

The **more important communications** is seen as a **success factor for companies**, the ...

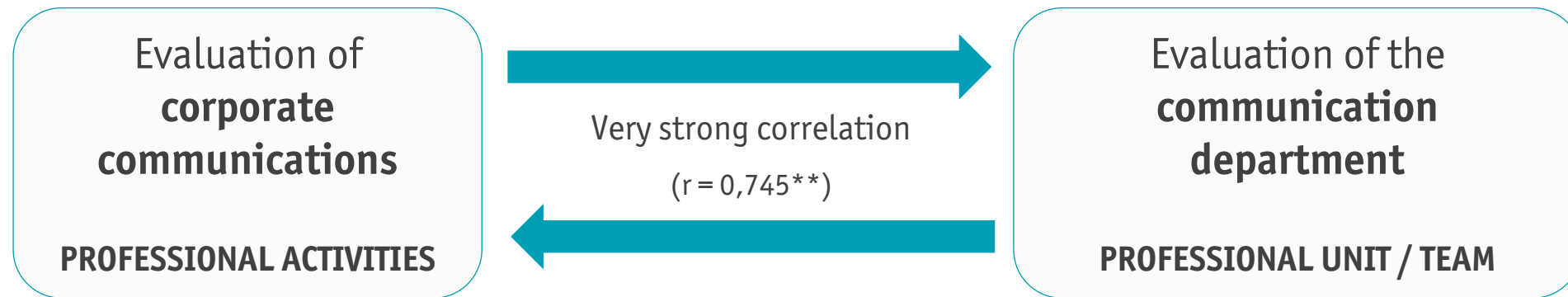
- greater is the desire for the communication department to **clarify** what it does
- more likely is that the **resources** allocated for the communication department are viewed as **justified**

Assessment of the work of the communication department

The **better** respondents rate their organization's **corporate communications**, the ...

- higher is the **competence attributed** to the communication department
- more likely is that the **resources** allocated for the communication department are viewed as **justified**

STARTING POINTS FOR SHAPING PERCEPTIONS: PERFORMANCE & TEAM PROPERTIES



- Respondents that rate **corporate communications activities of their organization** positively conclude that their communication department is competent and worth the money.
- Respondents who consider their **communication department** to be competent and/or believe that it is worth the money conclude that it is doing a good job, i.e. that corporate communications of their company performs well.



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03 INTERNAL POSITIONING PRACTICES & STRATEGIES

QUALITATIVE STUDY

- **32 expert interviews** supported through a conversation guideline based on previous research
- **Population:** Communication leaders (CCOs and deputies) in German companies with more than 1,000 employees
- **Focus on listed companies** (DAX40, MDAX50) and **private businesses** (90 family-owned companies with the highest annual turnover); random sample
- **Field phase:** December–January 2023/2024
- **Interview duration:** Ø 38 minutes

Companies in the sample



DAX companies

n = 11 (34.4 %)



MDAX companies

n = 7 (21.9 %)



Family-owned companies

n = 14 (43.7 %)

Ø Size of the communication department: 86 FTEs

Ø Professional experience in communications: 22 years

Ø Leadership experience of the interviewees: 18 years

NEED FOR INTERNAL POSITIONING

“I think **everyone has a certain idea of communication.** **But it’s probably not consistent** throughout the company. And of course that’s a problem to some extent.”

*Senior Vice President Communications,
Engineering and Manufacturing*

“The need for positioning always arises **when economic times are bad.**”

*Group Vice President Corporate
Communication and Public
Affairs, Retail and Wholesale*

“Then my own management comes along and says: **‘Well, it’s not entirely clear what the communication department actually does’** [...] and then I thought: Friends, now would be exactly the right time to kick me out!”

*Corporate Vice President Communications,
Healthcare Equipment and Services*

RELEVANCE AND MOTIVES

Management level

- Communication leaders see a greater need to position their teams towards **top management** than towards **middle management**
- **Reasons:**
 - Improving cooperation
 - Ensuring resources and success
 - Strengthening trust in the communication department

“If you’re not sitting at the table, you are on the menu.”

Senior Vice President Communication and Public Affairs, Engineering and Manufacturing

Employee level

- Employees are **not seen as the most important target group** for internal positioning
- Nevertheless, positioning towards all co-workers is considered **appropriate in some cases**
- **Reasons:**
 - Clarification of the department’s task portfolio
 - Enhancing communication skills of employees
 - Missing knowledge due to employee turnover

“If people are trying to get more information internally – but don't know who to turn to – then there is a need for action.”

Vice President Global Group Brand Management, Healthcare Equipment and Services

CONTEXT OF INTERNAL POSITIONING

Most important situations
in which internal positioning is required

Management level

- Crises and restructuring
- Resource and budget negotiations
- Reports to the Executive Board
- CEO transition

Employee level

- Media training
- Clarification of guidelines for communications
- Individual situations triggered by content-related issues

Most important internal stakeholders
for the communication department

Management Board

CEO

Human Resources

Marketing

Investor Relations

STRATEGIES USED FOR INTERNAL POSITIONING



Improve the perceptions of the department's performance

- Expectation management
- Impression management
- Internal word of mouth



Optimize the capabilities of the department

- Communication alignment & Value orientation
- Competence management



Enhance the network of the department

- Relationship management (personal ties to decision-makers)
- Internal ambassadors (in other departments)
- Leveraging power sources (mandates/governance, information & expert knowledge)

“It is important that we as a department offer added value so that employees see us as forerunners and ask for ideas.”

Vice President Global Corporate Communications and Government Relations, Packaged Goods



HOW INTERNAL POSITIONING IS REFLECTED

Statements in the interviews:

- Ongoing or ad-hoc discussion
- Often in regular meetings, less often in specific workshops
- Together with the entire department or only in the leadership team

But:

- **A quarter** of the communication leaders interviewed had no basic understanding or experience of internal positioning
- **Half of them** only reflect on experiences in previous positions or other companies
- **Only a quarter** of the interviewees described concrete learning experiences with internal positioning in their own company



DISCREPANCY

“I had never thought about that before this conversation.”

*Senior Vice President Communication,
Government Affairs and CSR, Utilities*



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04 IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS

HOW OTHERS PERCEIVE COMMUNICATORS – AND WHAT TO DO

Top executives	Middle managers	Co-workers
<p>Positive assessment of corporate communications and the communication department, but low appreciation of its competences & resource requirements</p>	<p>Consistently less knowledge and more critical perceptions of the communication department and lower satisfaction with corporate communications</p>	<p>Little knowledge and least appreciation of the communication department and corporate communications</p>
<p>Need to clarify the portfolio of activities and products, the competences and the value contribution of communication leaders and their teams.</p>	<p>Much untapped potential for improving perceptions and the internal standing of communication leaders and teams. Middle managers influence decisions by board members and the overall reputation of organizational units; future top executives are mainly recruited from this group.</p>	<p>The positioning of communication units towards all employees, although not a priority to date, should be reconsidered in light of the change to ‘communicative organizations’ – employees often act as ambassadors and should know what professional communicators do.</p>

→ Profiling communication leaders and their teams requires a **holistic explanation of the work and business models of communication departments** and a proof of the **performance of corporate communications.** (Zerfass & Link, 2024)

FOUR STEPS TO ENHANCE INTERNAL POSITIONING

1. Analysis

Current position vs. target position

How is our department perceived internally?
How do we want to be perceived?

Internal competition

How do other departments in the company position themselves? How do they do it?

2. Planning

Developing or adapting the departments' mission

What are our goals, mandates, tasks, activities/products and value propositions? (Communication Business Model)

Defining positioning strategies

Which strategies will help to achieve the target position?

Improve the perceptions of the department's performance

Expectation management
Impression management
Internal word of mouth

Optimize the capabilities of the department

Communication alignment & Value orientation
Competence management

Enhance the network of the department

Relationship management
Internal ambassadors
Leveraging power sources

3. Implementation

4. Evaluation & Reflection



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05 REFERENCES / ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Leipzig University, founded in 1409, is today globally renowned for strategic communication research and education. More than 100 book publications by the professors specialized in the field at the Institute of Communication and Media Studies, as well as hundreds of peer-reviewed journal articles and studies in several languages have been published by the small team since the 1990s. The Master Communication Management program is constantly ranked #1 in the largest European country. Graduates have repeatedly received awards for the best master and doctoral theses nationally, in Europe and globally. Many alumni hold leadership positions in the profession. More information: www.communicationmanagement.de