

Succession Planning and the Chief Communications Officer

A point of view on continuity, trust and leadership transition

Should a new CEO automatically bring in a new Chief Communications Officer?

Succession planning is often described as a process of replacement. In reality, it is better understood as a test of institutional readiness: how well an organisation prepares for leadership change, preserves continuity, and aligns future leadership with future need. At its best, succession planning is not a last-minute decision about names on a list, but an ongoing exercise in judgment, governance, and resilience.

The Chief Communications Officer sits slightly outside that traditional succession narrative.

In most senior roles, a leadership transition naturally creates space for renewal. A new CEO may want to reshape the team, change priorities, and bring in people aligned to a new agenda. In many functions, that is entirely reasonable. But the CCO role is different. It is not only a leadership role; it is also a continuity role. The CCO holds institutional memory, stakeholder understanding, and narrative coherence at the moments when organisations are most exposed.

That matters particularly when a CEO transition happens under pressure. If a business is already dealing with instability, scrutiny, activism, poor performance, regulatory pressure, or reputational strain, changing both the CEO and the communications leader at the same time can deepen uncertainty rather than resolve it. At precisely the point when the organisation most needs consistency of message, trusted stakeholder relationships, and a steady reading of the external environment, it risks losing both.

For that reason, there is a strong argument that in stressed transitions the default should be continuity in the communications seat. The CCO can provide context, memory, and credibility while authority is being transferred. In many cases, that stability is more valuable than immediate change.

That does not mean the CCO should always remain in place. There are moments when simultaneous change is justified, particularly where the CEO transition is part of a broader reset. If strategy is being fundamentally reworked, if culture requires repair, or if the company is trying to

signal a genuine break with the past, then changing both roles may be the clearest expression of that intent. But that should be a conscious decision, not an automatic one.

What makes the role distinct is that it depends as much on trust as on capability. The best CCOs are not simply functional leaders; they are trusted advisers. They bring the outside world into the room, interpret pressure, challenge assumptions, and help leadership understand how the organisation is being seen beyond the boardroom.

That is especially true in moments of transition. A new CEO will often want trusted counsel quickly, particularly if the business is under pressure. In contentious situations, leaders tend to gravitate toward people whose judgment they know, whose loyalty they trust, and with whom they feel instinctively aligned. That is why so many new CEOs want "their person" in the communications seat.

That is where the real tension lies. The institution may need continuity, while the new CEO may need confidence. The strongest CCOs can often bridge both: giving the incoming leader support, judgment, and discretion, while also preserving the broader interests of the company. Where that balance can be struck, continuity is often the better outcome. Where it cannot, change may be inevitable.

For a CEO or chair in transition, the test is often quite simple: do I trust this person to tell me the truth, to hold me to account, and to bring me the outside world as it is - not as I might wish it to be? And am I strong enough as a leader to hear that challenge? Or do I want to shape the relationship differently, with someone I have chosen myself, someone whose instincts I know, and someone with whom alignment feels constant?

There are no universally right answers to those questions. Continuity can be a strength. Change can be a strength. Both can work, and both can fail.

What matters is honesty about what is really driving the choice. Because in this role, values, trust, and leadership style usually matter more than process. Succession planning may provide the framework. But in the Chief Communications Officer role, values beat succession planning for lunch.