High-Performing Corporate Communications Teams: Views of Top CCOs

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Abstract

A study of the views of the chief communications officers (CCOs) at large organizations revealed views about "high performance" of the communication function is considered more in terms of the entire organization than evaluation only of the communications or public relations function. Depth interviews followed by a survey showed that top CCOs see high performance most important in IT and finance, but that high performance in communications is more vital to organizational success than it is in marketing, legal and the human resources function. Key drivers and impediments to high-performance of corporate communications were identified. The study matters to the profession by going beyond other research on communications and public relations evaluation that is focused more within the function than in the broader organizational context. It also extends recent research on public relations and leadership. Finally, the study shows a distinction in viewpoint between top communications executives and other professionals, and indicates a mindset necessary to be successful as a function as well as to gain respect across the enterprise.

Introduction

In most mid-sized and large companies, communications is an established management function that works with and alongside the functions of finance, marketing, human resources and others. Corporate communications professionals strive to build and protect corporate reputation by informing and engaging internal and external stakeholders.

The enterprise role of corporate communications varies from company to company and continues to evolve. Top teams today see it as much more than providing communications services (writing, presentations, graphic design, etc.) to the business – some define their role as enabling and growing the business. This is known in academic literature as the difference between the manager or technician role of public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Dozier, 1992; Dozier & Broom, 1995).

While it can be a challenge for some public relations or communications professionals to "get a seat at the management table," some CEOs welcome that, including their communications professionals in enterprise leadership teams and involving them in key aspects of corporate strategy development and implementation.

At the same time, CEOs, under performance pressure from boards and shareholders, want all corporate functions to contribute more tangible value to business results. These dynamics have made higher performance, at both the enterprise and functional levels—and the manager and technician roles--more important in recent years.

Previous research on leadership in public relations has called for additional research in this area. Berger and Meng (2014) note that leadership in the public relations field is "largely under-examined, under-developed, and under-measured" (p. xxiii). They also connect leadership to performance and conclude that there is "a great deal of room to improve the performance of public relations leaders" (p. 11). In a similar vein, Zerfass and Viertman (2017) call for future research to explain the links between communication and corporate goals.

This study responds to those calls to look specifically at the concept of performance. Specifically, the study examines what exactly "high performance" means in the context of the corporate communications team. It explores where performance in communications is more or less important than in other organizational functions, what factors influence performance, and of them, which have the most influence on driving higher performance and what if any factors have a negative impact on performance.

This research explores those questions. Findings from depth interviews and a survey of Chief Communications Officers (CCOs) will help other public relations professionals manage and lead their teams more effectively to increase the value they bring to the business.

Literature Review

Role Enactment

Since this study considers the perspectives of Chief Communication Officers (CCOs), or communication professionals at a management level, it is important to consider the literature in the area of role enactment. Role enactment refers to the way a PR practitioner actually performs his or her job.

The public relations literature consistently describes two primary public relations roles: manager and technician (J. E. Grunig & Grunig, 1992). The roles were determined by surveys of practitioners and subsequent factor analysis to arrive at these definitions: a manager primarily makes decisions and works with the management of an organization; a technician primarily writes and produces communication tactics (Dozier, 1992). Practitioners often perform tasks associated with both roles, but perceive their role as *predominantly* one or the other. In other words, manager and technician roles are different but not mutually exclusive (Dozier & Broom, 1995). The enacted role may not necessarily be consistent with the practitioner's perceived role, given other organizational factors (Moss & Green, 2001; Toth, 1998). Role enactment can also be understood through enactment theory, which posits that people enact the scenes they know and expect to be rewarding (Heath, 1994).

There are also several studies that look specifically at the roles within a manager role for top communication professionals and how these specific roles relate to team and organizational performance. A survey of senior communication professionals in the UK (Moss, 2005) determined five categories of roles: monitor and evaluate; issues management; policy and strategy advisor; problem solver; communication technician (tactical production). The study showed that there is a connection between reporting lines (structure and power), team collaboration, communication effectiveness and organizational success. More recently, a study

by the Arthur Page Society found that CCOs are investing more in content-based engagement opportunities. Engagement with C-suite colleagues is up 37% and mostly with the Corporate Information Officer (CIO). This emphasis on engagement has led to new job roles for the CCO and her/his team, including content and engagement designer, influencer engagement leader, digital strategist, behavioral scientist and culture czar (Arthur W. Page Society, 2016). The study concluded with outlining three over-arching roles for CCOs: foundational, integrator, and builder of digital engagement systems.

Other surveys of CCOs have considered more specifically the tasks of CCOs. A 2016 survey by PR firm Weber Shandwick of 153 CCOs worldwide found that their most common responsibilities are media relations, crisis communication, reputation management, employee communications and social media/digital communications. The same study revealed that CCOs collaborate regularly with other corporate departments, including marketing, legal, human resources, government relations and public affairs. These top CCOs expected increasing focus in the years ahead on digital communications and reputation management (Weber Shandwick, 2016).

Similarly, the University of Southern California's Communication and Public Relations Generally Accepted Practices (GAP VIII) study noted that public relations and communications as a function is increasingly seen as a contributor to organizational success (University of Southern California: Strategic Communication and Public Relations Center, 2014).

Leadership

Building on the roles research and the impact of the CCO function on the organization, more recent research considers leadership and public relations. Berger and Meng (2014) identify goal achievement as one of four key elements of leadership, thus tying it to performance. Further, in their definition of excellent leadership they consider individual, team, organization and societal factors:

> Excellent leadership in public relations is a dynamic process that encompasses a complex mix of individual skills and personal attributes, values, and behaviors that consistently produces ethical and effective communication practice. Such practice fuels and guides successful communication teams, helps organizations achieve their goals, and legitimizes organizations in society (p. 30).

Individual characteristics contribute to public relations professionals exhibiting leadership. Ragas, Uysal and Culp (2015) identified business acumen as something valued by senior communication executives when considering hiring team members. Men (2015) focused on CEOs as opposed to CCOs but concluded in her study of the CEO role in internal communications that "strategic leadership and management behavior should be considered characteristic of excellent public relations" (p. 469). There are also individual deficiencies that are detrimental to leadership. Berger and Meng (2014) reviewed previous research and noted that "leaders who lack professional expertise and organizational knowledge, and/or who are inexperienced in organizational politics and power relations will be less effective" (p. 27).

Leadership has also been considered not only as an individual characteristic but from an organizational perspective, or how the public relations or communications function achieves a

leadership function across the entire organization. For example, Zerfass, Schwalback, Beltele and Sherazda (2014) have found that the expectations for communications vary between CEOs and CCOs, with agreement that informing and motivating employees is the most important objective but disagreeing on transparency and other issues related to the communication function. In a global study, public relations leaders identified as the top issues in the field: the speed and volume of information, digital and social media, measurement of communications to demonstrate value, being prepared to deal with a crisis, the demand for transparency, employee engagement, finding and retaining communication talent, meeting communication needs in a diverse culture and among global markets, corporate social responsibility (CSR) demands, and the image of public relations and communication management (Zerfass, Linke & Röttger, 2014).

Leadership within organizations has also been framed in terms of influence and power. Reber and Berger (2006) defined influence in terms of shaping decisions, having access, and being heard. They noted public relations professionals are most influential when dealing with a crisis or preparing messages and communication plans, but least influential in strategic decision making, in interactions with senior executives, or when perceived as technicians. In a similar way, Bowen (2009) found that routes to the dominant coalition in an organization include handling a crisis, dealing with an ethical dilemma, credibility over time, handling media issues, and demonstrating leadership. Neill (2015) found that the corporate communications function is most likely to be included in decision making when issues are perceived as in their domain, the function has the support of the CEO, the industry is in crisis, or the company uses integrated decision teams. Neill and Jiang (2017) subsequently found that functional silos are a problem that can be resolved somewhat with dual oversight of internal and external communications by public relations and marketing, but this arrangement can weaken the influence of public relations over internal communications. For these and other reasons, leadership in organizations has been said to require the skill of persuasion (Conger, 1998).

Performance

For several decades, conceptions of performance in public relations in particular have been associated with the term "excellence" from the studies (Dozier, L.A. Grunig, & Grunig, 1995) that determined companies practiced 'excellent' communication if among other things: senior management was committed to communications excellence, CCOs reported directly to the CEO, PR and communication was more preventive than reactive, and the company was committed to research as well as ongoing training and development.

The Society for Human Resource Management (2015) has defined a high-performance work team as "a group of goal-focused individuals with specialized expertise who collaborate to relentlessly pursue performance excellence through shared goals, shared leadership, collaboration, open communication, clear role expectations, accountability and trust among its members." There are a variety of characteristics of high-performance teams. Thiel (2009) noted six characteristics of high-performance teams: common purpose, clear roles, accepted leadership, effective processes, solid relationships, excellent communication. Wolski (2016) describes high-performance teams as those that function at a high level for an extended time, are efficient and effective and have qualities of diversity, clear goals, effective communication, trust and ownership. Communicating well and aligning the team's talent in the context of business relationships are also seen as elements of high-performance teams (Cancialosi, 2015).

A number of other studies describe variables that affect the performance of teams. These include cohesiveness, or the degree to which teams stay together in pursuit of a common goal (Molnau, 2016), a shared understanding of terminology (Brewer, 2016), and willingness and eagerness to share knowledge (DeVries, van den Hoof, & deRidder, 2006). It is also notable that leaders and their followers have different perspectives of the job performance of leaders, with leaders evaluating themselves higher than those who report to them (Plank Center, 2016).

The type of team also is a factor in how it performs. A study of newly formed Navy teams showed that co-located (familiar) teams displayed higher performance levels, faster reaction times, more accuracy and greater mission success than distributed or unfamiliar teams (Especik, Johnsen, & Eid, 2011). Face-to-face team performance is improved by both task and process conflict, whereas it diminishes in computer-mediated-communication (CMC) teams. Videoconference teams were shown to be the highest performing and CMC teams the lowest of all types (Martinex-Moreno, Gonzalez-Navarro, Zornoza, & Ripoll, 2009).

There are few studies that have looked at how corporate communication teams in particular contribute to organizational performance (Schultz & Grindem, 2002). Liang, et. al. (2010) found that more communication in general between top management teams improves overall organizational performance, whereas decentralized communication has a negative impact on performance. Sometimes top executives, including those in public relations, are evaluated based on how their performance is consistent with organizational values (Powell & Pieczka, 2015).Within teams, meanwhile, task orientation, feedback and upward communication have positive effects on perceived organizational performance in mission-oriented organizations but potentially negative effects on performance in rules-oriented cultures (Garnett, Marlowe, & Pandey, 2008). A South African study found that corporate communications professionals see variables affecting organizational performance at the individual, organizational, professional, industry and country levels (Le Roux, 2014).

Traditionally, performance in organizations has been measured by key performance indicators, or KPIs. The performance of teams in particular has been operationalized by a solution quality average, a measure of the quality and quantity of task performance (Guzzo & Dickson, 1996). In this case, for products, quality was measured in terms of innovation level, viability in the market, and competiveness in the market rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale from "not at all" to "a lot." More recently, in the Arthur W. Page Society (2016) study, 93 percent of CCOs responding said KPIs specific to communication today are different than 3-5 years ago and include employee engagement, customer loyalty, propensity to recommend to others, social influence and likelihood to act based on past behavior.

Evaluation

Another term for performance and its measurement is the term evaluation, which is considered part of a prescribed PR practice process called RACE: research, action plan, communication, evaluation. Scholars have expressed concern that practitioners are not practicing PR skills, particularly research and evaluation, in the ways prescribed by educators (Gregory & Watson, 2008).

However, other studies show that practitioners rank strategy, research, and evaluation highly among priorities for public relations skill sets (Watson, 2008). In a benchmark study on PR professionals' use of research and evaluation, 75% of respondents said research is important but 95% also said research is talked about more than it is actually done (Lindenmann, 1990).

Another study revealed that practitioners who indicated research and evaluation is very important were more likely to actually use research and evaluation than those who said research and evaluation is of low importance. Research and evaluation was actually used by 74% of practitioners who considered it of high importance, compared to 48% of those who said it was of low importance (Judd, 1990). The same study also revealed a variety of research methods used by practitioners, with surveys, focus groups, and news clipping analysis being the most common. A landmark summit in Barcelona in 2010 established principles to improve the quality of PR evaluation, and the principles were updated in 2015 (Institute for Public Relations, 2015). One survey of practitioners showed that the RACE process steps were used "a great deal" in a typical day for 50% of respondents, with another 32% saying they used the steps in the process "some" (Sha, 2011).

Meng (2012) focused on internal communication and found that traditional evaluation methods such as feedback surveys, focus groups and qualitative analysis have been widely used. Laskin (2012), arguing that the profession should move beyond outdated models of practice and measuring excellence, proposed that corporate communication and public relations programs could be measured on five scales: info from – info to the organization; benefit to organization – benefit to publics; tactical – managerial orientation; reactive – proactive; short-term – long-term focus.

Michaelson, Wright and Stacks (2012) asserted there is a gap in defining what determines excellence of actual outputs of public relations and communication professionals. Their proposed model is focused on campaigns (as opposed to total organizational performance) and includes three levels in what they call the "Excellence Pyramid": a basic level that includes setting objectives, research and planning, outputs, outtakes and outcomes, and results; an intermediate level that includes deep connections to target publics, leadership support and engagement, and creativity and innovation that provides a unique approach; and an advanced level in which a campaign sets the agenda for the target audience on key messages.

This paper enhances the previous research by looking beyond campaign success or outputs and focusing more broadly on communication performance in the context of the total organization. Defining performance, comparing performance in communication and other functions, and identifying both drivers and impediments to performance are the subjects of the research questions.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical frame for this study comes from an old and a recent theory. The strategic contingencies theory of organizational power (Hickson, Hinings, Lee, Schneck, & Pennings, 1971) posits that organizations are systems of inter-dependent subunits, that power is distributed according to a division of labor. As such, the power of a subunit relates to coping with uncertainty, substitutability, centrality, and the strategic control of other dependent activities. Thus, the corporate communications unit would both maintain power and demonstrate value through high-performance measures of its distinctive functional contributions to the organization.

More recently, Zerfass and Viertman (2017) proposed a theory-based framework for demonstrating the business value of corporate communication and developed a "communication value circle" that includes four value dimensions of communication in organizations: enabling operations, building intangibles, adjusting strategy, and ensuring flexibility. These four are said

to anchor all other explanations of the value of communications. This study contributes to the communication value circle by finding whether these dimensions are consonant with what professionals say are aspects facilitating or impeding high performance of corporate communication teams.

Research Questions

The literature review summarized above shows prior research into organizational and team performance, as well as corporate communications contribution to organizational performance. Few, if any, studies however have considered what constitutes a high-performing corporate communications team from the perspective of CCOs. As such, this study investigates the following research questions.

RQ 1: What do CCOs consider "high-performance" to be in the context of the corporate communications team?
RQ 2: What factors influence performance of corporate communications teams?
RQ 3: Which of the factors identified in RQ 2 have the most influence on driving performance higher?
RQ 4: What are the impediments to high performance on corporate communication teams?

Method

The study employed a mixed- method approach involving, first, a series of depth interviews with a small group of CCOs followed by an online survey with a larger sample of CCOs.

There were 15 CCO interviews conducted over the phone using a semi-structured interview approach (Flick, 2002; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) in which eight common questions were asked, with follow-up prompts as necessary. Because of the time constraints of these high-level executives, interviews were kept to 30 minutes. Member checks were done by interviewers summarizing responses with each participant at the end of the interview. All interviewees had primary responsibility for all or most of the external and internal communications, including crisis management, executive communication, corporate reputation and brand, community relations and social responsibility, and social and digital platforms. Some had additional responsibility for marketing communication, public affairs or government relations, and corporate events. Most had a global role, with some having a national role within a global company. They led teams ranging in size from 6 to more than 500, with the average corporate communication team having 95.7 members. They represented a wide range of industries and geographic locations. Five were in the top corporate communications role for the first time, while ten had been in such a role previously in another company. When asked to rate their own corporate communication teams in terms of high performance on a scale of 1-10, the average was 6.45 with a range of 5 to 8.5. Table 1 summarizes the profile of the interview respondents.

Interviews were transcribed and subsequently analyzed by both researchers independently, and then compared to identify and agree on common themes, or categories of responses, which were placed on a spread sheet to compare across responses. This is consistent with qualitative analysis and interpretation in which instances in the data "relate to each other in such a way that they seem to belong to a category" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 215) or open coding of qualitative data in which "expressions are classified by their units of meaning (single

words, short sequences of words) in order to attach annotations and above all 'concepts' (codes) to them" (Flick, 2002, p. 178).

The interview responses and themes were used to construct a survey. An online survey was distributed to 541 potential respondents who are members of national organizations of CCOs or professionals with similar titles and responsibilities, i.e. the top communications professional in their organization. After a protocol involving five appeals to take the survey, there were 74 responses, for a response rate of 13.7%. The responses were uploaded into SPSS software for summary of descriptive statistics and additional statistical tests of differences among respondents.

Results

Depth Interviews

On each of the questions the responses were categorized according to emergent themes. On the general subject of whether high performance matters in business today, there was unanimity in that it not only matters but is critical to business success and survival. Several respondents commented that performance is a business priority for them, tied to outcomes and can influence organizational goals. Others noted that high performance is more important in some industries than others, such as commodities. One respondent pointed out that the importance of high performance can vary by function in an organization, so it can be unrealistic and even wasteful to pursue high performance for every business function.

When asked why high performance is important, responses centered on the nature of the business environment as well as considerations of the characteristics of people or employees on teams. In particular, respondents said the necessity of high performance in business is driven by a business environment that is increasingly global, complex, changing, and fast-paced, all while many organizations are lean in terms of people and resources. Because of this, high performance requires people who are adaptive and can make quick, data-driven decisions based on an understanding of the business model and strategic plan.

There was a wide range of responses to the question of what factors define a high performing team. A qualitative assessment of responses shows comments center on five common concepts that characterize high-performing teams: adaptive, collaborative, expertise, analytical, and leadership.

High-performing teams are adaptable.

Responses indicating adaptability included that word but also "nimble" or "speedy." Respondents stressed that a high-performing team is "able to stay current in fast- changing world," can "keep up with pace in an instantaneous world," or can "move quickly in a dynamic market." As one participant explained:

Particularly given the scale and velocity of change that business is experiencing as a result of the digital era, I think that having teams and individuals that are adaptable and are capable of thinking critically in conditions with a lot of ambiguity are critical for businesses to be successful.

High-performing teams are collaborative.

The ability to be collaborative is another theme that emerged from respondents addressing factors that define a high- performing team. Other words used to indicate collaboration were "horizontal," "teamwork," "camaraderie," and "collegial." One respondent said members of high-performing teams "have each other's backs." Other comments were consonant with stakeholder theory, including that high-performing teams "harmonize actions and align perceptions across many stakeholders", "build belief among stakeholders" and are involved in "connecting, engaging and activating its multiple stakeholders." One respondent also noted that high-performing teams are characterized by members who are "available and flexible; you can't take the weekend off." Information sharing was also a component of collaboration, as one respondent stressed:

> The other thing is people freely share information. In some companies, people hoard information because they think information is power. You have to share, freely, promptly because information can be going on different channels by different people. We need to understand what's appropriate for what.

High-performing teams possess specific and appropriate forms and levels of expertise.

Responses that caused a theme of expertise to emerge included words such as "knowledgeable." While expertise implies accomplishment in core areas, such as writing, digital and social media, respondents also indicated the need for diversity of expertise on the team. One respondent said teams need "a broad range of skills" and the ability to "do six things well." Several commented that expertise should not be static nor limited to just the communications function. For example:

> We only exist to serve in Corporate Communications. We are here to serve everybody else so we need to be consultative in the sense of guiding, advising, and supporting the organization based on our expertise. Corporate communications people are in a variety of different venues and situations when they need to know when to have a point of view or not, when to counsel, when to be spokesperson, how to read the room and make decisions about that. Diversity of thought I think is more about expertise in critical thinking.

Another respondent labeled expertise as having "a first chair, second chair approach: have a depth of talent ready to step up." The current term "talent" came up often, including one respondent's insistence that high-performing teams have a "focus on talent development.' Additionally, part of expertise included statements related to "business acumen." For example, one respondent said high-performing teams need to "understand the business and how their work helps to drive business."

High-performing teams are analytical.

Respondents also equated high-performing teams with two fundamental parts of the public relations RACE (Research, Action plan, Communication, Evaluation) process advocated by many scholars and professionals (Penning, 2012)—strategy and measurement. Being "strategic" was a common articulated characteristic, with other related terms mentioned such as "analytical," "thoughtful," having a "forward-looking perspective," "provide insights that impact business," and the caution that there should be "no daylight between communications and business strategy." Using big data and driving toward a goal was a key to performance for one CCO:

> We have to have a target in sight – this is where discipline comes in and a high performing team is linked to metrics and measurement. How do we use data and insights to prove our impact more than any other time? How are we using technology and data available to us today to prove impact of communications but also the whole business?

Phrased a similar way, another respondent said teams need to "take disparate messages and develop a cohesive strategy tied to business goals." Measurement was also indicated by the more common current term "analytics." Elaborating on the term, respondents spoke to the need to quantify outcomes, or as one said, to be "less instinctive, more measureable." One respondent indicated knowledge of neuroscience is desirable. Another advocated teams having a "discipline around metrics/measurement to create insights that drive performance." The ability to "synthesize information faster" was another descriptor.

High-performing teams demonstrate leadership across the organization.

The notion that high performing communications are not only well led but offer leadership to other functions was a common statement among CCOs. For example, one CCO said:

> From my standpoint it's simple. We need to be a team of people constantly evolving their skills and looking at ways to enable the business. Communications is our expertise but we exist to enable business outcomes. We need to move from assembly line model to a trading floor model and what that requires is …. people that can flow to the work that matters most not based on organization chart but on their interest, initiative, and leadership capabilities.

Leadership as a theme about characteristics of high-performing teams also emerged from a variety of terms. "Consultative" is one word used, and the description of teams being a "strategic counselor to the business" and being "centered on a shared, understood vision" also spoke to leadership. But leadership is not just within the team, but across the enterprise and with multiple other organizational functions. "Work horizontally across the organization" and "harmonize actions and align perceptions" as well as "connecting, engaging and activating multiple stakeholders" were statements that stressed leadership as characteristics of high-performing teams.

Specific factors affect high-performing teams.

While these five themes emerged when respondents were asked generally about defining high-performing corporate communications teams, similar categories emerged, albeit with additional explanations, when they were asked more specifically about factors that affect high-performance in corporate communications teams.

For example, in the area of expertise, additional specific skills were mentioned, including storytelling ("not mere broadcasting"), writing across various mediums, critical thinking and sensitivity to diversity and inclusion. Adaptability included a "comfort with change and ambiguity." Analytical included having predictive capability. Being collaborative meant being able to "influence beyond positional authority." Leadership included again having business acumen but also being decisive, having empathy, and gaining support from up the chain of command.

Some additional themes beyond the five categories above also emerged when respondents discussed factors that affect high-performing corporate communications teams.

These included organizational culture and structure, process and project management ability, clear accountability and responsibility among team members, shared vision and values, and an ability to engage stakeholders.

There was observed agreement when respondents were asked which of these factors were the most important for high-performing corporate communications teams. They included: a clear strategy, mission, vision and direction for the function; effective leadership in the function; having the right talent and tools (skills and expertise) in the function; business acumen; interpersonal skills (including adaptability); collaboration, including shared commitment and accountability.

High performance is impeded by team, organization, and external factors.

A final interview question was intended to assess perceived impediments to a corporate communication team achieving high performance. Here the responses indicated that hindrances to performance come from individuals within the team, team leadership, organizational culture and structure, and forces external to the function and to the enterprise.

One key theme that emerged is that lack of clarity and alignment in the enterprise is a significant impediment. This includes lack of clarity about roles, objectives, responsibility and accountability. One CCO said this is the biggest impediment to performance in large organizations:

> Clarity and accountability (are the biggest impediments to performance)—internal static of who owns what and who drives what. Generally internal turbulence slows messaging down more than anything else. If its hard to marketing and sales and CCOs to see what to do, it's really hard for the team. People at the top really have to have vision and authority to act and pass the vision on down the line without distortion—that's as big a problem now as it's ever been.

Respondents said working at cross purposes with management or lack of focus on what matters are key determinants of low performance. Another individual factor is lack of business and communication competence.

Poor leadership of the communications function itself was seen as another impediment. Some of this overlaps with impediments above, meaning that leaders are responsible for providing role clarity and objectives that align with the business to members of their team. One respondent noted "CCOs fail because they are bad leaders, not bad communicators."

A poor culture, both within the team and the organization at large, was a common perceived impediment to performance among respondents. For example, cultures with internal turbulence or destructive conflict, also referred to generally as "negative" culture or "wrong chemistry" and "lack of camaraderie," hold back performance. Also, a culture that is "risk averse, unwilling to innovate, uncomfortable with failure" will lead to lower performance according to one respondent.

Organizational factors were also seen as impediments to a corporate communication team's performance. These included inflexible processes and systems, also called a "silo" phenomenon. Too much policy and process, also called complexity of bureaucracy, also was seen as inhibiting performance, as was "falling in love with the current state." Not having the top management understand and appreciate the communications function was also mentioned as an impediment, as was executives from other functions "thinking they are a communications genius" and not respecting or taking the advice of the communications team. A related

organizational impediment was the "union mentality" or a "focus on seniority over performance."

Finally, certain external forces were cited as impediments to performance. Specifically, an environment of constant change and the complexity and speed of information were seen as circumstances that made it hard for communication teams to consistently perform at a high level.

Surveys
Respondents

Respondents to the survey are elite among the general population of public relations or communications professionals in that they are senior-level and working for large organizations. Their level of experience is seen in the fact that 91% have the title of CCO or equivalent (eg. senior vice president, vice president, director) and 83% verified they are the top communications professional in their organization. A majority (54%) report directly to the CEO, 20% to the top communications or public affairs officer, and 17% to the chief marketing officer. Additionally, 85% of respondents have 15 or more years of experience in communications and/or public relations. There was a fairly even gender mix of respondents, with 42% females and 58% males.

Respondents also represent large organizations, as seen in that 70% have revenues greater than $1 billion, 78% are international or global, and 84% have communication staff of 10 or more people, with 36% having communication staffs of 50 or more people. As for type of organization, 48 (76%) are publicly listed companies, 11 (16%) are private companies, 7 (10%) are nonprofit organizations, and 1 (1.5%) is a government organization.

Performance in various functions

While the qualitative interviews answered RQs 1 and 2, the survey portion of this study sought to understand the value of performance by function, and then to determine the drivers and impediments to performance in the communications function specifically (RQs 3 and 4).

First, when asked to rate how important the performance of each function is to the company's overall success, respondents collectively placed communication third, after finance and IT functions. With 1 = "not important" and 7 = "vitally important," the mean for communications was 5.85, with finance 6.51 and IT 6.0. Other functions were marketing (5.66), legal (5.61) and human resources (5.46). (Mean ratings per function are in Table 2).

On a related point, respondents were also asked to compare the performance of their own communication function with that of their peers at other businesses or organizations. With 1 being lowest and 7 highest, respondents gave their own communication function an average rating of 5.47, with the range being 3-7.

Factors driving performance in communications function

There were 20 factors of potential importance to achieving high performance in the communications function, derived from the interviews, that survey respondents were asked to evaluate. On the same scale of 1 = "not important" and 7 = "vitally important", 8 of these factors had a mean of greater than 6 and thus are seen collectively as the most important of the factors mentioned to drive performance in communications. The top factors in order of importance by mean score are: function's work is aligned with business goals (6.49); people in the function collaborate effectively with others (6.25); the communication function adapts quickly to change (6.15); demonstrate respect for others and a culture that allows people to do their best work tied at 6.14; people in communication understand the company's business (6.12); a clear role in the company and CEO support of the communications function tied at 6.08; and finally interpersonal skills was rated at 6.0. (All means for factors driving performance are in Table 3).

Impediments that have negative impact on performance in communications function

Respondents were also presented with 15 factors derived from interviews and asked how much each could negatively impact performance in the communications function. The scale was 1 = "minimum negative impact" to 7 = "maximum negative impact." The mean ratings for these negative factors ranged from 4.7 to 5.99. Seven factors had a mean above 5.5 and were therefore considered most likely to impede high performance on communication teams, according to respondents. Those factors, in highest order by mean score, include: A CEO who doesn't value her/his employees (5.99); lack of alignment around strategy (5.84); unhealthy work culture (5.83); inability of organization to adapt to change (5.65); lack of clear vision for the organization (5.64); difficulty hiring and retaining talent (5.54); and a silo approach to working in the organization (5.51). (All negative factors and mean ratings are in Table 4).

Variance among respondents

Because the respondents are a select group—i.e. top communication professionals in large organizations—there is little variance among them to test based on years of experience, size of organization and other variables that are not normally distributed. However, several mean differences in the categorical variables of organization type and gender were discovered in post-survey analysis.

A significant difference was found among companies and nonprofit organizations on the variable collaborate (people in the function collaborate effectively) as a driver of performance. Independent samples t-tests on public company with nonprofits, $t(51) = 4.119$, $P < .01$, and privately held companies and non-profits, $t(16) = 4.328$, $p < .01$, both showed a significant difference. The mean rating of collaboration as a factor of performance among nonprofit communication professionals was 5, whereas it was higher among both types of companies, with a mean of 6.55 for private companies and 6.33 for public companies. In other words, CCOs in companies see collaborating effectively as more important to performance than their counterparts in nonprofit organizations.

There were also significant gender differences in terms of how CCOs rated the importance of three variables: men are significantly more likely than their female counterparts to see having a clear vision $t(64) = -2.028$, $p < .05$, having tools needed to achieve goals $t(64) = -2.910$, $p < .01$, and having sufficient budget $t(65) = -2.192$, $p < .05$, as important for performance of the communication function.

Discussion

The qualitative (i.e. interviews) portion of this study identified that CCOs do believe that performance is an important aspect of business today, particularly because of the pace and scale of change in the business environment today. These depth interviews also brought out a variety of factors that drive performance, as well as some that inhibit it, for testing in the survey. The survey results show that top CCOs consider performance in terms of broader organizational factors that go beyond traditional evaluation of public relations campaigns or the communication function by itself.

Theoretically, the factors and impediments to high-performance of corporate communications identified in this study correlate to components of both the strategic contingency theory of organizational power (Hickson et al., 1971) and the communication value circle (Zerfass & Viertman, 2017). We can see how performance relates to power by relating

findings of this study to components of the strategic contingency theory. For example, the theory posits that power is a derived from an ability to "cope with uncertainty", and this study demonstrated that high performance is dependent on a clear role and vision for the communication function, support of the CEO, and a culture that allows best work. The theoretical construct "substitutability", meaning others in the organization can perform the communication function and thus reduce the subunit power, is related to the more recent term encroachment (Neill & Jiang, 2009). This is seen in the negative impacts on performance that were identified by CCOs in this study: micromanagement of senior leaders, bureaucracy, and lack of accountability. The theoretical construct of "centrality", or the degree a subunit is linked to other subunits, is reflected in performance factors identified in this study, specifically that communication work is aligned with organizational goals. A loss of power associated with less centrality is also evident in this study as CCOs identified a silo approach as a negative impact on performance, which corroborates the work on functional silos by Neill & Jiang (2009). Finally, the "strategic control of contingencies" (the activity of one unit being affected by the activities of another) as a component of subunit power is seen in the performance factors "our work is aligned with organizational goals" and "we know how to advise others."

Meanwhile, the four dimensions of the communication value circle are also associated with performance factors found in this study. "Enabling operations" is reflected in the fact that CCOs said high performance is dependent on their function being aligned with organizational goals, understanding the organization's business, and how to advise others. "Building intangibles" could be related to having interpersonal skills, leadership skills, and demonstrating respect for others. The communication value circle variable "adjusting strategy" may be seen in the performance factors staying focused on priorities, aligned with organizational goals, and whether the function knows how to advise others. Finally, "ensuring flexibility" as a communication value is parallel to communication performance factor of adapting quickly to change.

The theories mentioned above were derived from extensive literature reviews of previous work. This study confirms the existence of key variables in these theories, albeit worded differently by respondents. The current study also contributes the conclusion that performance is a component of leadership that is related to functional power and communication value in organizations.

There are also practical implications from the study. It may be expected that communications professionals see high performance in their own function as important to the organization's success. Perhaps due to familiarity, pride or some combination of the two, responding CCOs in this study rate their own communications function high compared to peer communications functions. But what is interesting in this study is the internal comparison--that performance in the communications function was viewed as less important to business success than performance in finance and IT. This perhaps shows a pragmatic view of CCOs that organizations exist and survive primarily on their ability to generate financial returns. It also indicates a reliance on technology in today's organizations. Meanwhile, CCOs see performance in their own function as more important to the overall business than that of the marketing, legal or human resources functions. This is interesting at a time when "convergence," the combination of marketing and communication functions (often with marketing subsuming communication), is topical.

The study also shows that in the views of top CCOs, high performance in the communications function requires communications professionals to think and work cross-functionally with overall organizational goals in mind. This is consistent with the emphasis on collaboration found in the GAP VII studies (University of Southern California: Strategic Communication and Public Relations Center, 2014). In other words, communication or function-specific factors are viewed as less important than organizational factors. The make-up of the team, budget, resources and other factors that would be more inwardly focused were less important than aligning with business goals, adapting to change, having the support of the CEO, having a clear role in the company, respect for others and a supportive work culture. This is consistent with manager-technician perspectives where the focus of management is more on strategy than tactics. This study's results provide perspective beyond the excellence theory and other studies that focused on qualities of good or bad PR from a functional or output perspective and instead looks at communication performance in a broader organizational context.

In a similar way, the results of this study with regard to negative impacts on performance show that CCOs look beyond tactics and abilities and outputs of communication when considering performance of the function. Inability to retain talent (i.e. communications department staffing) was the only top variable that was inwardly focused. More important negative factors for top CCOs include a CEO who doesn't value her/his employees, a lack of alignment in the organization around strategy, an unhealthy work culture in the organization, the inability of the organization (beyond the communications function) to adapt to change, a lack of clear vision for the organization, and a silo approach to working in the organization (i.e. not good cross-functional collaboration).

Statistically significant differences among the CCO respondents are also interesting. The fact that CCOs in companies (both private and public) see collaboration as more important to performance than nonprofit CCOs do could indicate a different operating culture that requires collaboration to be effective in a corporate setting. This may be worth further exploration.

Finally, the gender difference among respondents, in which men more than women see vision, tools and budget as important drivers of performance in communication, may merit further exploration. These particular variables speak to leadership style (clear vision) and more pragmatic concerns (tools and budget) and may also be worth exploring in future studies of gender and leadership (not just practice) of the communications function.

This study was limited by having a smaller sample which made advanced statistical analysis impossible. However, the sample is distinct and represents a smaller population in that respondents are top level communication managers at large organizations, and as such make a contribution to the literature of public relations and communication management.

This study has also revealed several potential areas for future study. By focusing on fewer variables—the top ones identified in this study—and a larger sample of all levels of communications professionals, researchers could study differences among top CCOs and mid-level to entry-level professionals in their views on performance, which would also provide insights on communications leadership, power and value. A larger sample could also make possible examining differences in views about performance of the communication function based on organization size (in terms of staff in communications function and annual revenues) as well as organization type, particularly the differences between corporate and nonprofit organizations.

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APPENDIX

Table 1
Background on interview subjects

#	Gender	Team Size	Industry	Public/Private	Scope
1	F	30	Healthcare	Public	National
2	F	6	Pharma	Public	National
3	F	20	Vehicle	Public	Global
4	F	300	Industrial	Public	Global
5	M	40	Appliances	Public	Global
6	F	18	Chemical	Public	Global
7	M	28	Furniture	Public	Global
8	F	130	Pro Services	Private	Global
9	F	100	Financial	Private	National
10	F	143	Airline	Public	National
11	F	12	Energy	Public	National
12	M	170	Energy	Public	Global
13	M	500	Industrial	Public	Global
14	M	51	Financial	Private	National
15	M	24	Travel	Public	Global

Table 2
Importance of performance by function

Function	N	M
Finance	74	6.51
Marketing	74	5.66
Human Resources	74	5.46
IT	73	6.00
Legal	74	5.61
Communications	74	5.85

1= "not important"….7 = "vitally important"

Table 3
Factors important to performance in communication

Variable	N	M
Our function has a clear role in the organization	74	6.08
Our function has a clear vision for our work	74	5.99
We have communication skills needed	74	5.96
We have interpersonal skills we need for our work	74	6.00
We have leadership skills needed for our work	74	5.96
We have the tools we need	73	5.25
Our function is diverse and inclusive	74	5.51
Our work is aligned with organization goals	73	6.49
People in our function understand organization's business	74	6.12
We know how to advise others	73	5.92
We collaborate effectively with others	72	6.25
CEO visibly supports our function	74	6.08
Our function has effective leaders	73	6.10
We have appropriate measures to assess our impact	74	5.12
We share accountability for achieving common goals	73	5.62
We have sufficient budget	74	5.18
We stay focused on priorities	73	5.60
We demonstrate respect for others	74	6.14
Our function has a culture that allows best work	73	6.14
Our function adapts quickly to change	74	6.15

1= "not important"....7 = "vitally important"

Table 4
Negative impacts to performance in communication

Variable	N	M
Lack of clear vision for organization	69	5.64
Lack of alignment around organization strategy	69	5.84
Lack of accountability in organization	69	5.23
Unhealthy work culture in organization	69	5.83
Silo approach to working together	69	5.51
Inadequate incentives to drive behaviors	69	4.77
Bureaucracy in organization	69	4.81
Insufficient budget	69	5.22
Emphasis on seniority over performance	69	4.70
CEO doesn't value his/her employees	68	5.99
Disruptive change impacting organization	69	4.77
Inability of organization to adapt new technologies	69	4.88
Difficulty hiring and retaining talent	69	5.54
Inability of organization to adapt to change	69	5.65
Senior leaders in organization micromanage	69	5.26

1= "minimum negative impact"....7 = "maximum negative impact"