The State of Play

Abstract This chapter reviews the current state of the communications profession. We consider different types of communicator roles, whether communicators speak the same "language" as their colleagues, and why there is a curious lack of lateral mobility of these professionals in organizations. We observe how communicators do not position themselves within a larger behavioral science frame. We also review the potent threats of new technologies, including generative language models such as GPT-3.

Keywords Structural dynamics · Generative language models · Behavioral science · Career mobility

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Communication reflects organizational life, which itself mirrors profound transformations taking place in our societies. Organizations are coping with sprawling complexity, information overload, and decreased levels of morale and trust. Technologies that were meant to liberate and connect us have ensnared us. In organizations, we are told to respond to these challenges by being flexible, agile, learn to manage in VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) environments, engage in multi-tiered thinking, embrace paradox, develop better work–life balance, work collaboratively, and somehow find enough hours in the day to foster innovation. But all this sometimes feels like magical thinking.

The truth is that many organizations and employees are worn out. And many Comms people are exhausted, after years of having to simultaneously manage all the above, while facing steep learning curves in mastering new technology, performing as an organization's cheerleaders, serving as advisors to senior leaders, keeping a finger on the pulse of the media, and anticipating the evolving needs of clients and employees in an ever-shifting competitive landscape.

Moreover, we have seen some seismic changes in the overall communications landscape. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated one of the most dramatic transformations the modern workplace has ever seen. From helping employees and leaders adjust to a global work-from-home experiment, to ensuring business continuity and connection among geographically dispersed stakeholders, the pandemic has delivered unprecedented challenges to the profession. And several of those challenges are here to stay. Flexible working, for many companies, is becoming a permanent feature of organizational life (Jacobs, 2021; Mattu, 2021; Newport, 2021).

It's important to remember that most of these Covid-era challenges accelerated a trend that was already evident: a broader movement toward alternative ways of working and activity-based workplaces. The modern office has seen huge and highly consequential changes in spatial layouts and design. Particularly in many city centers with high commercial real estate costs, there has been a move away from closed offices and cubicles to open-plan environments. These redesigns have often proved controversial with employees, as they have involved significant knock-on effects in terms of lack of privacy, increased noise, and decreased productivity, even as they have been designed to enable greater collaboration (McHale, 2021).

New technology has also brought enormous changes to the communications field. Social media has been around and disrupting the communication landscape for some time (although we are only now learning the extent to which it benefits and threatens our organizations and societies), but new AI-based generative language models, such as GPT-3, are emerging as significant threats to the Communications profession. Generative AI is already well known among journalists, but for some reason it has not yet entered the consciousness of many communications practitioners. As a result, many communicators have a false sense of security, confident in the increasingly erroneous belief that they provide services that could never be outsourced to a machine. Journalists are realizing, and writing about, the fact that GPT-3 can produce credible copy with breathtaking speed and efficiency—and Communications is ripe for the plucking, particularly with so many of our organizational messages being formulaic and uninspired.

But, and at the risk of indulging in an overworn axiom, I also believe that these developments offer communications practitioners an opportunity. Communicators can leverage these technologies to do the more mundane work of comms so that we humans can focus on the higher value-added areas. Only humans can be thoughtful and engaged enough to trigger the mysterious process of motivating employees, clients, and other stakeholders to make better decisions, solve problems more effectively, and bring their full selves to the office. Only humans can foster a sense of openness and curiosity about the plethora of complex emotional experiences we have together—from moments of revelation and deep connection to the psychological injuries, both large and small, that come from work.

Let's explore the state of play.

Types of Communicator Roles

Communication roles have been traditionally divided into three main areas: *External Communications*, which focuses on media relations and external stakeholders, and usually includes corporate social responsibility (CSR) and executive speeches; *Brand Communications and/or Marketing*, which focuses on an organization's value proposition and brand identity and strategy; and *Internal Communications*, which is sometimes rolled up into an HR department, focusing on employee communication and internally facing executive communication.

Of the three main areas, Internal Comms is the most different animal because of its internal focus, being chiefly preoccupied with employees. Internal comms is best understood as covering the middle part of the larger employee lifecycle, as it picks up from where recruiting/employer brand ends and actual employment begins, and then ceases when employees exit an organization. Former employees, or alumni, then re-enter the external communications world. Because it is internally focused, and therefore not seen as such high stakes, it is the area of Comms that is often the lowest status and as such, it is sometimes under-resourced and under-skilled.

There have always been a lot of gray areas in Communications as a huge array of messages are designed for and applicable to both internal and external audiences. Most communications are not quite binary in terms of audience appeal. This fact accounts for the high degree of role ambiguity within communications teams. Communicators often argue over whose purview a particular message might fall into and this ambiguity reveals both the power dynamics and an internal and external divide that is more fundamental and philosophical than first appears.

In organizational communication, there is always a tension between proactive reputation management and a desire for transparency. The experience of working for an organization is very different than how it is perceived by the outside world. As outsiders, there are things we look for when we are considering joining a new company, and we can sometimes be pushovers for an organization's marketing material and carefully curated brand identity. But when we get inside an organization and see the system from within, the situation changes considerably. The rose-tinting disappears, and reality is brought into relief. And our communication needs change. We need more candor.

External communications practitioners are, at the most basic level, tasked with prevention strategies. They are stewards of the reputation of an organization, as well as the reputation of its senior executives. External communicators learn to be very discerning with how information is communicated. They are naturally cautious, particularly when managing the media. They can be oblique. Media training programs often teach executives (and politicians) to become highly skilled at evasion. This is part of the game that we play in organizations, what organizational consultant Peter Block (2016) described as the *bureaucratic mindset*.

Internal communications practitioners are, at the most basic level, tasked with promotion strategies. The role is essentially about fostering

transparency and openness. Internal communicators are tasked with trying to find out what's going on in the organization, enabling two-way communication, and motivating employees to perform better. They try to understand what is on the mind of employees, how to access the intellectual capital employees possess, and how to build a shared sense of purpose.

This creates something of a double bind for the in-house Communications team. Employees smell spin from a mile away and do not appreciate communications that implicitly refute the fact that they are discerning consumers of internal information. Employees have uncanny skills of perception, able to see and feel the gap between an organization's espoused values and its actual in-use culture. Employees especially dislike communications that feel like indoctrination in corporate propaganda, or which contain *marketese* (marketing jargon). Yet, to tell the unvarnished truth—about business conditions, competitive threats, leadership challenges, redundancies, restructurings—isn't so easy, or without consequences especially when the reputation of the company may be threatened, and employees and clients alike are fickle.

So internal communicators often look for ways to hedge their communications, by incorporating a selective degree of authenticity, while being mindful of adverse reputational or legal exposure. Sometimes the result can be a little…vague. I can recall many instances, working in financial services, where I felt like I was getting more information about what was going on in the company from publications such as the *Financial Times* than what was contained in internal emails, town halls, or even conversations with managers. Although external media clearly have their own biases and inaccuracies, incomplete information is usually better than no information at all, especially during a crisis.

Comms Teams Speak a Different Language

Organizational communicators have a big challenge with language. I am not referring to English, French, Bahasa, or Mandarin, but rather to the aspects of language that we pay most attention to in our organizational lives.

Because internal communicators often need to hedge their bets and navigate the tension between transparency and reputation management, organizational communications tend to seesaw between prevention and

promotion strategies. This is probably very taxing for the brain—and for the communicator.

As I discussed in the Introduction, a terrific framework to understand this comes from systems theory, and specifically David Kantor's theory of structural dynamics (Kantor, 2012). One dimension of structural dynamics concerns the three *communication domains* that individuals use when they're interacting. Kantor called these communication domains, which is quite fitting for our purposes here, because they essentially refer to the hidden language that people speak—or more specifically the things that they tend to pay the most attention to while communicating. The three domains are: Power, Meaning, and Affect. Kantor memorably described those who can recognize the hidden structure of communication, and adjust their behavioral repertoire accordingly, as being able to "read the room" (Kantor, 2012).

As a quick review, *Affect* is concerned with the emotional realm, especially in terms of trust and psychological safety within groups, establishing a sense of connection, and a sense of openness and inclusion. The domain of *Meaning* is about analytical thought, big ideas, and an overriding sense of purpose. The domain of *Power* is the most action-oriented of the three communication domains and is focused on shorter-term time horizons, to do lists, and accountability.

In structural dynamics, a frequent cause of conflict, between individuals and in teams, is due to *not speaking the same language*. And sometimes, very often in fact, the *in-use* communication domain of a team or organization is dramatically different from the dominant communication domains of the individuals who comprise that team or organization. This is an especially helpful framework for describing what happens in Communications teams.

While not true in every case, most for-profit organizations communicate in *Power*. It is the language of action, accountability, and completion of tasks. It is the quintessential language of business. Skilled communicators must therefore become fluent in the language of Power if they are going to succeed in these environments. And with many coming from a business journalism background, this usually is not that difficult. Business journalists understand Power.

The problem occurs when organizations are too dominant in one domain. Organizations that communicate in Power, for example, face enormous challenges when they are designing and delivering messages around topics such as organizational culture, leadership development,

collaboration, innovation, corporate social responsibility, and other related topics. And leaders, when they try to switch gears to address these topics, often struggle with tone, authenticity, and credibility.

Communicating in Power is not a bad thing, and it's important to remember that there are no "bad languages" in structural dynamics. But it is also important to understand that organizations usually over-rely on one language over the others, and this has an outsized impact on their communication. Note that Power is not the dominant language in every organization: for example, many non-profits are more dominant in the languages of Meaning and sometimes Affect. These companies sometimes need to *practice developing* Power to improve their commercial acumen and ensure that they communicate and interact effectively with business stakeholders.

The overall goal for organizations should be about developing fluency and versatility in all three domains. Different challenges require different languages, as well as different tactics. For communications about organizational culture, for example, we really need to inculcate a sense of trust and psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019). The healthiest organizational cultures are those in which people feel connected, have a shared future, and sense they are safe (Coyle, 2018). Communicators and leaders cannot make those things happen by relying solely on the language of Power. This is where Affect, with its high levels of trust, and Meaning, which rallies toward an overarching purpose and shared vision, can really come in handy.

Let's look at this from a more neuroscientific perspective. Communicating in Power probably activates the task positive network (TPN). However, communicating in Affect would almost certainly activate the default mode network (DMN). Communicating in Meaning probably activates them both; however, not at the same time (remember that each neural network suppresses the other [Boyatzis, 2014]). Meaning, therefore, is an especially interesting language. It enables a movement back and forth from the TPN and DMN. I would surmise that this is the reason that "bystanding in Meaning"—Kantor's term for enabling *generative dialogue*—is such a powerful practice. It allows us to use more of our brains—quite literally.

The in-use communication domain is often a point of concealed tension for teams. More externally oriented communications professionals, who have an implicit preference toward prevention strategies, are often dominant in Power—or if they're not, they learn how to be,

but other communicators may struggle with Power. After all, the best communicators are those who can condense complex information into a few core messages and set a fitting emotional tone. This is a skill that requires significant versatility in both Meaning and Affect. This domain clash represents a hidden but taxing dynamic for many teams, and is often a source of tension, both for the team itself but also with other parts of the organization.

It is for these *structural* reasons that organizational communications sometimes come across as a little tone-deaf. Communication rings hollow when it is not delivered in the right language.

I suspect that it is also for these *structural*, rather than *attitudinal*, reasons that many communicators experience such low levels of job satisfaction or find their roles so unsatisfying. The same is probably also true for HR and many other functions that work in the organizational culture space. There is a profound and unmet need for greater levels of Meaning and Affect.

Shifting Job Titles

Job titles of senior communication roles are beginning to change, no doubt reflecting a broader transformation in the remit of the Communications function. Talking to recruiters, perusing job listings, and gleaning lists of the most influential in-house communicators, such as the *2021 Influence 100* (PRovoke Media, 2021), new patterns are emerging:

- *Head of Corporate Affairs* is increasingly visible as the catch-all title for all activities pertaining to communication and reputation management and is starting to transcend the *Chief Communication Officer* role. Corporate Affairs runs the gamut from internal and external communications to government relations, community affairs, and investor relations. Although the idea of integrating these different functional areas is a compelling story, it will be interesting to see whether one person can really fulfill such a gigantic remit, especially when considering that the information needs of these stakeholders are quite diverse. (I personally am more inclined toward distributed leadership models, such as Heifetz et al.'s [2009] *adaptive leadership*. But this will be an interesting space to watch.)
- Similarly, leaders of internal communication functions are increasingly being referred to as *Head of Employee Engagement*. This is

also a noteworthy development, reflecting a growing awareness that internal stakeholder management involves more than communication, and should be deeply intertwined with an organization's leadership, brand identity, professional development opportunities, and other initiatives pertaining to organizational culture.

The evolution of the types of roles in Communications is worth our study, both as an indication of where the profession is going, but also—and perhaps more importantly—of the challenges that organizations continue to face in the communications space. Clearly there is a need for greater alignment of corporate messages, as the remit of communication gets bigger and bigger. But how does this evolution apply to the career trajectory of communications executives?

Where Do CCOs Go?

Observers of Chief Communications Officers (CCOs) sometimes note an unusual feature of communications vis-à-vis other infrastructure functions: CCOs tend not to be laterally or upwardly mobile in terms of performing other types of senior organizational roles. In fact, it is extremely rare to hear of a CCO who goes on to become, for example, a Chief of Staff, a COO, or especially a CEO. This is not so true for other infrastructure functions. For example, it's not uncommon to see a Head of HR or a senior Strategy officer move into a Chief of Staff role, or a senior Risk or IT executive, or Head of Business Development become a COO (Bennett & Miles, 2006). And this lack of career mobility is not just about CCOs; it's true for more junior communicators too.

Why would this be the case? Communications executives are trusted advisors to CEOs, and few roles in an organization require as much depth and breadth in terms of understanding an organization's businesses, operations, and political landscape. Communicators are uniquely able to describe and elucidate what makes an organization tick and they have privileged access to the C-suite, where they can peek behind the curtain, see if the emperor has clothes, all the while coordinating and aligning messages. I'm mixing my metaphors here, but it's a valid observation. Communications executives represent a valuable commercial resource, so it's interesting that organizations have not developed better paths for

them to become business and operational leaders—and that communicators themselves do not generally aspire to other types of roles (H+K Global, 2020).

Empirical research on this topic is hard to find, but anecdotally, there appears to be one big (and telling) exception to the trend: the political sphere. At least in American politics, as any avid reader of *Politico* knows, it is quite common for communicators working for politicians, particularly politicians in leadership positions, to go on to meaty roles in government or become heads of consulting firms. This is almost certainly because political communicators are positioned to leverage their considerable skills in messaging along with their expert-level understanding of critical issues, and—perhaps most crucially—their access to the levers of power. This provides a singular advantage when positioning oneself as a conduit of information and action. Political communication is intricately interwoven with *strategy*. This is a formidable skill set indeed, but one that somehow doesn't translate to the corporate sphere. In the corporate sphere, Communication is often separated from strategy. The access is there, but not the ability to formulate and change policy.

Indeed, it may be in that very access to the C-suite that corporate communicators are at their strongest and their most vulnerable. CEOs often handpick CCOs and other key Communications staff because these individuals provide personalized messaging and context for a CEO's speaking engagements, as well as a framework for stakeholder management, especially *vis-à-vis* the media. This delicate work requires a high degree of trust. The closeness that is developed means that CCOs are often implicitly seen as one of the CEO's core team, so much so, that in succession scenarios, CCOs are usually caught up in the resulting turnover. In many industries, it is rare for a CCO to remain in place after a CEO transition. New CEOs generally want their own people and are not especially keen to retain members of the *ancien régime*.

This is not the case in politics, where communicators often work for a variety of political leaders, though usually within a particular political party. Again, this may be because communicators in the political realm are regarded more as *strategic advisors* than messaging specialists—and this may not be as true in the corporate sphere.

Another possibility is that perhaps CCOs don't want to go onto other roles. One of the most common career paths into corporate communications, what many CCOs and executives did *before* Comms, is journalism or writing. This isn't all that surprising given that both journalism and

Communications belong to the domain of words, rhetoric, current affairs, and the media. For organizations, it is usually a win to hire individuals tasked with handling the media from media organizations themselves. For journalists, the financial compensation and prestige associated with joining a high-status organization hold enormous appeal (particularly so given the diminishing financial returns of traditional journalism). But after the journalist joins the Comms team, and becomes a spokesperson for an organization, a curious alchemy sets in where they tend to get pigeon-holed into the Comms identity.

I also suspect that this "outsider" status may contribute to a sense of professional inertia. As I mentioned before, it is unusual for communicators to take on other types of roles, either as lateral moves within an organization or in terms of upward mobility, even though such roles tend to foster remarkable personal and professional growth. Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook, attributed her willingness to try out many different types of organizational roles as a key to developing her own leadership skills and career advancement (Sandberg, 2013). It is good advice, which many communicators do not heed.

Political communicators almost certainly use high levels of Power, Meaning, and Affect, in the structural dynamics sense, in their work. Similarly, the best political speech embodies all three of the Aristotelian appeals. Higher levels of Meaning would also account for the trade-off between financial reward and career fulfillment—many are willing to accept lower pay for greater meaning in their work. The political sphere, of course, sees much lower levels of compensation when compared to the private sector—at least while that individual remains in government. Is a role as a communications advisor to a president or prime minister more meaningful and fulfilling than one for a CEO? It probably depends on the president or the CEO. But what happens after that role is what seems to set communicators apart.

Changing Technologies

We continue to see technology changing the communications landscape dramatically. Channels of communication, both internally and externally, have grown by leaps and bounds, and social media has completely transformed the external communication strategies of virtually all organizations, both large and small. Organizational and executive communications are subject to the same forces that afflict the internet at large, both beneficial (visibility, voice, direct feedback from customers) and detrimental (disinformation, fake news). Instant interactivity with stakeholders, for better or worse, is now a reality, and communications are transmitted with hyper speed and viral intensity.

The same is not always true with internal communications, particularly in highly regulated industries. Many companies block access to social media platforms for their employees internally. This has led to the development of enterprise social media platforms (ESMPs), such as Yammer, Chatter, and Jive, which allow corporate administrators to enable some degree of interactivity while carefully curating content. While these platforms have not generated comparable levels of engagement and buzz as the better-known external platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), the field has been under-studied, with a surprising lack of peer-reviewed research.

However, this may be changing. A recent flurry of research has demonstrated numerous tangible benefits of ESMPs, including increased employee knowledge sharing (Qi & Chau, 2018), better team improvisation (Sun et al., 2020), and changes to perception management strategies on the part of employees (Sun et al., 2021). It is, however, interesting to note that most of this new research on ESMPs is coming out of mainland China. While this peer-reviewed research is welcome, of high quality, and marks an important contribution to the field, there are concerns about its ecological validity of in settings outside of China. For most mainland Chinese, access to uncensored external social media platforms is highly restricted. It may be the case that ESMPs have more impact in mainland China, and stronger empirical results regarding their efficacy in achieving desirable business outcomes, simply because there are no viable non-enterprise alternatives. More research is needed to know for sure.

AI and Generative Language Models

There is no doubt that social media has transformed the organizational communications landscape. It has done so primarily through offering a greater range of mediums, but also requiring that messages be adjusted to fit each medium. A classic example is Twitter, where messages need to be condensed to 280 characters. The channel of delivery has an important impact on the context and tone of electronic communications, which I will explore in greater detail in Chapter 4. Marshall McLuhan's famous axiom that "the medium is the message" has never been more relevant (McLuhan, 2013).

Even as social media has changed how organizations communicate, new technologies are transforming the nature of the content itself. AI and *generative language models* are now able to create original content, mimic narrative styles, and in some case, design compelling rhetoric that can sway and motivate. Currently, the most famous generative language model is GPT-3, which was unveiled in 2020 by OpenAI, a San Francisco-based research company.

Those who follow AI know that it is hugely consequential and will have an enormous impact on not only our work lives but on our societies at large, with profound implications for civil liberties, privacy, and governmental regulation. AI technologies cover a sweeping range of possible applications, from facial recognition software to mental health chatbots, to military technology, to the generative language models we are discussing here. Governments and regulators around the world are struggling to catch up to the precipitous pace of technological advancement and implementation. And researchers are also struggling to catch up, to understand the enormous societal impacts these technologies may unleash. In just the past year, we have seen several fascinating studies, with many more in the pipeline. It is a space worth watching and watching closely.

It's clear already that generative AI poses a significant threat to the communications profession. This cannot be overstated. In terms of day-to-day content production such as press releases, corporate announcements, and basic journalism, GPT-3 and its variants can produce convincing and accurate copy in a fraction of the time it takes a human being. The largest, highest-performing GPT-3 variant, DaVinci, even writes jokes (AI Weirdness, 2021). Granted, they are pretty bad jokes,

but, if you think about it, so are most people's. The point is that DaVinci can do it.

But don't hand in your resignation slip just yet. We are a long way from being able to surrender organizational communication to a machine, at least for the time being. This is for a few different reasons, and I suspect even more will present themselves in the coming years.

The first reason is that there is a dark side to these technologies. Researchers at Georgetown University found that GPT-3 (terrifyingly) excels at generating disinformation (Buchanan et al., 2021), a phenomenon *Politico*'s AI reporter Melissa Heikkilä (2021) cleverly described as "filling the swamp." The research found that GPT-3 can craft slick and credible-sounding messages with a distinctly partisan tilt, from QAnon conspiracy theories to climate change denial. Other research has shown that generative language models can amplify extremist narratives and radical ideologies (McGuffie & Newhouse, 2020). Just what the world needs…

Most generative AI technologies use something called *reinforcement learning systems*, which adjust themselves to maximize the likelihood that users of these technologies will behave in certain ways. We see this a lot in social media, and there is compelling evidence that reinforcement learning creates powerful feedback loops, which probably is a form of conditioning in that it triggers the brain's reward systems.

While the societal impacts of these developments are for governments and regulators to tackle, it's clear that the rise of the machines to handle more delicate organizational communications will take some time, although perhaps not as much time as we think. It will be interesting to see if and how generative AI, once it is more widely used in the corporate sphere, will mirror the "partisan tilt" of an organization's corporate value proposition, its competitive positioning, and even its own internal systems of political allegiance, privilege, and oppression. I fear we'll find out.

The second reason that generative AI is not coming for your job just yet is that its content is decontextualized. GPT-3 is a generative technology, but it doesn't follow that the content it generates is meaningful or emotionally coherent. It's like Alan Turing's imitation game, where a series of questions can determine if one is interacting with a human or a machine (Turing, 1950). For any issue of real consequence, GTP-3 is an imitation and not the real McCoy.

It is in this sense of imitation that generative AI presents an opportunity for the communications profession. It may liberate communicators

from having to produce mundane and humdrum organizational communications and allow them instead to focus on the kind of higher value-added and impactful communications that a generative model would never be able to produce.

And that's where neuroscience and psychology come in. If communicators invest in training in neuroscience and psychology, they will learn to leverage what the research is showing. They can learn to craft messages more in line with how the brain works, humanize organizational communication, as well as position the content they produce in a more meaningful emotional context—something a generative language model will probably (?) never learn to do. Generative AI might just be the push we need to progress the communications profession, by driving communicators to focus on more sophisticated, informed, and sensitive work—that can only be done by people.

Are Comms People Closeted Behavioral Scientists?

I have a pet theory that many communications and HR practitioners are closeted behavioral scientists. I developed this theory after getting my doctorate, when a surprising number of corporate communications and HR people approached me after hearing me at workshops, watching one of my interviews or podcasts, or via LinkedIn, wanting to get more information and advice about going back to school and possibly becoming psychologists themselves. I believe that this is connected to unmet needs around Meaning and Affect in both the communications and HR professions. In hindsight, that was certainly the case for me.

These discussions helped me realize that I had been a closeted behavioral scientist during my long communications career. Every time I did an employee survey, or conducted a focus group, solicited opinions from leaders, or partnered with HR in engagement initiatives I was doing quantitative and qualitative research. I wish that I knew then what I know now in terms of statistical analysis and survey design, as I would have done *t*-tests and ANOVAs galore, and probably would have managed to get more accurate data than I ever dreamed of having access to at the time.

In behavioral science, we often ask what it is that leads to change? What is it that leads to people making better decisions? What leads to the ability to flourish? And those are questions that communications teams are also tasked with answering by organizational leaders but also among each other as they seek to design impactful programs and strategies.

This is plainly visible at any corporate communications conference. The only difference is that communicators tend to do this work in isolation, without leveraging the training and empirical knowledge of the behavioral sciences.

This is particularly true with internal communications. Leadership teams often bring in the Comms team and task them with getting employees on board with huge change initiatives in order to bring about innovation and better collaboration. Those are really big tasks, and usually almost impossible to deliver. And yet there is a huge field of behavioral science—and emerging field of neuroscience—which strives to provide answers.

Engagement, in particular, is something of the holy grail in organizations and one of the points of richest collaboration between HR, and Communications, and organizational leaders. But what exactly is engagement? It is a quintessential example of a *latent variable*, precisely because it is so difficult to measure. Latent variables are those which cannot be directly observed but rather are approximated through various measures presumed to assess part of the given construct (American Psychological Association, n.d.). There are many ways to describe engagement, and there are differences in engagement pathways for employees versus customers and other external stakeholders. Engagement often includes concepts such as a sense of ownership, a vested stake, loyalty, emotional connection, a sense of belonging, a sense of accountability, a sense of personal investment in the success of a company. So how would we possibly measure these? Well, in behavioral science, we would do it through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. Again, it's worth considering why Communicators (and HR practitioners) aren't trained in statistical analysis as a part of their core skill set.

There is a huge case to be made for communicators to get much smarter about how they measure their work, but even before that, how the profession tends to operationalize the variables that they want to measure.

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So, what does it mean to up our game? It means being more expansive in how we understand and define communication, getting curious about what good leadership is, going deeper in understanding the meaning of our work lives, and stretching our skill set in measurement and statistical analysis. It also means being discerning consumers of information and its sources. And even more, it means equipping ourselves as change agents, personally embodying the types of behaviors we want to see in our organizations, and helping workplaces become more humane, kinder, more authentic, and more exciting, motivating, hopeful places to work.

Now, let's dive into the neuroscience!

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