

PERCEPTIONS AND POSITIONING OF COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENTS



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As digitalization and geopolitical conflicts amplify the importance of internal and external communications, the appreciation and resources available to communication teams remain stagnant – or worse, are declining. But why? Do top executives and other departments grasp the full range of contributions communication teams provide? How do they perceive the communication department? And how do communication leaders position their departments within the organization?

To explore these questions, a research project by Leipzig University adopted a two-step approach. First, 1,147 top executives, middle managers, and non-managerial employees from large German companies were surveyed about their perceptions of the goals, tasks, and relevance of their communication departments. Second, 32 Chief Communication Officers or their deputies were interviewed about their strategies for positioning communication within their companies. The study reveals an urgent need to sharpen the profile of corporate communications and outlines four steps to strengthen their internal positioning.

HOW OTHERS ASSESS CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Only top managers rate the standing and performance of their communication departments highly

- ▶ 87% of **top managers** are satisfied with the corporate communication activities of their organization, and 97% affirm a high standing of the communication department.
- ▶ However, approval ratings drop among **middle managers and employees**, with only 60% and 51% expressing satisfaction with the communication work.

- ▶ A similar trend is observed when comparing against **competitors**: only in top management do three out of four respondents believe their corporate communication surpasses that of the competition. At other hierarchical levels, fewer than half share this belief.

The standing and performance of corporate communications as judged by colleagues in the organization

I'm satisfied with our corporate communications.



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



Our corporate communications are better than those of our competitors.



■ Top executives ■ Middle managers ■ Co-workers

Figures show approval rates on a 5-point scale (Agree/Fully agree), Survey among 1,147 managers and employees in large German companies.

Many are not familiar with the tasks and objectives of their communication department

- ▶ Communicators are mainly recognized for their **operational duties**, such as creating content, running campaigns, organizing events, monitoring public opinion, and overseeing language rules or design guidelines.
- ▶ Among the **strategically relevant tasks**, reputation and brand management are mentioned most frequently. However, only 60% of top managers see this as the responsibility of the communication department.
- ▶ 80% of the top executives are aware of the **objectives of the communication department**, compared to only 58% of middle managers and 40% of employees. Bridging this knowledge gap can lead to greater acceptance within the company.

Communicators do not sufficiently support managers and employees in achieving their goals

- ▶ The findings on the **relevance of professional communication work** are concerning: Only one in two top managers (50%) and around one in three middle managers (36%) and employees (30%) state that the communication department supports them in fulfilling their tasks.
- ▶ Respondents are also critical of the **human and financial resources** allocated to communications. Only 53% of top managers, 59% of middle managers, and 40% of employees believe these resources are justified.
- ▶ This **lack of perceived support** helps to explain why communication departments often struggle to secure necessary resources despite the growing importance of corporate communications in times of crisis.

Only one in two regard the communication department as competent

- ▶ Only one in two respondents (57% of top managers, 54% of middle managers, and 52% of employees) consider the communication department to be

competent. This might explain why communicators are often not consulted on critical business issues.

- ▶ Only half of the top managers **seek advice** from the communication department on strategic decisions. Two-thirds acknowledge that communicators support or coach them in their communication efforts.
- ▶ This discrepancy raises questions about whether communication professionals are genuinely seen as consultants and coaches.

Increased interaction with the communication department leads to better ratings

- ▶ The study reveals that **frequent interaction** with the communication department improves colleagues' understanding of their responsibilities, roles, and goals. This familiarity leads to higher ratings of the department's influence and capabilities. Conversely, a lack of awareness about the communication department's work negatively impacts its standing within the company.
- ▶ Another statistically significant correlation found is that when employees view communication as a **critical business success factor**, they also believe that the resources allocated to the communication department are justified. Thus, a better understanding of corporate communications and its value can enhance the acceptance of the communication teams.

Communication work requires higher visibility and internal advocacy

- ▶ Communication managers should strategically promote their work and successes within the company to **legitimize their role** – for instance, by explaining their profile holistically when working on projects with other departments, in management training, and during onboarding processes. Only those who are in demand and accepted can contribute their expertise to corporate success.

STRATEGIES FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS TO STRENGTHEN THEIR PROFILE

The survey highlighted an urgent need to enhance the standing of communication departments within organizations. But how can this be achieved? To explore this, 32 senior communication leaders (Chief Communication Officers or their deputies) from listed and private companies in Germany were interviewed in person.

The goal was to understand how they position their teams to gain greater acceptance and influence within their organizations. The graphic below summarizes key perceptions of communication departments and suggests actionable steps for improvement.




»Communicators need a compelling mission and a consistent narrative for their work. There is still significant potential, particularly in the relationships with middle management, who will be the top decision-makers of tomorrow.«

Professor Ansgar Zerfass, Leipzig University

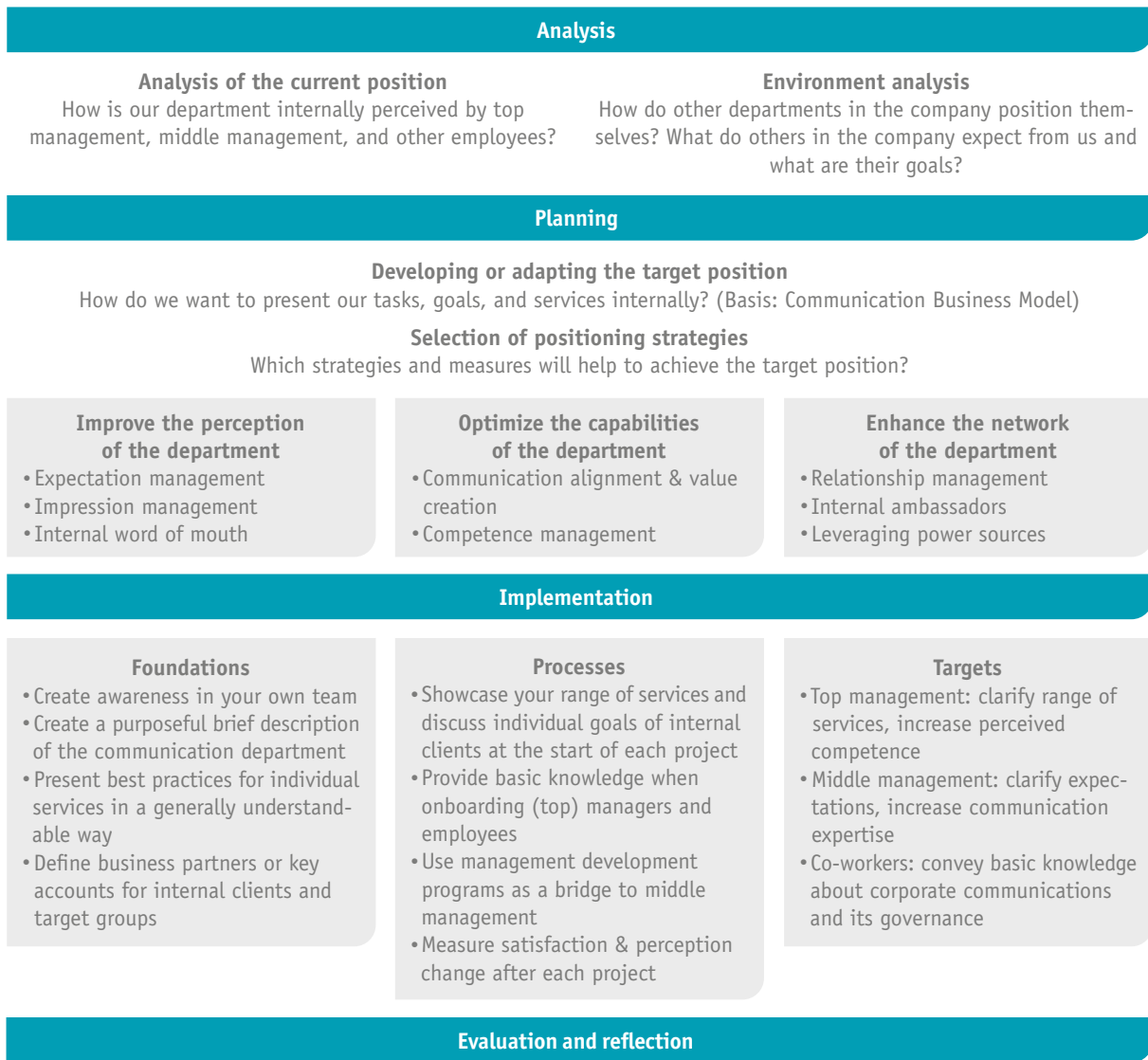
How other perceive communication departments and what to do

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; available at <https://bit.ly/Postprint-CBM>)

Based on the research findings, the study concluded different implications for communication leaders. A four-step model was developed to enhance the internal positioning of communication departments.

Four-step model to enhance internal positioning



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ABOUT THE STUDY

The study was conducted from fall 2023 until spring 2024 by researchers and graduate students at the Chair of Strategic Communication at Leipzig University. It's the most extensive study on the perceptions and positioning of communication departments so far. The project was headed by Professor Ansgar Zeffass and Jana Brockhaus 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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