



TEN KEY THEMES,
TEN CRUCIAL QUESTIONS,
TL;DR DIGEST
AND EXPERT COMMENTARY

2026 EDITION

REPUTATION, RISK AND RESILIENCE:

*where are we now and
what happens next?*

ASSUMING AGENCY AND ACHIEVING BALANCE
IN THE AGE OF ANGST AND RAGE

OUR 2026 SPONSORS AND MEDIA PARTNER:



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2026 EDITION

REPUTATION, RISK AND RESILIENCE:

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ASSUMING AGENCY AND ACHIEVING BALANCE IN THE AGE OF ANGST AND RAGE

A Summary and Analysis of the Past 12 Months' Key Global Reports on Trust, Reputation, Risk and Resilience

SECTION A: RISK AND RESILIENCE

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**Aon Global Risk
Management
Survey
(2025)**

2:

**AXA Future
Risks Report
(2025)**

3:

**Business
Continuity
Institute Horizon
Scan Report
(2025)**

4:

**International
SOS Risk Outlook
(2025)**

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Forum Global
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**By Rod Cartwright Consulting
19 May 2026**

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A.



INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW:

what does this report deliver?

Welcome to the 2026 edition of the *‘Reputation, Risk and Resilience’* – the fourth year in which I’m summarised and analysed more than 800 pages of data and insights from 12 major global publications on those ever-more interlocking topics.

If this were LinkedIn, I’d say I was delighted and excited. Make no mistake: it gives me genuine pleasure to share this free resource with fellow professional communicators and those working in the broader risk, resilience and business continuity arena.

However, I am also acutely conscious that if the environment into which I placed the previous editions felt complex and troubling, the practical and psychological context surrounding this year’s report is like little any of us have experienced in our lifetime. That sense is wholeheartedly reflected in what you are about to read.

Against that backdrop, any such work feels doubly important and – dare I dream – potentially consequential. I say that in part because the truly global reception last year’s report received suggested that I’ve touched on something relatively universal.

Indeed, the 2025 edition has, so far, been downloaded across 67 countries and all six inhabited continents (a download from one of President Trump’s beloved Arctic penguins is a stretch target for this year). It was downloaded in force across major markets – including the UK, US, Germany, India, Australia and South Africa – while also reaching as far afield as the Solomon Islands, Cambodia, Trinidad & Tobago, Oman, New Caledonia and the Turks & Caicos Islands. I truly hope this edition is as internationally useful as 2025.

Structurally, much remains the same:

1. The report’s ‘engine room’ remains the **12 individual publication summaries** – including a ‘too long, don’t read (TL;DR) synthesis of each – with all 12 TL;DRs captured in a single digest. **To hyperlink directly to any one of the 12 summaries, just click on the relevant box on page 2.**
2. Those summaries are bookended by **ten ‘red thread’ key themes** running through them and ten critical questions to consider and address in rising to the challenges – and unlocking the many opportunities – they present.
3. I have also retained last year’s intentionally provocative **‘Letter to the CEO and Chair’** and an **‘Expert Commentary’** in which leading lights in professional communication explore the themes and recommendations which most resonated.
4. As well as working again with the wonderful team at **Ipsos** as this year’s **Gold Sponsor** – together with **CIPR, EACD and ICCO** again kindly agreeing to be industry partners, and **PRovoke Media** as **media partner** – I’m delighted that **Roxhill Media** is this year’s **Silver Sponsor** and **AMEC** a **new industry partner**. My heartfelt thanks to one and all for their partnership.

However, there are a few crucial additions and iterations in this year’s edition:

1. With the line between our professional lives as advisors and our personal personas now separated by a cigarette paper, I’ve added a new **‘Letter to the Reader’** – a heartfelt and very human plea to consider how ensuring our own personal oxygen mask is fitted is more crucial than ever to our advisory work.
2. For the first time, I have also framed the report’s ten practical recommendations within a **single overarching theme: ‘Assuming Agency in the Age of Angst and Rage’.**

What does this report deliver?

In my darker moments, I fear that I will end my days as a strategic communication professional with a rather supplicant refrain ringing in my ears: “Why doesn’t comms have a seat at the top table?” On more positive days, I truly believe our function still has boundless potential to attain its rightful status as a management discipline that is as strategically central as it is indispensable to organisational outcomes – and is truly recognised as such.

However, and here’s the rub, to do so we will have to kick down the boardroom door and inhabit a seat that’s been actively earned – through an attitude, mindset and substantive approach to practice that mean it can’t not be there. A role and status that is epicentral to mission-critical discussions and decisions, with the communication function acting as the default decision-maker in more instances than at present.

That is where the umbilically linked notions of ‘Assuming Agency’ and ‘Achieving Balance’ – which I explore in detail as a ‘wrapper’ to the ten practical recommendations – will hopefully help move the ball down the field (as our Stateside cousins are wont to say) in practical and meaningful ways.

Compiling this report each year is like a mental Everest ascent: far more camps and steeper climbs than I’d remembered, and with no guarantee that the view from the summit will be as exciting as I’d recalled – either for me or for those in the climbing party!

However, we all know that life is about the journey, not just the destination, and the feedback I receive from readers around the world each year suggests that they continue to enjoy the different views from the top – and the climb itself – in very individual ways. So it is always worth the occasional vertigo and periodic altitude sickness in cresting the peak.

I truly hope you find the 2026 edition of ‘Reputation, Risk and Resilience’ stimulating, thought-provoking and practically useful as you grapple with the realities of a world gone slightly mad.

Don’t hesitate to get in touch with your thoughts – be they good, bad or ugly – and enjoy the ride.



B. A LETTER TO THE READER:

Before I begin, I have two simple words for you:

THANK YOU.

In an information environment where you have almost infinite options for ideas, insights and inspiration, it means the world to me that you've actively chosen to spend time with 'Reputation, Risk and Resilience' – and I mean that most sincerely.

If you've just downloaded it and are getting ready to dive in, it's likely that you're doing so in a professional capacity. You will likely be doing so given your role as an issues, risk and crisis communication specialist, a strategic communication professional more broadly or one of the ever-increasing number of risk, resilience and business continuity experts whose interest suggests a growing level of traction beyond a purely communication-focused audience

Make no mistake: that is great news and long may it continue. It will warm my heart if you derive as much professional value from this year's report as from previous editions.

However – if I can be so bold – I would like to make one additional suggestion, if not a plea. **As you do so, please also read what follows through the personal lens. Consider its content through the prism of your role as a partner, a parent, a neighbour, a friend and a citizen.**

If I have learnt one thing over my 30+ years as a strategic communication professional, it is that the very best counsel draws on the personal realm, lived experience and learned experiences as much as it does on professional craft, technique and tactics.

To be clear, the latter is an indispensable part of providing high-impact counsel, and I hope that this work enhances that side of your life. Put another way, it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for advisory success.

But just as charity begins at home, our professional capacity starts its journey in our own personal back yard. So while it might feel supremely irrelevant that you cry at the end of films – or eye-roll at your partner for doing so – it truly matters.

In my experience, the fact that you love live football games but loathe crowds, adore kimchi but abhor cabbage, is professionally material. At the risk of leaning all fridge-magnet or bumper sticker – it's what makes you you, in all your gloriously unique quirkiness, imperfection and brilliance.

Put simply, consciously celebrating that difference – while ensuring your personal oxygen mask is snugly fitted – is as critical to your professional competence, excellence and impact as any craft skills you may have developed.

So as you dive into this year's report – particularly the sections on 'Assuming Agency' and 'Achieving Balance' – **please do so as much through the prism of the personal as the lens of the professional.** My gut and experience tell me that it will unlock an extra layer of professional value and nourishment, even if that is your only focus.

I hope that it's not. Either way, my heartfelt thanks again for reading 'Reputation, Risk and Resilience' and I hope it feeds you in some way.

C: LETTER TO THE CEO AND CHAIR – Assuming agency in the age of angst and rage

Colleagues,

This time last year I wrote you a letter. In it I argued that we need to fundamentally rethink crisis and reimagine risk – centred around human preparedness and critical human infrastructure – if we are to unlock the huge, tangible, material upside value involved in doing so.

It was intentionally, punchy and provocative. After all, that's what you pay me for. And as you didn't fire me, here I am again with another missive – this year focusing the importance of **Assuming Agency and Achieving Balance!** If I may, I'd suggest you strap in, because it might just be an uncomfortable ride and read.

Let's start with what understandably matters most to you and the Board – the numbers. The latest UK [Reputation Valuation Report by Echo Research](#) reminded us that reputation has contributed between 20% and 38% of FTSE 350 market cap across the last 17 years. In 2025, its impact translated to £730 billion – or 29% – of the Index's value, a year-on-year rise of £11 billion. For the US, it accounts for 26% of S&P 500 market cap, representing \$13.8 trillion in shareholder value.

In parallel, global PR firm Burson's [Reputation Economy](#) research indicates that between October 2024 and October 2025, reputation delivered an average of 4.78% in added – and unexpected – annual shareholder returns, across 60 publicly traded companies. "Applying that added value to all of the world's publicly traded companies reveals that the global value of the Reputation Economy exceeds \$7 trillion", note Burson.

On the cost of crises specifically, I pointed in last year's letter to [major research](#) by Senate SHJ, showing that the average crisis globally over the past 40 years has hit the share price of the organisations involved by over 35% and EPS by 68%. On average, it took 427 days for the stock price to return to pre-crisis levels, while nearly a third of the companies' share price have yet to recover. **Put simply, reputation is material – hugely so – and never more so than during an acute issue or full-blown crisis.**

And yet, we continue to view proper preparedness for reputational issues or crises as a costly, irksome insurance policy that we may never cash in. All the while, we persist in behaving as if our 86-page risk register, our 134-page business continuity plan or even that crisis communications manual that you finally grudgingly signed off will see us through if the proverbial hits the fan. Let me be clear: they are a necessary but insufficient starting point.

You don't need me to tell you that the world has got even more batsh*t (technical term) in the past 12 months than ever before – you scroll through your newsfeeds (sometimes during my presentations!) just like the next person. However, our greatest risk is viewing instability as normality and somehow just relaxing.

Risk and resilience expert [Aaron Marks](#) terms this 'The Grey Zone': "It's not crisis. It's not stability. It's the in-between, where stress and risk quietly build because nothing crosses the line that forces action. Leaders", he continues, "believe they have a buffer that does not exist ... risk is misclassified as manageable ... [and] reform is delayed because current performance appears acceptable." Put bluntly, this is us. And it needs to change, because polycrisis and permacrisis aren't going away.

Last year I argued that we need to get better at creatively assessing all our vulnerabilities, imaginatively identifying what might feel like 'black swan' risks and pre-emptively working to defuse the ticking time bombs that may be hiding in plain sight. But this year, I believe in my very bone marrow that we need to go further. Put simply, **we need to ASSUME AGENCY and ACHIEVE BALANCE.**

What do I mean by 'agency'? Essentially, the deliberate assumption of conscious ownership, intentional action and purposeful choice when it comes to managing our reputational risk trajectory – if we are to achieve meaningful influence over potential future developments that carry so much potential jeopardy.

And to be clear, I'm not talking about doing so after the crisis balloon has already lifted off. This is about pre-emptive governance and early action across the entire issues lifecycle – not as an illusory proxy for control but as a powerful driver of the real-world outcomes we aspire to achieve for ourselves and others.

To be clear, developing a carefully cultivated disposition towards ownership and action will involve a fundamental shift in our cultural mindset. However, when risk is actually a simple equation – 'Threat x Vulnerability x Potential Consequence' – reducing our organisational vulnerability through the assumption of agency will be a major act of corporate de-risking (pun intended!).

We cannot control the 'stimuli' of the outside world, but we can influence our response to it. And if we do so while achieving a balance between the crucial 'pairings' I talked about last year – reputation and relationships, character and capability, sensemaking and sense-giving, crisis systems and human infrastructure – the dividends could be immense. So, when shall we meet?

Ms Dee Risk,
Corporate Affairs Director

D.



TEN KEY THEMES FOR 2026

The following ten themes emerge from a side-by-side review, summary and analysis of twelve key global reports on trust, reputation, risk and resilience published over the past twelve months. For each theme, a short synthesis is followed by a specific, practical recommendation for action.

1. ECONOMICS GETS POLITICAL: GEO-ECONOMICS IS THE NEW GEOPOLITICS

In last year's edition, I described geopolitics as having "emerged from the wings with a vengeance." In 2026, it has both doubled-down and shape-shifted. The defining shift is not simply that geopolitical risk has intensified further and remains a defining feature of today's landscape. Rather, its primary expression is now economic rather than military, political and diplomatic. Geoeconomic confrontation has topped The World Economic Forum's (WEF) one-year risk rankings for the first time, displacing state-based armed conflict. AXA confirms the pattern: tariffs, sanctions and supply chain fractures now outrank fear of military escalation among risk experts.

In Aon's Global Risk Management Survey, geopolitical volatility entered the top 10 for the first time in 19 years, having risen nearly 30 places since 2019. Although it is not due for publication until the summer, key elements of the 2026 Oxford-Globescan Corporate Affairs Survey shared by its authors show a major shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics. At the same time, Gallup's 'World's Most Important Problems' (WMIP) data adds a more public dimension: economic concerns top the national problems list in 71 of 107 countries – but driven by the lived experience of economic challenges, not abstract GDP numbers.

Organisations that have not yet built explicit geoeconomic and geopolitical scenario planning into their strategic and communication frameworks – mapping tariff exposure, supply chain dependencies

and regulatory risks by geography – risk operating with a damaging structural blind spot.

2. CLIMATE STILL TOP OF THE RISK LIST, BUT SLIPPING DOWN THE ACTION AGENDA

Climate risk occupies a paradoxical position in the 2026 data: its long-term dominance in experts' worry lists has never been more entrenched, yet its short-term priority is quietly and rapidly eroding. WEF records its most counterintuitive finding in years: absolute severity scores declined for all environmental risks over the two-year horizon – in both relative and absolute terms. Yet extreme weather holds the #1 spot over ten years, with five of the top ten long-term risks remaining environmental. AXA, which has placed climate top for five consecutive years, records a meaningful decline in dominance (63% to 55%), while only 12% of the experts they surveyed believe public authorities are adequately prepared.

Resist the temptation and pressure to allow the (seemingly) urgent to displace the important. Climate risk has not diminished because it has slipped in the short-term rankings. Organisations that allow political volatility and short-termism to become a cover for reduced climate ambition are trading long-term resilience for apparent short-term comfort.

‘Meaningful use of AI has fallen 15 percentage points in a single year to 43% and only 11% of the world’s most senior Corporate Affairs professionals believe their AI governance is adequate.’

3. AI FINALLY IN THE RISK MIX, BUT CONFIDENCE LAGS AMBITION

AI has clearly been one of the defining stories of recent years. And yet, it has played a strangely minor role in terms of the world’s risk registers. That finally changed definitively in 2026, with a remarkable upward trajectory. WEF finds the ‘adverse outcomes of AI’ moving from #30 in its two-year ranking last year to #5 over ten years this year – among the starkest single risk moves ever.

And yet for the huge investment focus in AI and a growing risk profile, confidence in AI adoption and impact lags behind ambition. AXA find that only 11% of risk experts believe public authorities are prepared for AI risks – the joint lowest preparedness score across all risk categories. The Conference Board captures a similar corporate paradox: AI is simultaneously the #1 investment priority and the #1 perceived threat among global C-suite leaders. Among CCOs, Ipsos finds that while tackling AI-generated misinformation has become a planning priority, meaningful use of AI has fallen 15 percentage points in a single year to 43% and only 11% of the world’s most senior Corporate Affairs professionals believe their AI governance is adequate. Meanwhile, Gallup’s *‘State of the Global Workplace’* report notes that despite approximately \$40 billion in enterprise AI investment, 89% of global executives report no measurable impact on labour productivity, suggesting that *“AI investment without manager investment is largely wasted.”*

Close the gap between AI aspiration and investment – and AI governance – before the gap closes the organisation. Investment in the technology without parallel investment

in the human, managerial and institutional infrastructure needed to deploy it effectively and responsibly is not ambition – it is exposure.

4. CYBER AND DATA RISK: CLEAR, PRESENT AND GETTING MORE COMPLEX

If AI is the emerging risk story of this edition, cyber-risk is its increasingly well-established twin: persistent, intensifying and, if anything, increasingly underestimated precisely because it has become familiar. And that is before the public release and true impact of Anthropic’s new *Mythos* LLM – and inevitable international equivalents – has fully played out. Aon places cyber at #1 for the third consecutive survey, while BCI’s Horizon Scan places cyber at the top of both the 12-month and five- to ten-year risk outlooks, and AXA finds 80% of risk experts view public authorities as unprepared for cyber-risks, up seven points in a single year. The sophistication of the threat is growing as fast as its scale: International SOS records 2,593 ransomware attacks in 2024, a 15% annual increase, while Aon’s deepfake and social engineering data – up 53% and 233% respectively – capture powerfully the strengthening of an AI-cyber nexus in operational terms. The average cost of a single data breach now stands at \$4.88 million.

Treat cyber not as an IT infrastructure problem with communications consequences, but as a communications and reputational risk with technical origins. The deepfake threat behoves organisations to develop rapid-response authentication, verification and response protocols before, not after, an incident occurs.

5. THE EMBEDDED PSYCHOLOGICAL PANDEMIC: MENTAL HEALTH AND EMPLOYEE DISENGAGEMENT

In last year's report, I described plummeting employee engagement and soaring mental health as a "new pandemic" and a leading "sleeping giant" risk. The 2026 data suggests it has been sleeping even less soundly than we might have hoped. Gallup records global employee engagement falling for the second consecutive year to 20% – its lowest level since the COVID pandemic. Manager engagement has collapsed nine points since 2022, and Gallup is clear: it is the manager layer, more than any other single factor, that determines whether AI investment translates into productivity or evaporates.

The estimated cost of disengagement to the global economy stands at \$10 trillion annually. International SOS documents one billion people globally living with mental health conditions – yet only 17% of risk leaders rate it a top-three concern. Aon sees workforce risks disappearing from the headline rankings for the first time – yet absenteeism was the #1 cause of actual financial loss when measured by the actual frequency of that loss.

The mental health and workplace disengagement crisis is not a welfare issue with productivity consequences – it is a productivity crisis with welfare origins. Organisations that continue to treat it as the former will find themselves unable to deliver on the latter – including their AI ambitions – making the gap between how organisations rank this risk and how it actually affects them is among the starkest in this entire analysis.

6. ESG PRAGMATISM AND THE RISE OF STRATEGIC SILENCE

The ESG story has entered a new and more complex phase: not dying but fracturing along geographic lines, retreating from public view and being quietly re-embedded in operational practice under different language. Ipsos captures this most sharply: 80% of global corporate affairs leaders expect ESG communications to become more tentative (rising to 97% in the US), and only 33% believe 'ESG' remains the right term, falling to 11% Stateside. Put another way, principles are in and acronyms out.

We have come a long way since 2021, when ESG performance briefly topped the risk list in the Oxford-GlobeScan Corporate Affairs Survey. Their report this year documents a north-south fault line: 92% of African organisations view ESG as a business opportunity, against 53% in North America, down from 71% in a single year. The Conference Board finds 38% of US CEOs saying sustainability is not a business priority – double the global average. Yet 52% of global communicators believe ESG is fundamentally changing how businesses operate, rising to 86% in Latin America.

Crucially, Ipsos identifies a move from broad-based activism to 'strategic silence': a deliberate, risk-assessed decision not to engage on issues that are not core to the business. Only 21% of its Reputation Council Members prefer their organisation to speak out on potentially divisive issues; 32% prefer to stay quiet; 47% say the decision is situational.

ESG is not collapsing, it is bifurcating. Against that backdrop, distinguish between ESG as a purely public communications posture and ESG as an operational reality – and be deliberate about which is driving which. For some, strategic silence is a legitimate short-term tactic. However, it arguably risks becoming a strategic liability when the silence outlasts the original hostility that sparked it.

'The estimated cost of disengagement to the global economy stands at \$10 trillion annually.'

7. A WORLD DIVIDED, FRAGMENTED AND INSULAR

The forces of division and polarisation documented in previous editions of this report – fuelling and fuelled by mis-, dis- and mal-information – have not merely continued, they have calcified. What was polarisation is becoming active insularity: a turn inward that is as much psychological as political. Edelman’s 2026 Trust Barometer – one of several reports pointing in the same direction – finds 70% of global respondents to be hesitant or unwilling to engage with those who differ from them. AXA frames fragmentation as its lead structural finding: only 10% of the general population believe their country shares common values, while 74% of risk experts see social division as deep and worsening.

WEF identifies societal polarisation at #4 in the 2026 risk rankings, rising to #3 by 2028 – characterised as “*streets vs. elites*”. Page-Harris finds that differences in expectations on priority issues are more marked between generations (most notably Boomers and Gen Z) than between countries, suggesting that generational divergence has overtaken geographic difference as a primary fault line. Gallup’s WMIP research confirms that age and gender now determine who shoulders the economic burden of today’s environment, particularly in developed economies. All these dynamics are deepened and accelerated by perceived institutional failure: only 19% of AXA’s risk experts have full confidence in public authorities’ capacity to manage future crises and WEF finds just 6% expect revival of the rules-based international order.

Resist the temptation to treat polarisation, division and insularity as a temporary passing storm to be waited out. The ability to communicate across difference, without assuming shared reference points or even hoping for consensus, is becoming a core strategic capability, not a communication nicety.

8. RISK CONVERGENCE, INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Risk intersectionality – a term I coined in my 2024 report – has become one of the defining features of this work. Running through the 2026 data as a structural thread is the recognition that while the risks we face do not arrive or operate separately,

many of the frameworks organisations have built to manage them still assume that they do. International SOS puts it directly: “*The siloed response structures most organisations have built are not equipped for simultaneous, intersecting threats*”. Its data show 57% of risk leaders reporting that new risks are emerging faster than their organisations can manage them, with 49% noting that risk convergence has increased in the past twelve months.

AXA identifies a particularly tight nexus between geopolitics, cyber-risk and AI – forces that amplify each other in ways qualitatively different from their individual effects. Aon builds its central thesis around four interconnecting megatrends – technology, trade volatility, weather events and workforce disruption – arguing they never arrive one at a time. WEF identifies inequality as the most interconnected risk in its dataset for the second consecutive year, with those breaches in the social fabric both reflecting and amplifying every other risk on the register.

If you have not audited whether your organisation’s risk management and crisis response infrastructure is built for simultaneous, intersecting threats – rather than for single, sequential ones – you might be in for a nasty shock. The findings, for most organisations, will be unwelcome, uncomfortable and urgent to address.

9. THE AWARENESS VS PREPAREDNESS GAP

Across the twelve reports in this 2026 edition, one of the most consistent and troubling findings is not the existence of risk: it is the gap between knowing the risk exists and being configured to respond to it. Aon makes this its centrepiece finding: only 14% of organisations quantify their exposure to their own top-ten risks and 37% suffered losses from geopolitical events in the past year, yet only 33% have a geopolitical response plan. International SOS documents a “*resource paradox*”: 80% of risk leaders know that faster detection would improve outcomes, yet only 20% can verify risk information at speed – a 60-point gap. Fleishman Hillard’s *Leading in the Era of the Compounding Crisis* research found an average 38 percentage point gap between CEOs concerned about the EBITDA impact of specific risks and their belief that their company was “*very prepared*” for the respective risks.

The BCI finds the pattern consistent at the organisational level: safety and health incidents have been the #1 actual disruption source for the first time, yet sit at 16th and 19th in forward planning. Page-Harris adds a useful external stakeholder dimension: 61% of respondents globally say it is very important for leading companies to create economic impact for everyone, yet only 31% have high confidence they will – a 30-point gap driven not by hostility but by the invisibility of action and a failure to provide context.

Treat the awareness-preparedness gap not as an operational inconvenience, but as a strategic liability. Knowing your risks and not being ready to manage them is not a neutral position: it is wilful exposure to potential jeopardy without the benefit of plausible deniability.

10. THE HUMAN RISK BLIND SPOT AND THE HUMAN INFRASTRUCTURE DEFICIT

If there is one unifying dynamic which arguably connects all that precede it, it is the fact that human-centred risks top much of the actual disruption data and yet are almost entirely absent from the preparedness agenda. BCI records human-centric risks as the leading disruption source, year after year. Aon finds absenteeism to be the #1 cause of actual

financial loss, while sitting 39th in the organisational risk rankings. The Conference Board identifies a human infrastructure deficit as a structural constraint on organisations' ability to execute their strategic ambitions – most acutely their AI strategies.

Gallup is unequivocal: the failure of AI investment to deliver productivity gains is not a technology problem, it is a human one. Oxford-GlobeScan underlines the fact that corporate affairs functions globally are returning to “*the most human*” strategies available – direct stakeholder engagement, face-to-face relationship-building – because every other form of connection is under strain. This is not nostalgia. It is a rational response to an environment in which human judgement, human relationships and human resilience have become among the scarcest and most valuable organisational assets.

The thread running through all ten of these themes is this: we cannot control the stimuli – the geopolitical shocks, the climate disruptions, the AI transformations, the economic anxieties. What we can influence is the human experience of them and our role – organisationally and individually – in helping enhance the human capacity to respond. That is what assuming agency in the age of angst and rage truly means.

‘The failure of AI investment to deliver productivity gains is not a technology problem, it is a human one.’



E. WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Ten crucial questions to consider and address

'ASSUMING AGENCY, ACHIEVING BALANCE'

A. INTRODUCTION: THE RECOMMENDATIONS 'SANDWICH'

In each of the three previous editions, I was determined not simply to “admire the problem” (to borrow a phrase from the National Preparedness Commission) but to provide ten clear, practical recommendations each year, to help readers rise to the challenges raised in the report.

While this year is no different, I've chosen to 'house' this year's ten recommendations in a single thematic wrapper – that of **Assuming Agency**, which I explain in more detail below. At the same time, as readers consider the application of the 'agency' concept to their work, I have also provided thoughts on a parallel concept which – in my repeated experience – can be a powerful driver of effective issues management and crisis communication: **Achieving Balance**.

To explain, I have synthesised many of the key recommendations from the first three years of 'Reputation, Risk and Resilience' into a set of 'yin and yang' pairings. To be clear, each of the elements in each pairing is central to delivering high-impact issues and crisis communication. However, it is striking the often illusive balancing act between – and within – each pair that can make such an enormous difference to the eventual outcomes.

In short, this recommendations 'sandwich' – between **Assuming Agency as a unifying concept and Achieving Balance as a critical success factor in the delivery of those recommendations** – provides a potentially new way of thinking about what we do as issues, risk and crisis communicators.

After all, if Deloitte is correct in its [estimates](#) that the global annual agentic AI market could reach US\$45 billion in 2030 (up from a projected

US\$8.5 billion in 2026), should we not be considering a more human agentic approach to issues and crisis leadership?

B. ASSUMING AGENCY

So why have I chosen 'Assuming Agency' as an overall thematic wrapper for this year's ten recommendations? I've unpacked a detailed answer to that question at the end of this section.

But at its core, my argument is that in a world where control is an outdated myth, even our ability to influence our reputational and relationship outcomes fundamentally depends on our willingness to assume truly deliberate and active agency.

To avoid any confusion with the term as it's found in 'PR agency', I'm using the term as an abstract noun connoting the deliberate assumption of ownership, designed to achieve meaningful influence over events.

Agency involving intentional action and purposeful choice – consciously originating from inside the acting organisation – rather than being imposed by external forces from the outside.

Agency not as an illusory proxy for control, but as the ultimate driver of the real world outcomes we aspire to achieve for ourselves *and others*.

Agency as a fundamental cultural mindset – a conscious, carefully cultivated cultural disposition towards ownership and action *across the entire issues and crisis lifecycle*.

Agency which may not completely slay the snakes or entirely banish the ladders in the game of snakes and ladders that is issues, risk and crisis communication in 2026, but that can make that all-important difference to their length and frequency. That is what I mean by 'Assuming Agency and Achieving Balance', as the core organising principles for the ten recommendations which follow.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

THE AGENCY CYCLE IN ACTION:

This Year's Ten Practical Recommendations

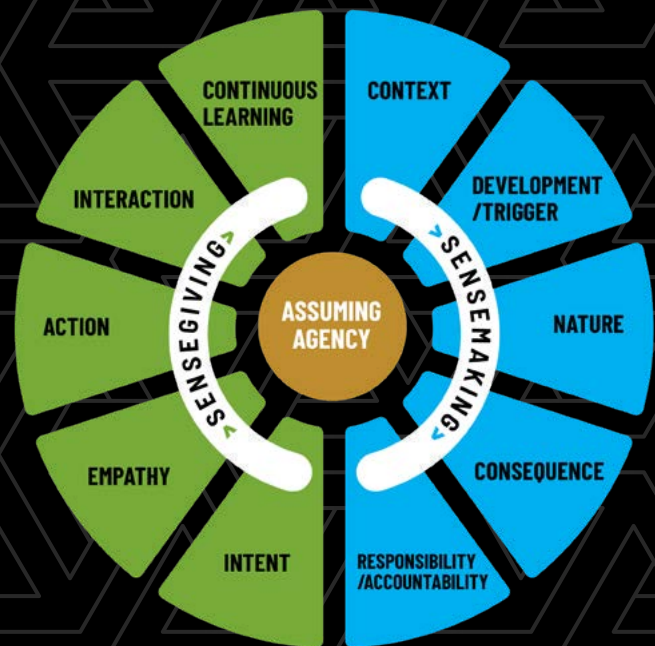
In the context of this year's 'wrapper' theme of 'Assuming Agency and Achieving Balance', the cycle below lays out the ten key elements of true agency, as applied to issues, risk and crisis communication.

The diagram provides a simple visual take on those elements – divided equally between those centred on sense-making and those focused on sense-giving. In reviewing what follows, I'd ask readers to consider throughout two foundational factors:

Firstly, that crises – *properly defined* – are only ever pivotal turning points, as potentially rich in opportunity as risk. That is why – as I said in last year's report – there is real opportunity to use risk management, crisis preparedness and resilience-building as sources of hugely tangible, upside material value, rather than viewing them as irksome, costly insurance policies. After all, if risk is an equation of 'Threat x Vulnerability x Potential Consequence', reducing organisational vulnerability is a major act of corporate de-

Secondly, that this year's ten recommendations – under the 'Assuming Agency' banner – should be viewed not only as a guide to decision-making and action during a true crisis, but as the foundations of the early-stage issues preparedness that can be so fundamental in limiting the likelihood and impact of such a crisis occurring.

To quote the 'Don' of issues management, Tony Jaques, from his seminal 2007 article in [Public Relations Review](#), "*Crisis management should be seen not just as a tactical reactive response when a crisis hits, but as a proactive discipline embracing inter-related processes ranging from crisis prevention and crisis preparedness through crisis response and on to crisis recovery.*"



1. Context:

Issues management and crisis communication are, at their core, intensely contextual activities. Indeed, as they teach you at Harvard Business School, competitive advantage stems from a mastery of context. No two issues or crises are ever the same, with the specific context for each – whether corporate, cultural, geographic or political – playing a major role in those crucially nuanced differences. A critical facet of the sensemaking and sensegiving that are so central to effective issues and crisis response is the development of the fullest possible contextual understanding of the emerging issue or breaking crisis. Without that, even the most fully developed scenario plans, best-rehearsed responses and highly practiced decision-making processes will be limited in their effectiveness. **Do you have the systems, processes and tools needed to rapidly analyse and understand context, backed by the agile curiosity required to gauge the all-important nuances between the lines of the data and the analytical insights?**

2. Development/Trigger:

It might feel like a statement of the obvious, but rapidly and forensically understanding what has happened, is happening or could yet happen – and its causal roots – is fundamental to the process of assuming effective agency. It is a well-trodden axiom of issues, risk and crisis communication that the facts are your friends, making the rapid establishment of the ‘what, when, who, where and why’ of all developments mission-critical. In my repeated experience, the ‘why’ – or causal ‘trigger’ – is particularly important, most notably in managing emerging issues, rather than dealing with full-blown crises. In the issues management space, when the reputation ‘bomb’ has not yet gone off, it is sometimes possible to lengthen the fuse or even extinguish it altogether, but only if your exercise of pre-emptive or real-time agency is specifically focused on that causality. **Are your issues and crisis preparedness – and live-fire crisis handling – specifically designed to rapidly establish the ‘what, when, who, where and why’ facts, pin down causality and slow the fuse on any potential reputational explosion?**

3. Nature:

As important as it is to establish context, facts and causality, it is the specific nuances of each and every acute issue or full-scale crises – their ‘nature’ – that can so often drive or destroy an effective response. In last year’s report, I focused extensively on the difference between ‘capability’-driven crises (usually functional and operational in nature) – which can cause undeniable damage to your reputation and relationships – and character-driven scandals (centred on culture, behaviour, ethics and morals), which research is increasingly shown to cause far longer and deeper damage. That is just one vector involved in understanding the nature of any given issue or crises. **Does your approach to scenario planning, training and simulations arm your teams with the systems, process and mindset need to gauge the specific ‘texture’ of an issue or crisis, to be able to act more effectively on it?**

4. Consequence:

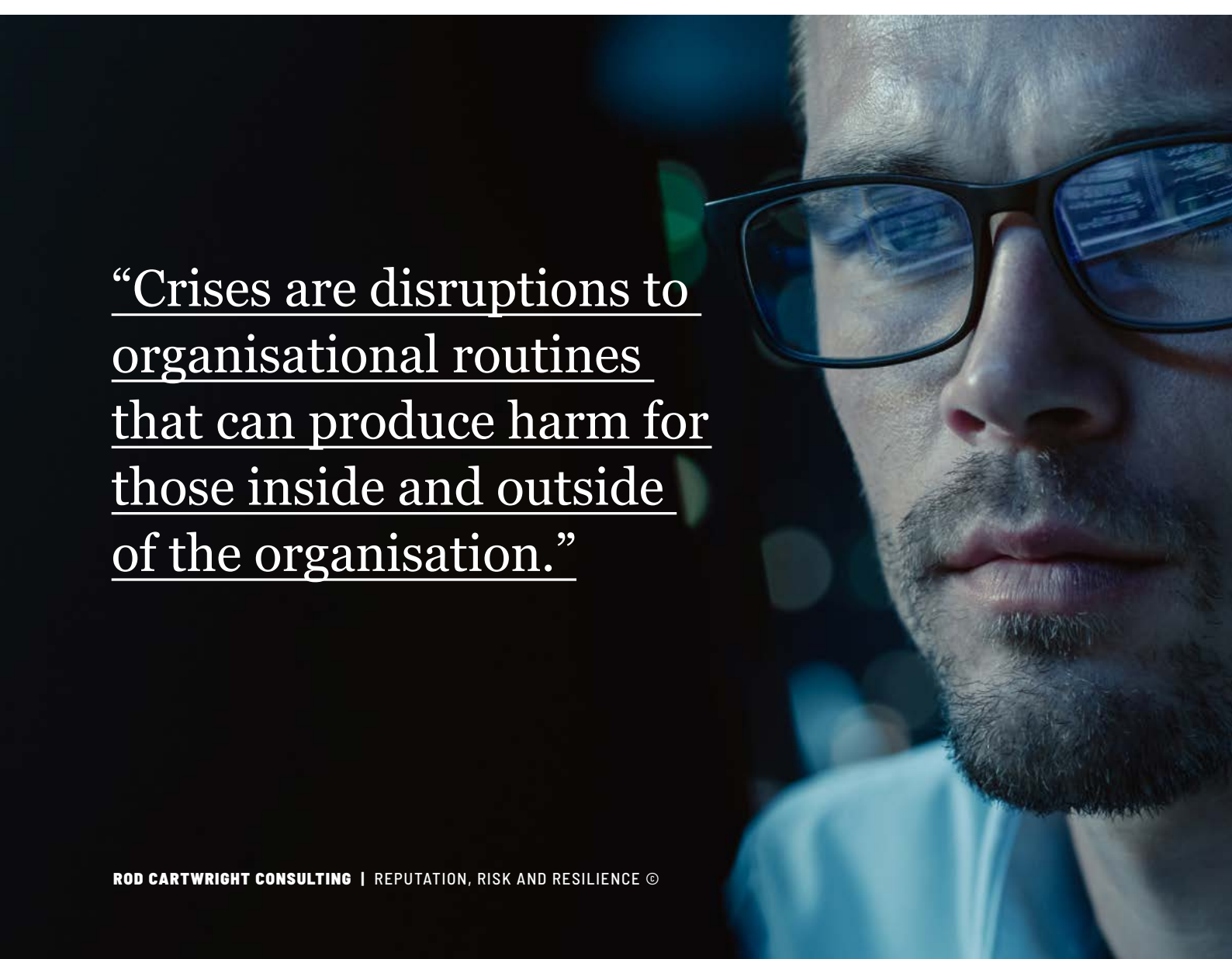
There is a widespread focus in both theory and practice on issues and crises as sources of harm or damage. Indeed, as Finn Frandsen, W. Timothy Coombs and Winni Johansen argue in [‘A Primer for Crisis Communication Theory’](#), “Crises are disruptions to organizational routines that can produce harm for those inside and outside of the organization.” I naturally wouldn’t counter the idea that issues and crises can be hugely harmful or enormously damaging – whether physically or psychologically. However, in line with my foundational view of crises as points of inflection, involving both risk and opportunity, we should not forget that the consequences of an issue or crises need not be exclusively negative, presenting as they do the chance to learn and grow. Equally, while many issues and crises are caused by the organisation, many are not – with consequences that can be substantially and substantively different as a result. **Are you set up to rapidly gauge and assess as fully as possible all the consequences of an issue or crisis in all their forms – in the short, medium and long term – including consequences that might not be exclusively negative or may not have been self-induced?**

5. Responsibility and Accountability:

Given that not all issues and crises are caused by the organisation (in whole or in part), the rapid establishment of both responsibility and accountability sits at the heart of effective issues management and crisis communication. To be crystal-clear, responsibility isn't only about liability. It is about understanding as fully as possible the balance of agency and causality behind any development, including the 'means, manner and motive' of all key actors. Equally, while accountability can involve a demonstration of contrition, empathy, remedial action and restitution to the 'others' impacted by the issue or crises, it can also involve robustly standing up and being counted when the responsibility is not as alleged. **Either way, are you entirely clear on the difference between responsibility and accountability, and are you configured to deliver both – be it to others or, in some cases, to the organisational 'self'?**

6. Intent:

In my training work, I often prefer the term 'intent' to that of 'purpose'. I do so because whether in an issues or a crisis environment, all strategic communication should be driven by the ultimate 'end state' that the individual or organisation wishes to create – to the benefit not only of the 'self' but also of the 'other'. Issues, risk and crisis communication are no different, with two forms of intent sitting at the heart of effective practice. Those two forms are strategic intent – in essence how you want your handling of an issue or crisis to be remembered in six months' time – and commander's intent – the values-based parameters which will guide all decision-making regardless of who makes those decisions. **From the earliest stages of issues and crisis preparedness through to live-fire handling in the field, have you established your organisational intent – both strategic and 'commander's'?**



“Crises are disruptions to organisational routines that can produce harm for those inside and outside of the organisation.”

7. Empathy:

It is almost truistic to say that empathy should be a cornerstone of any issues or crisis preparedness programme – whether in its conception or ultimate delivery. After all, showing a human face, acting with humility, committing to transparency and (where appropriate) demonstrating contrition can be indispensable in underlining a deep-seated commitment to safety and wellbeing – both physical and psychological. As we will see in the points that follow, empathy alone is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of an effective issues or crisis response. However, without it – particularly in the early stages of the issues or crisis cycle – even a world-class plan will be blunted in its effectiveness. **Do you plan training and simulations to place authentic human empathy front and centre as a foundational element in your mindset, ethos and response?**

8. Action:

As fundamental as true human empathy undeniably is to the effectiveness of any issues or crisis response, empathy alone simply isn't enough. Research I led in a former professional life into the behaviours expected of leaders or organisations in a crisis found that 'demonstrating empathy for those impacted' and 'communicating openly with those effected' were, respectively, the two least important behaviours – relatively speaking. The two most important? 'Having a clear plan of action' and 'being clear on the task in hand', reminding us that it is operationalising empathy through clear concrete action that delivers the greatest impact. **Are you clear – in your preparation and real-time response – on how to operationalise empathy, so that you can answer the simple human questions "Do they care?" and (if so) "What are they actually going to do about it?"**

9. Interaction:

In the game of 'crisis bingo' that crisis specialists sometimes play to maintain our sanity, phrases such as "We've listened, we've heard and we've acted" are all too common. And it's all good: active listening, empathetic communication and decisive action are all crucial. However, without interaction – meaningful engagement with those impacted by an issue or crisis – they risk appearing like a self-serving and isolating one-way street. Every case is different and there are often barriers – whether legal, practical or ethical – to such *interaction*. **However, do you place true, structured interaction and engagement as a starting default position at the heart of your planning and responses wherever it's possible to do so?**

10. Continuous Learning:

There is an all-too-frequent – and entirely understandable – tendency for senior leaders to reach the end of an acute issue or full-blown crisis, mop their brows, breathe a sigh of relief and return to the operational day job. In the process, they also forego one of the richest opportunities of all in the crisis communications arena – to draw active lessons from what has gone before, provide a visible commitment to doing so and offering a subsequent feedback loop to show that commitment has been acted upon. To quote Tony Jacques again, "not only can crises arise from issues, but issues can arise from crises" – meaning that, "the end of every crisis should be the beginning of the preparation step for the next one." **Is active learning and a 'Kaizen'-like commitment to continuous improvement – including a specific, structured recovery phase – hard-baked into your preparedness plans, processes and mindset?**

Each of the elements in the 'Assuming Agency' cycle is important in its own right. However, it is by marshalling them together that we unlock their collective power as the foundations of deliberate, intentional and active agency. Assuming agency – a fundamental cultural mindset and a conscious, carefully cultivated disposition – is the ultimate driver of the real world issues and crisis outcomes.



C. ACHIEVING BALANCE

Anyone who has ever had the pleasure of attending one of the ‘Yes ... And’ corporate workshops – run by comedy theatre and school of improvisation The Second City – will know that life rarely consists of binary choices.

Rather, our experiences – whether professional or personal – are enriched by the quest to find the often-illusory, ‘yin and yang’ balance between concepts that could be seen as being in tension, but seldom are.

Below, I’ve provided a set of ‘pairings’ – drawn from recommendations in the past three editions of ‘Reputation, Risk and Resilience’ and from my own daily crisis practice – which I view as central to the effective assumption of true agency in the issues management and crisis communication arena.

Sensemaking The professional communicator’s hidden superpower	...and...	Sensegiving A crisis leadership imperative and crucial guide to effective decision-making
Reputation What your key audiences understand, think and feel about you	...and...	Relationships How they behave and act in a practical, real-world sense as a result of that understanding, and those thoughts/feelings
Business Continuity / Business as Usual An entirely valid short-term goal	...and...	Relationship Continuity / Reputation as Usual An often more challenging medium-to-long-term objective
Strategic Intent How you want your handling of an issue or crisis to be remembered in six months’ time	...and...	Commander’s Intent The values-based parameters which will guide all future decision-making
A Focus on the ‘Self’ Understandable, but often driven by corporate trauma-induced ‘fight, flight or freeze’	...and...	A Focus on the ‘Other’ A central emphasis on physical and psychological safety/wellbeing, and the ultimate driver of reputational and relationship outcomes
External The natural starting point when under the microscope and spotlight	...and...	Internal The invaluable and often undervalued source of major risk and indispensable support
Capability The all-too-common assumption that most crises are operational in nature	...and...	Character The genesis of some of the greatest long-term damage to reputation and relationships, rooted in values, culture and behaviour
Shareholder / Investor Obsession A necessary, but not sufficient, issues and crisis focus	...and...	Stakeholder-Centricity The true driver of long-term outcomes, value and valuation
Issues and Crisis Infrastructure The all-important development of systems, processes and materials	...and...	Critical Human Infrastructure The human systems, human preparedness and cultural embedding without which purely system-led organisational resilience is impossible
Communications Preparedness The rational, but limited, assumption of where reputational and relationship risk sit	...and...	Whole Organisation Preparedness The only true means of mitigating downside reputational risk and unlocking upside relational opportunity

D. ASSUMING AGENCY: UNPACKED

Anyone In reviewing this year's global landscape, in discussing it with colleagues, clients, friends and family, and from my own personal experience of today's febrile environment, one factor really stood out: an overwhelming sense that **people feel they have lost control** over all that is going on in the world.

And yet, I would argue for at least the past 15–20 years – if not beyond – the notion of **control has arguably always been an illusion**. The myth of being able to “*control the message*” or “control the narrative” is just one striking example how utterly outmoded the concept of control has become, in today's hyper-connected, AI-accelerated, always-on environment (albeit that proponents of GEO might see that growing domain as an exception to that general rule).

Instead, **a more realistic expectation** – whether as individuals or professionals – is **the potential to influence the world around us** and the organisations we inhabit. There is, of course, a vast literature on the whole notion of influence that time and this report's focus don't allow me to dive into.

However, the famous Serenity Prayer comes to mind as a powerful expression of the crucial difference between control and influence: “*grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*”

Which is where agency comes in. Because even if we aspire to influence the trajectory of the issues swirling around us – individually or organisationally – that **influence fundamentally depends on our willingness to assume truly intentional and active agency for the outcomes we aspire to achieve**. And to do so **early**, before the wave breaks, not when it already has – with AI already proving to be a powerful tool in supporting early-stage preparedness.

Just as knowing the Latin origins of the word ‘crisis’ (meaning “*a moment, when a choice, decision or judgement has to be made*”), the roots of ‘agency’ are just as important. The term derives

from the Latin ‘agere’ – meaning “*to do, to act, to drive*” and it emerged in 17th-century English to mean simply “**the condition of being in action**”.

Across philosophy, psychology, sociology, philosophy and beyond, there is a red thread that dates back to Aristotle's idea of ‘Praxis’, runs through psychologist Julian Rotter's 1950s concept of ‘internal locus’ and can be seen in James Kanagasooriam's argument just last year that [“agency could be the next big idea.”](#)

That thread is the idea that **true agency implies intentional action and deliberate choice** – purposefully and consciously **originating from within the actor**, rather than being imposed by external forces from without – as **the ultimate driver of outcomes for the self and others**.

Crucially, true agency in the context of this report, must be translated into a fundamental organisational mindset and cultural disposition: **not just a strategic calculation, but a moral commitment to act – on behalf of all those the organisation touches, not just itself**.

Put another way, it involves developing a conscious, carefully cultivated orientation towards rolling ownership and action across the entire issues and crisis lifecycle – not a misguided belief in episodic control when a crisis is already breaking. **An orientation that rests as much on human preparedness and human infrastructure as on systems, processes and manuals**.

After all, **issues management and crisis communication in 2026 are far more akin to a game of snakes and ladders than to the linear, sequential approach** that underpins so much crisis communications theory and practice.

Indeed, to quote Tony Jaques again: “*Issues do not necessarily follow a linear sequential path, but instead follow paths that reflect the intensity and diversity of the values and interests stakeholders bring to an issue and the complexity of the interaction among the factors.*”

While none of us can slay the snakes or banish the ladders entirely, **it is agency – assumed early, sustained deliberately and exercised on behalf of others as much as of ourselves – that can make that all-important difference to their length and frequency.**

In his must-read [Future of Reputation 2030](#) report, author Craig Badings said: “*Reputation is built through accountability, behaviour, and system design.*” And in discussing the notion of agency with him, he put it to me this way: “*Reputation is no longer solely a communication outcome; it is a governance signal, judged by boards and investors through consistency of conduct, not only clarity of narrative.*” He continued, “*Influence without authority is theatre and proximity to leadership is not power if it does not change outcomes.*” Can I get an amen.

Equally, in her brilliant report ‘[Divided on Purpose](#)’ from earlier this year, fellow practitioner, Catherine Arrow reminds us that “agency is everywhere” and says “we may not control every risk, but we are not spectators – nor should we consider ourselves to be. What happens next will be shaped by the choices we make”.

Rarely have wiser words been spoken, and if I were to modify the Serenity Prayer around the agency imperative, it might read as follows:

“Grant me the wisdom to know the difference between control and influence, the moral courage and character to act intentionally on that knowledge early enough to matter, and to do so on behalf of more than just me and my organisation.”

“Reputation is built through
accountability, behaviour, and
system design.”

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F.



EXPERT COMMENTARY

Last year, I added a new ‘Expert Commentary’ section, allowing leading experts from around the world to share their take on the key findings and recommendations contained in the 2025 edition

I’ve again worked with this year’s partners and sponsors – together with a range of other PR and communication ‘big beasts’ internationally – to hear what resonated most from this latest report.

There was a far more even ‘spread’ of key themes that chimed with this year’s commentators, but among those, *‘geo-economics as the new geopolitics’*, *‘the awareness vs preparedness gap’* and *‘a world divided, fragmented and insular’* narrowly won the day.

In terms of the recommendations on practical responses – alongside the thematic ‘wrappers’ of *‘assuming agency’* and *‘achieving balance’* – our expert commentators focussed overwhelmingly on *‘achieving agency’*, *‘context’* and *‘empathy’*.

My heartfelt thanks to every one of the 22 experts who so generously shared their time, expertise and insights in informing this crucial section of the report.

TEN KEY THEMES AND THREE MAJOR RISK DYNAMICS



Tom Fife-Schaw, Managing Director, Corporate Reputation, Ipsos UK

ESG PRAGMATISM AND THE RISE OF STRATEGIC SILENCE

“Rather than a total retreat, Strategic Silence means organisations treading more carefully on external pronouncements, focusing on pragmatic, values-based realism and striking a careful balance between genuine transparency and what matters most to their people, stakeholders, and supply chain.

However, in a challenging environment, responsible businesses with a story to tell can fill the void amid the dearth of economic optimism we see in our polling – after all, a clear strategy and authentic culture can withstand any scrutiny. Businesses exist because they solve problems, fulfil needs, and create value, and against the doom and gloom, the organisations making impactful progress can stand up and be counted and reap the reputational rewards in the process.”



Tarquin Henderson, Head of Insights, Roxhill Media

THE AWARENESS VS. PREPAREDNESS GAP

“When it comes to risk, is forewarned always forearmed? We as communications professionals are naturally excited about using AI to develop new prediction tools with richer data to model the future.

This is transformative for risk, with quicker, smarter analytics reducing the operational inconvenience of boosting risk awareness. It helps identify key exposure and highlight any strategic liabilities.

Deploying these analytics effectively still depends on the communications profession as a strategic partner for risk management and operations teams. The success of this partnership relies on the ability to activate data with expertise to deepen trust. When it comes to new prediction technology, this trust must be built carefully.

To bridge the awareness and preparedness gap, communicators must equip themselves with the right faculties of critical interpretation. AI prediction tools can enable quicker, more certain risk insights only through thoughtful application and experienced agency partners.”



Maja Pawinska Sims, Editorial Director, PProvoke Media

THE HUMAN RISK BLIND SPOT AND THE HUMAN INFRASTRUCTURE DEFICIT

“The biggest risk in this report isn’t AI, geopolitics or cyber, it’s the fantasy that organisations are prepared at all. We’ve become brilliant at producing dashboards, frameworks and risk registers that create an appearance of control, while systematically underinvesting in the human judgement, talent, creativity and innate problem-solving required when those systems inevitably fail. AI is only making that gap more visible. Most organisations don’t have a risk problem; they have a capability problem, masked by process. When a real crisis hits, it won’t be the tech that saves them; it will be whether anyone in the room is trusted, empowered and experienced enough to make a call. Too often, they’re not. At least not yet. And when that moment comes, all the investment in systems won’t just look insufficient; it will look like a very expensive way of avoiding accountability.”



Alastair McCapra, Chief Executive Officer, CIPR

AI FINALLY IN THE RISK MIX, BUT CONFIDENCE LAGS AMBITION

“AI has become one of the defining strategic questions facing public relations in a remarkably short period. What resonates most is how far adoption has outpaced governance. Investment in the technology is racing ahead of the managerial, ethical and institutional infrastructure needed to use AI responsibly, and these findings demonstrate that plainly. For a profession that depends on accountability and human judgement, ambition without that infrastructure becomes exposure. The task now is to build that infrastructure deliberately, so that governance keeps pace with deployment.”



Arun Sudhaman, Non-Executive Chair, ICCO

ECONOMICS GETS POLITICAL: GEO-ECONOMICS IS THE NEW GEOPOLITICS

“The rise of geoeconomics as the defining corporate risk accelerates a shift that the industry has been reluctant to confront: the end of the multinational communications playbook. For decades, global strategies were built on the assumption of a broadly liberal, rules-based order that rewarded consistency and scale. Instead, organisations must now demonstrate genuine contribution to local economies and communities, while taking account of sensitivities in their home markets. This demands real cultural intelligence, alongside devolution of decision-making authority to in-market practitioners, and a fundamentally different understanding of how corporate influence is earned rather than broadcast.”



Johna Burke CEO and Global Managing Director, AMEC

CYBER AND DATA RISK: CLEAR, PRESENT AND GETTING MORE COMPLEX

“What stands out in this year’s analysis is both the escalation of cyber and data risk and the widening gap between the volume of data organizations rely on and the credibility of that data. Increasingly, analysis is distorted by irrelevant, misclassified and artificially amplified content presented as stakeholder insight. That is not insight. It is distortion presented as truth.

Weak data creates false confidence at speed and scale, eroding alignment internally, trust externally and ultimately business relevance. Credibility is built not on data volume, but on whether insight withstands scrutiny and drives action and value. If it fails scrutiny, it isn’t strategic.”



Anne Gregory, Professor Emeritus, University of Huddersfield and Past-Chair, Global Alliance

THE AWARENESS VS. PREPAREDNESS GAP

“This speaks to the ‘knowing/doing’ gap that underpins many risks identified in this Report. The challenge is not recognising problems, but deciding what to do. Organisations often assume that eliminating silos and aligning systems, processes and people will generate solutions. This reflects corporate overconfidence: even perfect internal coherence would be insufficient. What’s needed is genuine humility: acknowledging that internal dialogue is shaped by those adept at exercising personal agency, and that critical insight may lie elsewhere and often outside the organisation. Narrowing the gap depends on sustained, sense-making conversations that challenge established patterns of thought and where sense-taking from others becomes the order of the day.”



Catherine Arrow, Executive Director, PR Knowledge Hub

A WORLD DIVIDED, FRAGMENTED AND INSULAR

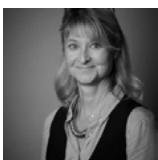
“The critical theme for me is a world divided, fragmented and insular because, when trust and shared understanding break down, it becomes far harder to resolve risks and issues or serve as able sensemakers amid converging pressures. As practitioners, we are responsible for the relationships organisations need to maintain their licence to operate. When those relationships fracture through polarisation, fuelled by misinformation, disinformation and malinformation, social cohesion fragments and anger rises. We lose the foundation needed to act and move forward together. The division we face is not theoretical. It is a grim, isolating and lived reality that turns words into wounds on a daily basis and keeps us in an ever-worsening state of polycrisis.”



Charlotte West, Vice-President, Global Corporate Communications, Lenovo

ECONOMICS GETS POLITICAL: GEO-ECONOMICS IS THE NEW GEOPOLITICS

“In an environment where business decisions can quickly become politicized, our role has shifted from explaining decisions to actively safeguarding the company’s licence to operate across markets. That’s changed the pace at which we operate, the substance of what we do, and critically, the talent we need to do it. Leadership increasingly turns to communications for three key reasons: 1/ we simplify complex fast moving issues into business choices, 2/ we have the clearest real-time view into stakeholder expectations across government, customers, employees, media, etc, and 3/ we’re the ultimate corporate diplomats – largely agnostic of internal power fractions, and focused on one thing only – doing what’s right for the business to ensure it maintains its licence to operate.”



Chris Tucker, Co-Chair, CIPR Crisis Communications Network

ECONOMICS GETS POLITICAL: GEO-ECONOMICS IS THE NEW GEOPOLITICS

“In many parts of the world, we are operating in what the military describes as the “grey zone”—a space between peace and open conflict where hostile activity is persistent but often ambiguous. This environment is defined by uncertainty and is likely to play out over the long term. It is characterised by the use of proxies, the deployment of economic and cyber tools, and the widespread use of misinformation and disinformation. As a result, supply chains are increasingly fragile; access to critical resources can no longer be assumed; and our stakeholders do not know what or whom to believe. In this context, effective crisis management and communication require more than operational readiness; they demand a clear understanding of the geopolitical landscape to anticipate, interpret, and respond to the disruptions that are now inevitable.”



Craig Badings, Partner, SenateSHJ

AI FINALLY IN THE RISK MIX, BUT CONFIDENCE LAGS AMBITION

“The tension of our AI confidence trailing our ambition reflects a deeper truth: AI is both sentinel and saboteur - it expands foresight but can amplify fragility. PR and corporate affairs has reached an inflection point. The opportunity is not only to manage AI as another channel, but to use it to close the gap between signals and decisions. Turning fragmented data into reputation intelligence is what should shape behaviour, not just messages. Those who move AI into risk, governance and strategy won’t just mitigate the reputation threats; they will define its future value.”



Craig Carroll, Founder, Observatory on Corporate Reputation

RISK CONVERGENCE, INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND INTERSECTIONALITY

“Rod is right that siloed structures cannot handle converging risks. But the deeper problem is this: when tariff exposure collides with workforce disengagement and a cyber breach simultaneously, the failure is never that leaders didn’t see each risk individually. It’s that nobody in the room could connect the economic implications across leadership, operations, revenue, stakeholder relationships, and workforce dynamics fast enough to act coherently. That connective capability is the single most underdeveloped muscle in corporate leadership today. Organisations invest heavily in identifying risks but almost nothing in training leaders to trace how a shock in one part of the business cascades across others. Until that changes, risk convergence will keep outrunning the response.”



Girish Balachandran, Founder, ON PURPOSE

A WORLD DIVIDED, FRAGMENTED AND INSULAR

“What we’re witnessing world over, is the rise of the far right, unbridled and unhinged. What previously could only be spoken about in hushed tones, is now being shouted from the rooftops, with state provided protection and impunity. It’s different here in the Global South, often an inheritance of colonial borders, state sponsored polarisation and unequal information flows. It’s hit home harder for me more recently, when living room conversations with family and friends have demonstrated how well coordinated propaganda can shape identity, highlight differences and build walls where bridges used to be. It strikes me of our role as communicators, to listen without prejudice, to translate without ownership and to keep the smallest passages of exchange open, even when few believe they matter.”



Kate Hartley, Co-Founder, Polpeo

CYBER AND DATA RISK: CLEAR, PRESENT AND GETTING MORE COMPLEX

“Cyber risk is never far from a leader’s mind. It must be the most prepared-for risk – and yet it still catches organisations out because its roots spread so far across the business. It doesn’t exist in isolation and crosses into almost every other area of this report.

Organisations tend to approach cyber risk with technical solutions. But the greatest risk factor is human: human error, deliberate sabotage, activism. It is driven by AI and deepfakes, funded by state actors or criminal gangs, crosses geopolitical borders and feeds on employee disengagement. Effective preparation crosses organisational culture, training, communication and awareness, effective reporting systems, and of course the behaviour of leadership.”



Dustin Chick, Communications Director, Ford Motor Company of Southern Africa

A WORLD DIVIDED, FRAGMENTED AND INSULAR

“The dominant narrative of our time is one of division. Social media hasn’t merely amplified this; it has weaponised it, enabling a toxic detachment from accountability and reality. This is the defining risk of the coming decade. Established norms are fracturing. For brands and organisations, this is not a temporary disruption, it is a fundamental reimagining of the social contract that demands a rebuilt value equation.

We must name it to manage it. The Expectation Risk: the widening gap between traditional behaviour and the volatile demands of a more fractured public.”



Kathryn Metcalfe, Visiting Professor, New York University

THE EMBEDDED PSYCHOLOGICAL EPIDEMIC – MENTAL HEALTH AND EMPLOYEE DISENGAGEMENT

“The report’s framing of disengagement as “a productivity crisis with welfare origins” is exactly right – and yet it still understates the full picture. Research from the University of Chicago has documented a troubling rise in alcohol and substance misuse among professional services workers – a largely invisible coping mechanism that rarely surfaces in the official data, which means the 1 billion figure cited here for those living with mental health conditions is almost certainly a floor, not a ceiling.

The mental health burden on communications professionals specifically deserves urgent attention. The vertigo-inducing pace of AI transformation, geopolitical and economic challenges, corporate restructuring, crises, and always-on expectations, has made our profession one of the most psychologically taxing.

Communicators who spend their careers helping organizations navigate reputational risk must get equally serious about the human risk inside their own functions. That means working smarter not harder and normalizing conversations about mental load and burnout, treating the psychological health of the communications team not as a welfare amenity but as a core operational asset. Let’s put our own oxygen mask on first and prioritize helping our teams and company employees thrive in a VUCA world.”



Mary-Ann Anyikam, Head of Global Resilience, HP

THE AWARENESS VS. PREPAREDNESS GAP

“The awareness-preparedness gap resonates because I see it every day. Organizations have clarity on their risks: geopolitical exposure, operational vulnerabilities, emerging threats. They understand the stakes. But understanding risk and acting on it are fundamentally different choices. Organizations stop at identification and documentation. They build the architecture, satisfy the audit, and check the box. What is missing is the will to stress-test that architecture under pressure. Boards govern risk appetite based on strategies that have not been tested in real conditions. The gap is not between knowing and preparing. It is between deciding and doing.”



Philippe Borremans, Crisis & Emergency Risk Communications Consultant and Editor, Wag the Dog

CLIMATE STILL TOP OF THE RISK LIST, BUT SLIPPING DOWN THE ACTION AGENDA

“Climate is not just one crisis among many; it is the engine beneath them all. Extreme heat strains health systems. Drought fuels conflict. Flooding displaces populations, pressuring governments and destabilising economies. The cascade is already underway – and it is accelerating. What makes climate uniquely difficult is not its scale, but its permanence. Other crises spike and recede; this one compounds. It does not wait for society to be ready, and it does not negotiate. That is why it demands a whole-of-society response – not a government memo, not a corporate sustainability report. Every institution, every communicator, must be fully committed. Nothing less will suffice.”



Rupert Younger, Director, Centre for Corporate Reputation, Oxford University

ECONOMICS GETS POLITICAL: GEO-ECONOMICS IS THE NEW GEOPOLITICS

“This is the tectonic shift. For years geopolitics has been a context factor - one that popped up in macro contexts (such as discussing political polarisation, the rise in populism, democratic deficits and autocracy) as well as in country specific frames (how to handle difficult leaders, the crossover between global values v local values). Today, geopolitical discussions at the board have been replaced by enterprise critical geoeconomic ones - whether that be digital currencies, supply chain integrity, or the imposition of uncertain tariffs. Leaders need to prepare differently in geoeconomic matters, moving quickly to insulate from threats or to capture commercial advantage.”



Stephen Waddington, Past-President, CIPR and Director, Wadds Inc.

THE HUMAN RISK BLIND SPOT AND THE HUMAN INFRASTRUCTURE DEFICIT

“Human-centred risks top the disruption data and yet typically don’t feature on the preparedness agenda. Strategic standing is built on proximity, access and management understanding. These are human conditions.

Continuous learning is where this either holds or fails. The post-crisis review is usually run as a process audit. It should be run as a relationship management exercise. Who learned what about whom? What changed as a result? Whether the function came out of the crisis with more standing or less.

That is the real test of organisational learning. Most organisations sidestep it. The same pattern is showing up in AI adoption - investment in the technology and a disregard for the human conditions that determine whether it is adopted and works.”



Tim Coombs, Advisor, Centre for Crisis & Risk Communications

ESG PRAGMATISM AND THE RISE OF STRATEGIC SILENCE (HOW EMOTIONS CAN ENHANCE CRISIS COMMUNICATION: THEORIZING AROUND MORAL OUTRAGE)

“The ESG-hushing is a course correction. Not a correction for the ESG, a very valuable element within society, but for speaking out on social issues in general. Managers had bought into the opinion polls telling them, “everyone wants you to speak out on social issues.” The problem is “everyone” was never in agreement on which side of the social issue to support.

The growing global affective and moral polarization is only sharpening the divisiveness of social issues. Strategic silence reflects the reality of being more selective when speaking out on social issues. Managers realize ESG-related communication must be more nuanced and driven by the organization’s values. Strategic silence around ESG will continue as long as polarization creates an environment wherein ESG communication can be perceived as problematic for many vocal stakeholders.”



Tony Jaques, Founder, Issues and Outcomes Ltd.

THE AWARENESS VS. PREPAREDNESS GAP

“The awareness-preparedness gap assumes that executives know a risk exists. However, my experience is that some organisations are seemingly not fully aware of the real issues, or remain in denial. The focus is often primarily on the risks inherent to their industry – what I call Natural Risks. Such as the risk of an explosion at a refinery, contamination for a food company or an infection outbreak at a hospital.

But the real range of risks is much broader, including executive misbehaviour, a data breach of a hostile takeover. Little wonder so many executives prefer to focus on the positive and fail to prepare for what might be awkward or embarrassing.”

TEN PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS



Tom Fife-Schaw, Managing Director, Corporate Reputation, Ipsos UK

DEVELOPMENT/TRIGGER (THE POWER OF EARLY INSIGHT)

“Rapidly establishing the ‘what, when, who, where and why’ – particularly the causal trigger – is mission-critical in issues management. This is precisely where reputation insight proves indispensable. Robust stakeholder insight grounds decisions in evidence rather than hunch – an invaluable objective viewpoint in a world of competing internal narratives and vocal minorities - and provides the “see around the corner capability” that transforms communicators from reactive messengers into proactive navigators who can act before emerging issues become full-blown crises.”



Tarquin Henderson, Head of Insights, Roxhill Media

NATURE

“Nature and Nurture are the most common descriptors in psychology for how humans develop their character. Nature, the genetic predispositions of an individual, alongside Nurture, the experiences and environmental factors that influence character, preference and behaviour. In an organisational context, these two definitions can apply with equal relevance. Culture is often wheeled out as a proud characteristic and quite often blamed when things go wrong. Honestly defining the true character of an organisation is an excellent starting point for identifying those natural elements alongside their environmental and ‘lived’ experience. And from there developing a comprehensive risk profile for the organisation.”



Maja Pawinska Sims, Editorial Director, PProvoke Media

CONTEXT

“Context resonates with me from this list of recommendations because organisations are increasingly mistaking information for insight. We have more data, more monitoring tools and more ‘real-time intelligence’ than ever before, but leaders still need to apply critical thinking and to be able to join the dots in a way that only humans can. In a hyper-reactive environment shaped by algorithms, outrage and AI-generated noise, the pressure is always to respond faster, louder and with greater certainty. But reputation isn’t built in certainty; it’s built in judgement. The organisations that navigate risk best won’t necessarily be the ones with the most data, but the ones still capable of nuance, perspective and asking difficult questions before rushing to simplistic conclusions.”



Alastair McCapra, Chief Executive Officer, CIPR

CONTINUOUS LEARNING

“The end of a crisis might see the light at the end of the tunnel get brighter, but it doesn’t mean the journey is over. The organisations that weather uncertainty best are those that see recovery as an opportunity to learn and adapt.”

A culture of continuous learning builds the instincts, agility, and resilience to respond next time. It means that when the pressure is on, a team is not starting from scratch but drawing on a well of knowledge, skills, and experience.

In a world where the only certainty is change, investing in continuous learning is ultimately investing in an organisation’s ability to face whatever comes next.”



Arun Sudhaman, Non-Executive Chair, ICCO

ASSUMING AGENCY

“While the idea of narrative control has always been something of a fictional comfort, the shift towards decentralised influence has unleashed consequences that many communications frameworks are ill-prepared to solve. What this idea does is address that tension without pretending the problem is simple. Assuming agency means acting early, deliberately and on behalf of others, rather than waiting for the crisis to force your hand. In markets where institutional frameworks are less robust and reputational recovery slower, that kind of thinking can mark the difference between organisations that shape events and those that are shaped by them.”



Johna Burke CEO and Global Managing Director, AMEC

ASSUMING AGENCY

“Assuming agency in today’s environment means abandoning the illusion of control and taking responsibility for the credibility of the insight shaping decisions, narratives and reputational risk. Communication professionals cannot claim strategic influence while relying on data distorted by irrelevant, misclassified or artificially amplified content presented as stakeholder insight. Weak data creates false confidence, weakens alignment internally and fragments trust externally. True agency requires acting early, challenging assumptions and ensuring insight withstands scrutiny before it drives action. In an AI-accelerated environment, influence will belong to those who can prove their insight is ethically curated, accurate and worthy of driving decisions.”



Anne Gregory, Professor Emeritus, University of Huddersfield and Past-Chair, Global Alliance

CONTEXT

“Content may be king in marketing, but in crisis and risk communication, context rules. Context isn’t limited to the big picture global, political, social or economic etc. factors; it is personal and fluid, shaped by family, friends, wellbeing, attitudes and emotions. As the world speeds up and communicators lean on social-listening tools or familiar networks, it becomes easy to overlook the deeper layers that aren’t easily monitored or reached. To genuinely understand context requires connecting with the whole picture, not just the visible signals. Context is holistic, and only by recognising its full complexity can communication be truly effective.”



Catherine Arrow, Executive Director, PR Knowledge Hub

ASSUMING AGENCY

“Assuming agency resonates because it is something I have been urging practitioners, and anyone else within earshot, to do for a long time. We have to get on with something. We need to act. We need to help people prepare for what is ahead this year and help our organisations steer their way through polycrisis. Even small, incremental actions can create better conditions than those we collectively face at present. As part of our relationship purpose, we need to understand what is to be done, who needs to do it, how we can help and the barriers to be overcome. Inaction is not an option.”

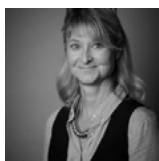


Charlotte West, Vice-President, Global Corporate Communications, Lenovo

ASSUMING AGENCY

“Assuming agency is a fundamental mindset shift for communications leaders - moving from asking ‘how do we communicate this?’ to ‘what should we do to sustain trust and our licence to operate?’. It requires us to influence decisions, not just interpret them, because we understand the external consequences better than anyone in the room, and critically, it requires leaders who are comfortable making decisions under pressure, often with incomplete or conflicting information, in an environment defined by constant change and ambiguity.

Our role is to use our assumed agency to navigate that ambiguity - balancing risk and reward and framing better or worse trade-offs. Ultimately, assuming agency means measuring impact and success by whether our organisations can continue to be trusted and operate effectively in complex environments.”



Chris Tucker, Co-Chair, CIPR Crisis Communications Network

DEVELOPMENT/TRIGGER

“Distinguishing between an issue and a true crisis is critical. A crisis is not simply a problem—it is a threat to the organisation’s very existence. As Tony Jaques puts it, issues management is about steering the ship away from the iceberg, while crisis management is dealing with the impact if it is hit. Effective scenario planning requires understanding what could escalate an issue into that crisis phase. Start by imagining the worst-case scenario and mapping how it could unfold. Identify the triggers and interventions that could shift stakeholder sentiment decisively against you. Strong issues management focuses on anticipating and neutralising those triggers before they take hold.”



Craig Badings, Partner, SenateSHJ

NATURE

“Our Crisis Index 300 data show crises are not equal in impact and ‘nature’ matters. Of the eight crisis categories, character-driven leadership and ethics scandals have the most severe financial consequences, the deepest share price falls and the longest recovery periods. Companies typically take significantly longer to regain pre-crisis valuation compared to operational or capability-driven events. It reinforces Rod’s point that crises rooted in behaviour, culture and trust cut far deeper than functional failures. The implication is clear - preparedness must extend beyond operational response to ensuring teams can respond in ways that actively rebuild trust with stakeholders.”



Craig Carroll, Founder, Observatory on Corporate Reputation

CONTEXT

“Context is often treated as something senior leaders naturally possess. That assumption is undermining preparedness. I have seen experienced executives walk into a reputational crisis unable to articulate how their company’s revenue model, stakeholder relationships, regulatory exposure, and workforce dynamics interact under pressure, not because they lack intelligence, but because no one ever required them to build that map. Context is not instinct. It is a structured discipline: the systematic ability to read an organisation’s exposure across every domain where value is created, multiplied, protected, or lost. If your crisis team cannot draw that map in 30 minutes, you do not have contextual capability. You have a blind spot with a job title.”



Girish Balachandran, Founder, ON PURPOSE

INTENT

“Intent begins by answering a fundamental question: whom does the business exist for? Shareholders or stakeholders beyond them? In our quest to sound and look purposeful, we’ve seen too many well-intentioned brands use ‘purpose’ to drive more profit. Sadly, it’s exactly the kind of short-term noise we see brands in the Global South prioritise over strategic intent and purpose-wash their way into more immediate sales over long-term reputation building. Without clear intent, we default to reaction, not direction. Whereas, adopting Commander-like intent, protecting values when no one is watching, would keep our work honest, adaptive and accountable, especially when the world fragments around us.”



Dustin Chick, Communications Director, Ford Motor Company of Southern Africa

EMPATHY

“In the face of increased expectation and the corrosive effects of digital extremism, empathy is the essential strategic pivot to frame robust reputations. While the “anti-us” narrative thrives on dehumanisation and the breakdown of shared realities, empathy anchors the relationship between the organisation/brand and individuals in one of mutual respect.

By leaning into diverse lived experiences, brands can bridge the chasm of “what sets us apart,” into a new trust-earned social contract. In our fragmented world, empathy is not merely a soft skill; it’s a sincere and sophisticated risk-mitigation tool that restores the human connection necessary to navigate a world that has otherwise lost its common ground.”



Kate Hartley, Co-Founder, Polpeo

EMPATHY

“Under severe pressure, we lose empathy. We prioritise our own survival over everything and everyone around us. In a crisis, that can be catastrophic for an organisation’s reputation.

We tend to centre our own needs during a crisis. True empathy means understanding the needs of others, and then prioritising them through action. An empathetic approach isn’t just the right thing to do. The Trust Equation – a model of trust developed by Charles Green – shows ‘self-orientation’ (focusing on yourself) means you’re less trusted by others. The ability to focus on someone else, and therefore increase trust, comes from empathy.”



Kathryn Metcalfe, Visiting Professor, New York University

CONTINUOUS LEARNING

“I came to this recommendation personally: after five CCO roles, I moved into the classroom — not to stop learning, but to accelerate it. Teaching forces a discipline of synthesis and reflection that the relentless pace of senior corporate life rarely permits, and it confirmed for me that continuous learning is less a best practice than a survival skill for our profession. The report’s invocation of Kaizen is apt, but the learning opportunity most consistently underused in communications is peer-to-peer exchange — the kind of candid, practitioner-to-practitioner conversation we should all prioritize.”



Stephen Waddington, Past-President, CIPR and Director, Wadds Inc.

EMPATHY

“Empathy ranks last. A clear plan of action ranks first. The easy reading of this is that empathy is overrated. The harder reading is that organisations prioritise themselves over victims in a crisis.

Action planning does not correct for that. It often entrenches it. Standing is earned through proof and proximity, long before a crisis breaks. Without it, empathy gets signalled, victims get sidelined, and action gets decided elsewhere.

The prior question is whose interests the action actually serves. If the answer is the



Mary-Ann Anyikam, Head of Global Resilience, HP

RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

“Responsibility and accountability matter because they transform preparedness from an operational checklist into a governance imperative. When boards understand they are responsible for ensuring strategies have been tested under pressure, and accountable if decisions fail, the gap between knowing and doing narrows. This is not about blame, but clarity of agency. Organizations that define ownership of preparedness at the board level, and establish who is accountable when it fails, move from documentation to validation. Responsibility and accountability are not about assigning fault after a crisis. They are about making preparedness a non-negotiable condition before one occurs.”



Philippe Borremans, Crisis & Emergency Risk Communications Consultant and Editor, Wag the Dog

CONTEXT

“Context is everything. Who are the affected audiences? What do they already believe? What cultural, political, and organisational forces shape how they receive information? Answering those questions, rigorously and continuously, is where crisis communication actually begins.

That’s why real situational awareness capacity matters. Not the dashboards and media monitoring, but digital twins that model how information moves through a system and human networks, behavioural insights that reveal the gap between what people say and what they do, and cultural and psychological sensing that picks up what the data alone will never show.”



Rupert Younger, Director, Centre for Corporate Reputation, Oxford University

ACHIEVING BALANCE

“In a VUCA (“volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous”) world, achieving balance is an important leadership superpower. For leaders seeking to protect their reputations in moments of crisis, recognising and balancing differing viewpoints is a necessity across issues and stakeholders - whether it be the need for speed of response against a pause for more information or wise reflection; for a desire to apologise against the legal implications of doing so; or for putting in place rapid remediations against forensically investigating the causes. Great leaders understand that multiple and interconnected agendas require balance.”



Tony Jaques, Founder, Issues and Outcomes Ltd.

EMPATHY

“While crisis preparedness is critical, true empathy is an essential quality to help get through that crisis. Even in today’s more socially aware world, some senior executives still think empathy is a sign of weakness and don’t feel comfortable expressing their emotions. They still say things like “mistakes were made” and “It is regrettable”, rather than taking responsibility. We can’t teach empathy, but we can provide executives with the tools to understand other people’s feelings and speak in the first person. Try saying “I am truly sorry our actions have caused you this distress and I am personally committed to make sure we do better in the future.” That can’t be too hard.”



G: About

ROD CARTWRIGHT

Rod Cartwright is the principal of [Rod Cartwright Consulting](#), a strategic communication consultancy which works with in-house teams and agencies to enhance their human preparedness, organisational resilience and business performance. His focus is on issues, crisis, reputation, risk and resilience, from a preparedness, training and advisory perspective.

Over a 25-year global PR agency career, Rod worked for international market leaders including Ketchum (as Global Corporate Practice Director), Text100/ Archetype (EMEA Regional Director), Hill & Knowlton (Director) and GCI (Director).

He has advised world-leading brands and organisations, ranging from IBM, Dell, Accenture, Sanofi, KFC and the UK Cabinet Office to IKEA, Western Union, McKinsey, P&G, Pfizer, the British Council, ActionAid UK and the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure (CPNI).

His frontline crisis experience includes advising Malaysia Airlines' (MAB) Chair, CEO, Board and legal counsel following the disappearance of Flight MH370 in 2014, and on its subsequent restructuring by MAB's sovereign parent.

The [2024 edition of his 'Reputation, Risk and Resilience' report](#) was awarded a Certificate of Excellence for Agency Thought Leadership at the 2025 PProvoke Media EMEA IN2 Sabre Awards and the 2025 edition was downloaded in 67 countries across six continents.

He also is a Visiting Fellow at Cardiff University's internationally-renowned [Centre for Media & Public Communication](#) and Special Advisor to the CIPR's [Crisis Communications Network](#). He was voted [Independent PR Practitioner of the Year](#) in the 2025 CIPR Excellence Awards, is a co-founder of the Independent [Impact 50 Awards](#) and was included in the [Strategic 26](#) at the 2026 Strategic Global Awards

A PRCA Fellow and former Board Member, he was also Deputy Chair of the [Global COVID-19 Taskforce](#), an active Steering Committee member of the [Ukraine Communications Support Network](#) and a member of the Professional Practices Committee which reviewed the Bell Pottinger Affair.

Rod will be delivering tailored primer sessions to help individual organisations assess the practical implications of this report for them, as well as deeper-dive, half- or full-day group workshops, exploring in detail the application of the report's key insights.

To discuss this report and the practical application of its findings to the work of your organisation, your clients or your colleagues, you can contact Rod as follows:



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1. AON GLOBAL RISK MANAGEMENT SURVEY (2025)

A New Era of Converging Risks and Accelerating Disruption

Aon's tenth Global Risk Management Survey – drawing on responses from nearly 3,000 risk and business leaders across 63 countries – finds organisations navigating a risk landscape defined less by individual threats than by their convergence and interconnection. Cyberattacks or data breaches retain the number one position for the third consecutive survey. Geopolitical volatility makes the top ten for the first time in the survey's 19-year history, having surged nearly 30 places since 2019. Climate change and natural disasters reach their highest-ever rankings and AI enters the future risks top 10 at number eight.

What makes the 2025 findings particularly striking is not the risk rankings themselves but rather the gap between risk awareness and action. Only 14% of respondents actively quantify their exposure to the top-10 risks and just 19% use analytics to evaluate their insurance programmes. Meanwhile, workforce risks – the most common driver of actual financial losses – have fallen out of the top-20 entirely, a vivid reminder that perceived risk and experienced risk are not the same thing.

Aon's central argument is that the age of isolated, manageable risks is over. The four megatrends shaping today's environment – technology, trade, weather and workforce – do not operate independently. They amplify, accelerate and interconnect. Organisations that respond with siloed, reactive strategies will find themselves perpetually behind the curve.

2. AXA FUTURE RISKS REPORT (2025)

The twelfth edition of AXA's Future Risks Report draws on the views of 3,595 insurance experts across 57 countries and 23,000 members of the general public across 18 countries. The 2025 report frames the current risk landscape around a single organising concept: fragmentation. Social, political, informational and geopolitical fragmentation is not merely a risk in itself; it is the condition that makes all other risks harder to manage and easier to ignore.

Climate change tops the expert rankings for the fifth consecutive year, but the gaps with second-placed geopolitical instability and third-placed cybersecurity are narrowing – a signal

of deepening and ever-more interconnected polycrisis rather than a receding climate concern. In the most striking structural shift since the survey began 12 years ago, demographic risks enter the expert top 10 for the first time. Two new entries – macroeconomics, driven by tariff and trade war anxiety, and demographics – displace pandemic risks and new security threats, reshaping a top 10 that increasingly places systemic, slow-burn vulnerabilities above acute, headline-grabbing ones.

Among the most striking single findings is the collapse of confidence in our institutions: only 19% of experts express full confidence in public authorities' capacity to manage future crises, while for AI and demographic risks, that figure falls to just 11%.

3. BUSINESS CONTINUITY INSTITUTE (BCI) HORIZON SCAN REPORT 2025

Complex and Interconnected Risk

The Business Continuity Institute's (BCI) Horizon Scan Report 2025, now in its fourteenth annual edition, is based on survey data from 151 practitioners across 17 sectors. The 2025 report provides a pointed diagnosis: the risks actually disrupting organisations are not the ones they are scanning and preparing for. Safety incidents have topped the cumulative disruption index for the first time yet fall to 16th in the twelve-month forward risk assessment. The threat landscape organisations say they are preparing for and the environment actually impacting them are almost two different worlds.

Looking ahead, three threat domains dominate: cybersecurity (63.6% of respondents cite it as a five- to ten-year priority), climate risk (40.7%) and the role of AI (30.5% – its first appearance as a specified long-term concern). For the immediate term, extreme weather overtook digital threats as the single largest cause of actual disruption for the first time since 2017. Trade wars and activist campaigns entered the top 10, underlining the geopolitically inflected risk environment.

The report's central challenge is direct: stop underestimating human-centred risks. The BCI's companion Emergency and Crisis Communications Report 2026 reinforces the point, noting that when disruption strikes, it is human behaviour under pressure, not plan design, that determines whether response succeeds or fails.

4. INTERNATIONAL SOS RISK OUTLOOK 2026

Leading Through Uncertainty, Shaping the Pace of Preparedness

The 10th edition of the International SOS Risk Outlook – based on a survey of 860 senior risk decision-makers across 94 countries – delivers an unambiguous and sobering verdict: risks are outpacing the ability to manage them and most organisations know it. Fifty-seven per cent of respondents say new risks are emerging faster than they can deal with them. Seventy-four per cent say the window for critical decisions is shrinking, yet only 35% are confident they can mobilise teams rapidly when it matters, and a mere 20% believe they can verify risk information at speed. Meanwhile, three-quarters of security and health specialists face flat or reduced budgets and are being asked to do more with less at the precise moment the environment demands more of everything. The report's ten thematic chapters span geopolitical fragmentation, extreme weather, workforce health neglect, cyber-threats, misinformation, and the emerging human duty-of-care blind spot of 'hush trips'. The consistent thread is convergence: risks no longer arrive sequentially and the siloed response structures most organisations have built are not equipped for simultaneous, intersecting threats.

5. WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM GLOBAL RISKS REPORT (2026)

The 21st edition of the World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Risks Report draws on a Global Risks Perception Survey (GRPS) of over 1,300 experts, supplemented by an Executive Opinion Survey of 11,000+ business leaders across 116 economies. The 2026 edition finds the world at a structural inflection point. We have entered an 'age of competition': a contested, multipolar landscape where confrontation is replacing collaboration, multilateral institutions are in active retreat, and trust – the currency of cooperation – is losing its value. Geoeconomic confrontation tops the immediate one-year risk rankings for the first time, displacing state-based armed conflict. Economic risks – conspicuously absent from the 2025 top 10 – surge back, with the largest ranking increases of any category. Environmental risks decline in the short-term, even as they tighten their grip on the 10-year outlook. And adverse outcomes of AI registers the starkest upward trajectory of any risk: #30 over two years, rising to #5 over ten. Half of

respondents anticipate a turbulent or stormy world over the next two years – up 14 percentage points in a single year. Only 1% predict calm. The Forum's conclusion is as pointed as the data: in an age of competition, cooperation is harder to achieve but more indispensable than ever.

6. GALLUP/WORLD GOVERNMENTS SUMMIT 'THE WORLD'S MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEM' (2026)

The 10th edition of the International SOS Risk Produced in collaboration with the World Governments Summit, the core question behind this inaugural global edition of Gallup's 'The World's Most Important Problem' Report was first asked of Americans in 1935 and is now posed across 107 countries. This global exercise delivers a deceptively simple finding: ask people what their leaders most need to fix, and they will tell you the economy. A global median of 23% name economic issues as their country's biggest problem, a figure that holds in 71 of 107 countries and dominates in every region except Northern America, where politics leads. But the report's real contribution is analytical. Economic anxiety is not driven by GDP growth as an abstract idea, but rather by whether people feel they can live comfortably on their household income. Similarly, work-related concerns are not driven by unemployment alone. Instead, they reflect deeper dissatisfaction with job quality and the dignity of work. Political discontent is not evenly distributed, it is concentrated in wealthy democracies and tracks institutional trust almost entirely. And security eclipses everything else where conflict exists: in Ukraine and Israel, fewer than 10% name any other concern.

7. OXFORD–GLOBESCAN GLOBAL CORPORATE AFFAIRS SURVEY (2025)

The sixth annual Oxford-GlobeScan Global Corporate Affairs Survey captures the views of 245 senior Corporate Affairs professionals across 44 countries, surveyed between February and March 2025 – after the first wave of international US tariffs, but before President Trump's 'Liberation Day'. The mood it conveys is one of sustained and deepening unease. Geopolitical risk has topped the risk agenda every year since 2020, but with 76% of respondents citing it as their primary concern (up from 47% five years

ago), what we're seeing is not so much a new alarm as a new normal. Macroeconomic instability has surged to second place, ESG is fracturing along North-South lines and visible corporate advocacy is in retreat, particularly in North America.

Against this backdrop, the Corporate Affairs function is doing what business functions often do in a crisis: returning to basics. Stakeholder mapping, direct engagement, and face-to-face relationship-building are reasserting themselves. AI is universally recognised as the defining opportunity, yet adoption remains largely tactical. Perceived stakeholder trust in respondents' own organisations has more than doubled since 2016. But trust in the function's ability to articulate its own business value is, paradoxically, slipping.

As a crucial footnote, although it is not due for publication until the summer, early sight of key elements of the 2026 edition of the research sees a major shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics (in line with other publications in this report); a 27 percentage-point jump in the importance of AI and technology; a very considerable rise in the perceived importance of issues/crisis/risk preparedness (a 12 percentage-point increase year-on-year) and a sizeable leap in the status of governance as an ESG risk (up 16 percentage points since the 2025 edition).

8. IPSOS REPUTATION COUNCIL REPORT (2025)

The Eye of the Storm

The eighteenth sitting of the Ipsos Reputation Council – in-depth interviews with a record 161 senior communications leaders across 19 markets – finds the CCO at a structural inflection point. The role has irrevocably expanded from guardian of the message to strategic sense-maker, geopolitical analyst, and trusted advisor to the CEO. Ninety-one per cent now have direct CEO access, yet 67% say the job has become harder to manage over time. Four themes define the 2025 sitting: the rise of Strategic Silence (only 21% now prefer to speak out on divisive issues); a widening AI confidence gap (57% use AI daily but only 43% consider it 'meaningful' down from 58% last year, with just 11% finding ethical policies adequate); a strategic retreat from ESG-centred public proclamations, even as ESG principles are embedded more deeply into operational DNA; and a near-universal elevation of the CCO to

indispensable C-suite strategist, navigating – as one Council member – a question asked each morning: 'What fresh hell is this?'

9. THE CONFERENCE BOARD C-SUITE OUTLOOK 2026

Uncertainty and Opportunity: The CEO Playbook for 2026

The Conference Board's 27th annual C-Suite Outlook is based on research involving 1,732 executives, including 771 CEOs across North America, Europe and Asia. The latest edition finds global business leadership entering 2026 in a state of watchful unease. Uncertainty is the defining condition: not a temporary disruption to be managed but the operating environment itself. Recession risk, tariffs, cyberattacks, regulatory fragmentation and political instability crowd the threat horizon, while AI dominates the opportunity agenda – though CEOs are more preoccupied with making it work than with its transformative promise. Arguably the report's most striking finding is the gap between AI ambition and AI confidence. Globally, CEOs rank AI as both a top investment priority and a top external threat, reflecting not technophobia but a sober assessment of execution risk, governance complexity and uneven return on investment. Sustainability and broader ESG commitments are fracturing along geopolitical and geographic lines, with US CEOs twice as likely as their global peers to deprioritise environmental issues entirely. And while issue, crisis, and risk management ranks as a communications priority only in Asia, it barely registers in North America or Europe, where corporate strategy dominates CEOs' communications agenda.

10. EDELMAN TRUST BAROMETER (2026)

Trust Amid Insularity

The 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer – the survey's 26th year, drawing on 33,938 respondents across 28 countries – identifies insularity as the defining successor to last year's crisis of grievance. Where 2025 found populations angry at a system they felt was rigged against them, 2026 finds them retreating from it entirely: 70% of respondents are now hesitant or unwilling to trust anyone who differs from them in values, information sources, approaches to societal problems or background.

The global Trust Index edges up one point to 57, but this masks a deepening fracture between developing markets (66) and developed ones (49 – firmly in distrust territory), and an income-based trust gap that has more than doubled since 2012. Only 32% believe the next generation will be better off. Fear that foreign actors deliberately spread disinformation to inflame domestic divisions has reached an all-time high in 15 of 26 countries. Trust is migrating inward – falling in national governments, major news organisations and foreign business leaders, and rising in neighbours, coworkers and “my CEO”.

Edelman’s proposed antidote is trust brokering: a set of practices that surfaces common interests across divided groups rather than trying to change them. The employer emerges as the primary trust broker – the only institution seen as both obligated and performing reasonably well on this mandate – with the workplace positioned as the arena in which macro challenges like AI, globalisation and affordability can be translated into lived experience. Done effectively, successful trust brokering delivers an 18-point trust boost among low-income respondents – effectively closing the income-based trust gap.

11. 2026 PAGE–HARRIS POLL CONFIDENCE IN BUSINESS INDEX

Regaining Credibility in the GenAI Era

The latest annual Page–Harris Poll Confidence in Business Index, surveying 15,285 adults across 14 global markets during December 2025, finds public expectations of business running well ahead of public confidence, with economic impact at the centre of the gap. Sixty-one per cent say it is very important for leading companies to create economic impact for everyone, yet only 31% have high confidence they will. That 30-point chasm is not new, but two years of cumulative data now confirm it is actively exploitable – including by politicians who position corporate underperformance on economic issues as a target for populist attack. Three further findings sharpen the picture. Generational divergence is more marked than geographic differences: Gen Z and Boomers differ more from each other than any two countries do, with mental health a Gen Z priority that older generations barely register, and corruption a Boomer fixation that has almost no resonance for younger cohorts. Confidence is

structurally broken: 71% of the global public see little evidence of company action or context, and that invisibility drives an erosion of belief rather than simply disagreement. At the same time the information environment has been fundamentally reordered: search dominates, GenAI is surging in both usage and trust, and news media has been demoted to a secondary, generationally stratified discovery tool.

12. GALLUP STATE OF THE GLOBAL WORKPLACE (2026)

The Human Side of the AI Revolution

Gallup’s 2026 State of the Global Workplace Report – drawing on World Poll data from 140+ countries – finds that global employee engagement has fallen for a second consecutive year to 20%, its lowest since 2020, costing the world economy an estimated \$10 trillion in lost productivity. But the more important story lies beneath that number. The lead cause of the decline is a collapse in manager engagement – down nine percentage points since 2022 and falling five points in a single year – erasing what was once a meaningful engagement premium for those in leadership roles. Gallup’s central argument is that this is not merely a management problem: it is the critical obstacle to realising the productivity gains that AI promises but has so far failed to deliver. Despite significant enterprise investment in AI, only 12% of US employees in organisations implementing AI programmes strongly agree that AI has transformed how work gets done. The strongest predictor of adoption is not the technology but whether managers actively champion it. Fix the manager crisis and you unlock the AI dividend. Leave it unaddressed and disengagement will erode whatever gains AI delivers, with active disengagement also creating potential security risks in the process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS FOR THE 2026 EDITION OF 'REPUTATION, RISK AND RESILIENCE'

Compiling *'Reputation, Risk and Resilience'* every year is a true personal labour of love and – as I said in this year's introduction – akin to a mental and intellectual attempt on Everest! However, for all the solo, midnight oil research, analysis and writing sessions, it is also a true team effort.

So I wanted again to wrap up this year's edition by repeating my most sincere thanks to my wonderful sponsors and partners for the 2026 edition: **Ipsos UK (Gold Sponsor), Roxhill Media (Silver Sponsor), PProvoke Media (Media Partner), and AMEC, CIPR, EACD and ICCO (Industry Partners).**

Their support and collaboration have again enabled me to keep the report 'free-to-air', while helping the work to reach an ever-wider audience. I'm relishing another year of partnership and collaboration with so many fellow practitioners who I now call friends.

The same holds entirely for the amazing international crisis comms community I'm proud to be part of – not least my wonderful colleagues on the **CIPR Crisis Communications Network committee**, to whom I continue to love acting as Special Advisor.

Many thanks, too, to the 'gimlet-eyed grammar tickler', **Melanie Cotton**, for her expert editorial comment and proof-reading, and to the supremely patient **Patrick Hostler**, for his invaluable design work on all four editions of the report.

Although I've used AI (particularly Claude Pro) during the research and synthesis phases of the 2026 project – and for some writing support – this report remains a firmly human endeavour, and will remain definitively so.

To repeat my favourite comment on the 2024 edition, which still warms my heart: "AI finds the obvious patterns. Your report unearths the gold hidden in the cracks between those patterns."

Finally, to Elaine, my co-director at Rod Cartwright Consulting, since we opened our doors in 2019 – who also happens to be my long-suffering wife of 25 years and life partner for the past three decades: I'm sorry to say that I'm finally coming out of my office and you'll have to put up with my stories and dad jokes again! Thank you, as ever, for your patience, forbearance, wisdom and brilliance.