



# **HAVAS** Red

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## **IN PLAIN SIGHT: THE NEW REALITY OF CEO VISIBILITY AND INFLUENCE**

# Introduction

The spotlight on executive leadership has never been brighter — or less forgiving.

Five years ago, the pandemic challenged CEOs to lead through uncertainty with clarity and empathy. **Leading Through Crisis**, published in 2020, offered a framework for high-trust communication during that moment of upheaval. Today, the uncertainty hasn't faded. It has calcified.

CEOs are no longer steering through episodic shocks. They are operating inside a continuous storm, where AI, policy volatility, fractured trust and real-time scrutiny are now baseline conditions.

And that requires a new kind of visibility. In this environment, visibility isn't about being seen. It's about being believed, trusted and followed across platforms, stakeholders and crises. The best leaders don't just show up — they show how and show why.

This white paper examines four forces redefining what it means to lead at the top in 2025:

- The need to anchor decisions in values that endure amid volatility
- The rise of the platform-native CEO who communicates with fluency, consistency and intent
- The erosion of inherited credibility in a fragmented trust environment
- The emergence of AI as a strategic co-pilot that enhances leadership insight but cannot replace human judgment



# I. **Standing on Shaking Ground**

Why CEOs must lead with  
values in times of volatility



*With regulations shifting overnight and stakeholder expectations on the rise, executives are navigating unfamiliar territory. How can CEOs develop point-of-view (POV) strategies that hold up across borders and election cycles? The answer lies in leading with values that endure — even when everything else is in motion.*

From climate policy rollbacks to the dismantling of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, all amid an AI regulatory race, today's leaders are operating in a state of near-constant flux. Just to name a few recent shifts, we've seen delayed climate targets in the U.K., softened legislation in Germany and fully repealed clean energy initiatives in the U.S. — and their ripple effects are global, challenging leaders to act fast while staying anchored. Traditional response strategies like wait-and-see, avoid-and-deflect or stay-in-your-lane are no longer viable. In this new reality, values are the only constant. This calls for a new leadership posture: one that blends decisiveness with adaptability and integrity. Where once authenticity was the gold standard, today it must be paired with accountability. Being authentic is not enough if it causes harm, contradicts company values or leaves stakeholders questioning where you stand.

Take the shifting tech landscape: AI is evolving at breakneck speed. At the end of 2024, Microsoft AI CEO Mustafa Suleyman spotlighted **five disruptive capabilities** on the horizon, from self-improving models to emotionally intelligent, vision-enabled AI companions. Meanwhile, U.S. lawmakers introduced **over 700 AI-related bills** last year alone. Europe's **AI Act** is establishing a risk-based AI classification system via phased enforcement. The U.K. is pursuing a **principles-based model** that will likely lead to

regulatory divergence from the EU. Each region's path is unique — and increasingly hard for global companies to navigate.

The same is true of climate regulations, where changes in policy direction — like the **U.S. emphasis on fossil fuel** infrastructure or the **U.K.'s delay on petrol car bans** — complicate long-term sustainability strategies. An approach that works in one market maybe undermined in another within months. Yet leaders cannot afford paralysis.

Those who endure — who build real trust — are not those who react to each shift, but those who lead with consistency. That kind of leadership demands introspection, humility and the ability to evolve without losing sight of core values. It's not about picking sides but standing firm in your principles — grounding strategy in values that build trust, guide decisions and promote coherence across markets.

For example, when corporate DEI became a political flashpoint in early 2025, **Cisco** CEO Chuck Robbins was among the first to defend his company's policies in Davos — and continued to do so. Meanwhile, **Patagonia** has remained unwavering in its environmental stance, regardless of the ongoing challenges inherent in corporate sustainability. In addition, **Microsoft** prepared early for the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and has taken the opportunity to continue championing global data privacy.

The key is to flex and communicate clearly and consistently, internally and externally, without flip-flopping. That means:

- Taking a clear stance — because silence is not a neutral position.
- Auditing your current POV regularly: Is this a position you'll stand behind in a decade?
- Rooting your responses in your mission and values to avoid reactionary swings.
- Backstopping decisions with credible data and stakeholder input.
- Creating internal alignment — from boards to business units.
- Stress-testing values through scenario planning to prepare for what's next.

As McKinsey's 2025 *Superagency in the Workplace* report notes, the global C-suite is more regulation-minded than ever, with 37–50% of leaders in markets like Singapore, India and the U.K. identifying as “Gloomers” — favoring stronger oversight and citing ethical concerns as barriers to innovation. Regulatory uncertainty is not a passing phase. It is the new backdrop for leadership. The only way forward is to lead with values that transcend the moment.

## LEADERSHIP IN ACTION: Amanda Blanc on corporate responsibility

*“[There is] no non-diverse hire at Aviva without it being signed off by me and the chief people officer... Not because I don't trust my team but [because] I want to make sure that the process followed for that recruitment has been diverse, has been properly done, and is not just a phone call to a mate saying, 'Would you like a job? Pop up and we'll fix it up for you.'”*

— Amanda Blanc, CEO, **Aviva**

The CEO of Aviva demonstrates a consistent blend of strong values, evidence-based decision-making and stakeholder alignment. She takes a principled stance on a range of issues, from gender equality and climate responsibility to customer fairness. For example, in her intervention of Aviva's hiring practices to tackle systemic bias, it

is reported that Blanc personally reviews any non-diverse hire to ensure recruitment processes are fair, transparent and free from the old “tap on the shoulder” culture. This approach shows how she makes values an operational priority, and where possible, translates them into tangible policies.



## II. The Multichannel CEO

Platform fluency as a  
leadership imperative



*Leadership today is less about the podium and more about the platform. In an era of radical transparency and constant communication, a single keynote or earnings call isn't enough. The most effective CEOs no longer lead from the top down — they lead across.*

Today's leaders are expected to show up consistently across channels, connecting with employees, investors, customers and the public in real time. Visibility is no longer just about presence — it's about purpose. CEOs who understand how to flex their message across platforms while staying rooted in their values are better equipped to build trust, shape culture and move their organizations forward.

### **Mixternal is the new norm**

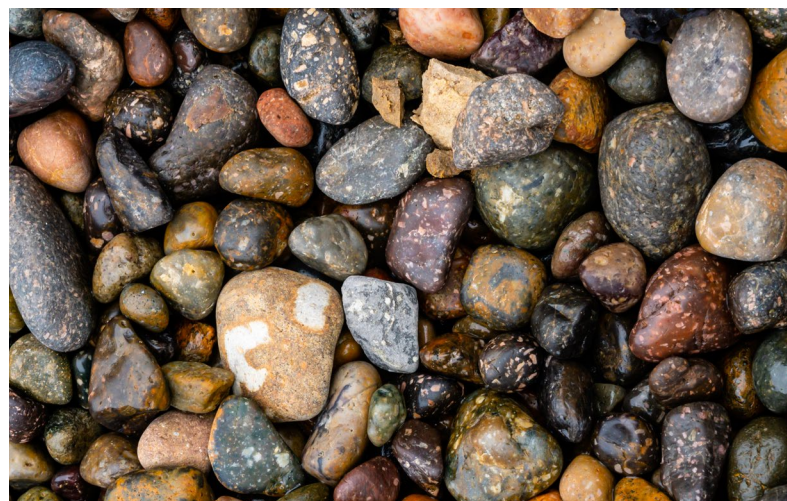
*In today's hybrid information landscape, every internal memo is a potential headline. Executive content must resonate across employees, investors and the public — with transparency, timing and tone aligned.*

What's emerging is a new kind of fluency — one where the CEO's message doesn't shift with the platform but strengthens through it. That means being clear and confident in an investor call, empathetic and energizing in an internal email, thoughtful and authentic on a podcast, and human and transparent on LinkedIn. The message may be adapted for the medium, but the core should remain intact.

When this ecosystem breaks down — when a CEO tries to sound one way to their own employees and pushes back against external narratives without being honest about whether there is any validity and substance to speculation — it not only signals

misalignment but generates distrust and internal dissent.

For example, in early 2024 when former Reach Plc CEO Jim Mullen claimed that Reach would end the year with the same teams it began with after cutting more than 700 jobs across the firm in 2023, he sought to reassure staff that he was being committed, upfront and honest. His communications over the year (about restructuring, job cuts, business strategy and audience performance) sought to reassure employees amid cost pressures, and he wrote directly to staff in November 2024 saying "external commentary" on the company was "noisy, distracting and, to be honest, a bit lazy at times." He added, "I have kept my word and have not changed this commitment." Further significant restructuring followed, and staff expressed anger over learning of the plans through media coverage instead of internal communication, calling the morale situation "rock bottom."



The elevation of the chief communications officer (CCO) reflects a broader shift in how organizations — and other C-level executives — perceive the value of strategic communication. Once considered a support function, corporate communications now often sits at the heart of business strategy. Moreover, the emergence of CCO-plus titles that combine communications with marketing, ESG or corporate affairs, for instance — which have **increased by 88% in the last five years** — demonstrates the expanding scope and strategic importance of communications leadership in today's complex business environment.

### **CCO on speed dial**

*As of 2024, **56% of CCOs reported directly to the CEO**, up from 22% the previous year, underscoring the role's growing influence in guiding corporate reputation, stakeholder engagement and crisis management.*

As communication habits evolve, so too must the channels CEOs use to connect. **LinkedIn** remains the dominant platform for executive thought leadership — a digital stage for op-eds, personal reflections and cultural commentary — especially as traditional media opportunities dwindle. But new platforms and tactics are also gaining traction. Some leaders are experimenting with TikTok or borrowing its storytelling style — short, informal and authentic — to connect with younger audiences or bring levity and relatability to the workplace. **TikTok-like formats** can help humanize executive voices, while **video** also has the power to bring authenticity to

LinkedIn posts. In this environment, communicators must play a critical role: helping executives find their voice, match the message to the moment and balance transparency with professionalism. When done well, these channels offer more than reach — they offer resonance.

The bar has risen. Silence, once seen as caution, can now be read as absence. And inconsistency, once considered a minor risk, can shake confidence fast. The modern CEO must not only lead the business — they must also lead the narrative.





# LEADERSHIP IN ACTION:

## Robert Isom on crisis communication

In January 2025, following a tragic midair collision involving an American Airlines flight, CEO Robert Isom exemplified effective multichannel communication. Within hours, he released a heartfelt **video statement** expressing deep sympathies and outlining the company's immediate priorities. Over the coming days, Isom continued to provide frequent updates through press conferences, additional videos and social media posts.

Responding to a tragedy of this magnitude requires clarity, discipline and speed. Isom's approach underscored the importance of consistent, cross-platform communication in building trust and guiding various stakeholders through challenging times. Many praised his approach, including **Axios** stating, "While your first communication is never going to be your last in a crisis of this scale, it does set the tone — and the tone American Airlines established was transparent and empathetic."



# III. The Credibility Conundrum

Redefining trust in an  
age of fragmentation

*Stories may inspire, but facts defend. The most resilient CEO narratives are those that can stand up to scrutiny — and withstand the next news cycle.*

### **Old visibility**

*One keynote, one quote, one annual report. New visibility: Multi-platform, always-on, high-risk, high-return. What used to be a once-a-quarter moment is now a minute-by-minute expectation.*

### **New visibility**

*Multi-platform, always-on, high-risk, high-return. What used to be a once-a-quarter moment is now a minute-by-minute expectation.*

A CEO's credibility used to come pre-installed with the title. That is no longer the case. Today, credibility must be earned in real time. Leaders face a more fragmented and discerning audience than ever before: employees, customers, regulators and investors, each with their own priorities and expectations. One message rarely satisfies all. What's more, perception — not presence — has become the true test of trust.

In this new reality, smart leaders are adapting their **communication style** without sacrificing substance. They are transparent with regulators, empathetic with employees, values-driven with customers and performance-oriented with shareholders — while staying rooted in a single, coherent narrative.

The problem? Most companies still default to generic messaging. And in today's environment, one-size-fits-all

communications not only fall flat — they can backfire. Whether it's a purpose statement that rings hollow or a strategy update that skips the "why," messages that miss the mark erode trust and amplify risk. That's why precision matters. CEOs who deliver consistent messages while tailoring their words to each audience — and **aligning to core values** — are more likely to build lasting credibility. And those who understand the reality of the people they serve, face the hard truths and **"tell it like it is"** will succeed, financially and socially.

But words alone are not enough. Stakeholders are asking: Where is the proof? Data, outcomes and **third-party validation** are the new currency of trust.

Crucially, perception has overtaken impression as **the metric that matters**. Clicks can be inflated. Sentiment cannot. What people hear, believe and remember has more staying power than what they simply see. And that puts greater pressure on executives to listen deeply, speak carefully and back their words with action.

As the CEO of Reddit, Steve Huffman, put it in a recent **interview**: "The job is not just to lead — it's to be seen leading, with trust and presence." This signals a broader shift: Where once credibility was inherited, it must now be earned and continually demonstrated.

To meet the moment, leading companies are moving beyond messaging. They are investing in **strategic listening**, message testing, stakeholder mapping and real-time sentiment tracking — not just to monitor reputation but to earn and sustain it.





## LEADERSHIP IN ACTION: Steve Huffman on trust

In a recent **podcast** appearance, Reddit co-founder and CEO Steve Huffman offered a refreshingly human take on leadership. His advice? Effective leadership isn't about performance or polish — it's about honesty, clarity and vulnerability. "What are you trying to do, why do you want to do it, what does it take to get there? What's going well, what's not, what are your hopes, your dreams, your fears?" These are the questions he believes leaders should openly answer.

In his view, building trust demands consistency and a willingness to be real, even when it's hard. "Just being straightforward about what we're trying to do and why, and not sugarcoating things, is really important. Vulnerability builds trust, and trust is what builds cohesive teams — and you need cohesive teams to do things." In an age of fragmented attention and fleeting headlines, Huffman's approach reminds us that credibility starts with connection.

# IV. AI-Augmented Leadership

Balancing intelligence with intuition in the C-suite



*AI is transforming executive decision-making — but not without risk. To unlock its full potential, CEOs must pair machine-driven insight with human judgment, organizational readiness and a bias for foresight.*



Artificial intelligence (AI) is fast becoming a boardroom ally. For today's CEOs, AI enables sharper strategic decision-making in high-stakes environments. At **JPMorgan Chase**, for instance, AI helped the bank weather April's market selloff by delivering personalized financial advice at scale — boosting sales in asset and wealth management by 20%. Across fraud detection, credit scoring and trading, AI-driven efficiencies saved the bank nearly \$1.5 billion.

The rise of digital twins and agentic AI adds another dimension. At **SAS Innovate 2025**, companies like Epic Games and Georgia-Pacific demonstrated how executives can simulate complex decisions before making them. By continuously monitoring market trends, for example, and instantly flagging potential risks or opportunities, these tools allow leaders to test, model and iterate, reducing delays while ensuring accuracy and unlocking foresight in a way traditional dashboards never could.

For CEOs, AI can be a powerful visibility tool, allowing ease in content creation and social media management across channels. But the promise comes with paradoxes. Overuse or misuse of AI can backfire, making messages feel impersonal or off-brand.

New **research** shows that while they are “impressively consistent” in their reasoning, large language models like ChatGPT exhibit human-like cognitive biases — overconfidence, confirmation bias and more. This challenges the assumption that AI is inherently objective, often making decisions as irrationally as we do. Another **study** also warned that AI tools could be slowly impairing our critical thinking skills. CEOs therefore must treat AI as a partner, not a replacement — one that requires oversight, context and human judgment to avoid compounding blind spots.

Today's stakeholders expect AI fluency from the C-suite. But since AI readiness is far from universal, CEOs must continuously evolve their understanding of the technology. While 63% of CEOs in IBM's **2024 CEO Study** say they are pushing generative AI initiatives, fewer than half of their executive teams feel equally prepared. The enthusiasm is clear — but execution is lagging. Leaders cite roadblocks ranging from unclear ROI and data integration challenges to talent gaps, cultural resistance and ethical uncertainty.

AI's role in the modern corporation may be transmuting by the day, but it's important that CEOs stay steady in their commitment to using AI to enhance clarity and extend their reach without outsourcing authenticity.

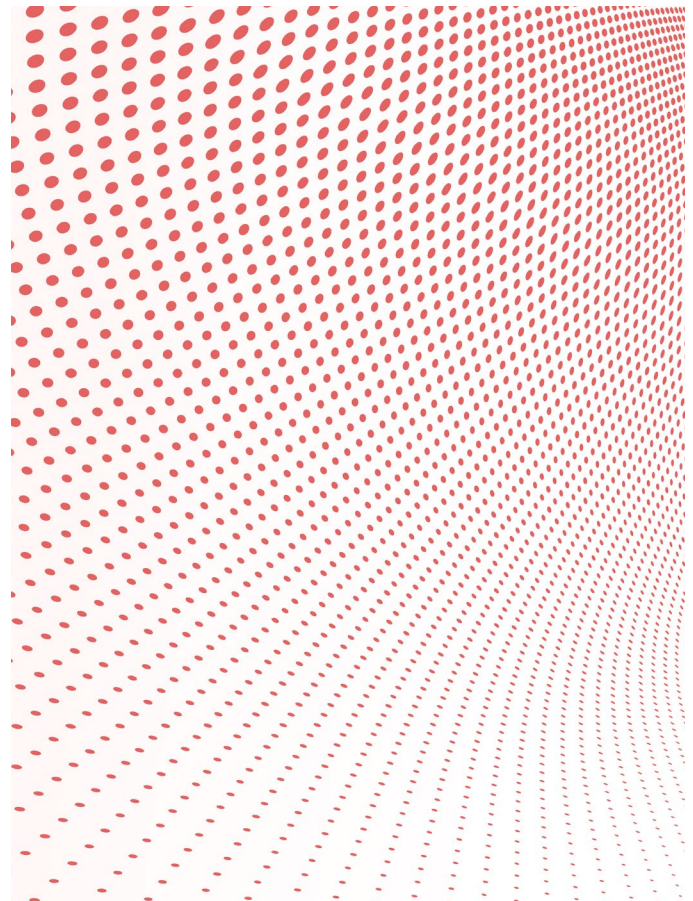


# LEADERSHIP IN ACTION: Arvind Krishna on scaling AI responsibly

As Chairman and CEO of IBM, Arvind Krishna has become one of the most prominent voices on the promise — and the limits — of AI in business. Under his leadership, IBM has **doubled down on AI** as a core strategic focus, launching enterprise-ready tools like watsonx while also advocating for responsible governance and transparency.

In **interviews** and **public remarks**, Krishna has consistently emphasized that generative AI is not a magic bullet — it's a tool that must be integrated thoughtfully, with the right data, talent and guardrails in place. He emphasizes that the winners in generative AI will not be those with the most data — it will be “those with the most relevant data, the most trusted models and the most organizational alignment.”

Krishna's leadership exemplifies a balanced approach to AI adoption—prioritizing both innovation and responsible implementation to ensure that AI technologies deliver tangible value while aligning with organizational goals.



### What CEOs and comms teams should do now

- *Audit your visibility ecosystem*
- *Map stakeholders and tailor messaging*
- *Embed comms into strategic decisions*
- *Stress-test values through scenario planning*
- *Implement AI with transparency and alignment*

## Final Thoughts

Executive leadership is being redefined — not by position alone, but by purpose, presence and precision.

In a world of shrinking attention, rising skepticism and accelerating change, visibility is not about being seen everywhere. It is about showing up where it matters — with clarity, consistency and credibility.

The bar has risen. CEOs must now lead across audiences and channels, balance intelligence with intuition, and remain steady as the ground shifts beneath them. Those who default to silence or spin risk eroding trust. Those who embrace transparency and coherence — even when the answers are complex — will shape the future of leadership.

And as AI rewrites the rules, it is not the loudest or the fastest who will lead. It is those who can anticipate what is coming — forecasting market shifts, customer behavior and operational outcomes — while staying grounded in human insight and organizational purpose.

This moment is not just a test — it is an opening. For leaders who are willing to listen deeply, act boldly and communicate with intention, there is a real opportunity to build stronger connections, smarter strategies and more resilient organizations.

The future will favor those who show up — and lead with clarity, courage and conviction.

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**UNEXPECTED ideas.**

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