



***THE impact OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION
IN DECISION-MAKING COMPANY CEOs***

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Abstract:

This study seeks to explain the relationship that business leaders have with strategic communication within their organization as well as the importance they attach to the strategic function of communication in their management process. More specifically, we sought to find out if strategic communication exerts an influence in the decision-making of CEOs. Our approach allowed us to clarify the perceived value of strategic communication within nine organizations headquartered in Canada. Based on numerous scientific works and writings as well as on different theoretical models, then through empirical research, we proceeded to the validation of two hypotheses. 1) communication becomes strategic when it articulates a message and a process leading to the achievement of a business objective and, more particularly, when these messages and processes are governed by the dominant coalition, namely the main senior leaders of the organization. Strategic communication influences the quality and effectiveness of decisions taken in its role of creating meaning, making people understand, bringing projects to fruition

port. Thus, strategic communication acts as a mediating function of conciliation between various parties that makes room for dialogue

2) the communication

strategic as a management function influences not the decision, but above all, the quality of the transmission and perception of this decision

Keywords: . CEOs – communications – corporate - STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION-

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I. INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the 1980s, communications services began to be used in a more strategic sense in order to support the objectives of organizations (Cornelissen, 2017, p. 12). They thus integrate all forms of communication and they compose interdependent messages that work together in harmony. For companies, the integration into the decisions of elements of communication (image, reputation, identity, positioning, internal communication, external communication) now appear essential. The mastery of communication becomes a major strategic weapon (Boistel, 2007, p. 12). Strategic communication is perceived as an effective coordination of all internal and external communications with the aim of establishing and maintaining a favorable reputation with all parties stakeholders of the organization (Cornelissen, 2017, p. 5) – a stakeholder being any group of individuals or any individual who can affect or be affected by the achievement of organizational goals (Mullenbach, 2011, p.111). As part of a large survey entitled "Audit of CEO Communications" carried out in the first half of 2017 by The Gandalf Group for the Luc-Beauregard Center of Excellence for Communication Research, 33 CEOs or former CEOs, interviewed individually, said that they considered communication in their organization to be "very important" and that it was a strategic function within their organizations rather than a function of tactical executions.

In the same sense, Hallahan et al. explain that the "strategic nature of communication is essential [...] and that it focuses on the way the organization itself presents itself and projects itself thanks to the intentional activities of its leaders" (2007, page 7). Falkheimer et Al (2016, page 100) confirm that "managers find communication crucial for their organizations at a strategic level: to achieve business objectives, for the success of

the organization and so on". The corporate communication function thus takes on a considerable role. It is perceived as the business entity whose objective is to "implement the company's strategies through communication" (Forman, Argenti, 2005, page 246)

- thus reflecting the fact that when the notion of "strategic" is associated with the function "communication", it becomes "a management function" (Hallahan et al., 2007, page 12).

Considered as a management function, communication contributes to the effectiveness of organizations, on a scale equal to that of other management functions traditionally included in an organization. Consequently, the strategic component linked to the role of the communication professional takes a back seat, when compared to the traditionally recognized technical and tactical ones.

The growth of the strategic importance of the communication function as well as the growing strategic role of communication professionals are essential conditions to allow communication to contribute significantly to the effectiveness of the organization.

This contribution reaches its full value when communication is systematically involved in the strategic decision-making process, instead of being relayed to the simple communication of decisions taken by other functions of the company (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2011, p.14).

Although communication appears more and more strategic within organizations, it is still difficult to determine its real contribution to the creation of value for them.

There are still no standards that make it possible to clearly determine the relationship between communication and its impact on organizational performance. Different approaches, indicators, methods and measures as well as evaluation concepts have been put forward by different researchers. The environment on which our study focuses is that of strategic communication within nine small and large Canadian companies from various sectors of activity :

manufacturing, financial, energy, entertainment, retail. Obviously, the organizational structures and the business challenges are different, as are the domain and the geographical dimension of the organizations. Our analysis of the impact of strategic communication thus applies to a fertile and varied territory we present our approach to interviews as well as all the results of our survey of nine CEOs regarding their expectations of strategic

communication, communication strategists – their role, their responsibilities as well as their attitudes and skills –, and this, in the context of decision-making.

We thus aim to validate two research hypotheses :

1st: Communication becomes strategic when it articulates a message and a process leading to the achievement of a business objective.

2nd: Strategic communication is an important management function in

the organization, because it may occasionally have an influence on decision-making but it always has an influence on the way of transmitting relative information to the decision.

1- Strategic communication:

Corporate communication has the essential role of building messages in perfect harmony with the values, business objectives and operating activities of the organization.

Consequently, the management of corporate communication requires a communication strategy that defines an orientation for the organization and that describes the activities carried out by communication practitioners in order to strengthen or maintain the reputation of an organization among its stakeholders (Cornillessen, 2017, p.109). Business communication fully exists when it is strategic - then we speak of "strategic communication". At this moment, strategic communication is part of a management role

part of the decision-making process in organizations (R. Smith, 2017, p.17).

Publications on corporate communication and on public relations have given various meanings to the concept of strategic contribution of communication to decision-making, praising its multiple potential and highlighting the implications in the process of creating corporate value (Hallahan et al., 2007). Three components highlight the concept of

strategic contribution of communication to corporate governance from different angles: the contribution of communication to the definition and dissemination of corporate strategies and guiding values, the analysis and interpretation of the organizational context, and finally, the activation of symmetrical relationships with the company's stakeholders (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2011, p.14).

Strategic communication uses multiple tools from all communication disciplines to interact with the different stakeholders. The combination of actions involving the analysis of issues, the composition and tone of messages and the management of communication processes and tools well describes the strategic mechanism in communication of business.

Paul defines strategic communication as "coordinated actions, messages, images and other forms of engagement aimed at informing, influencing or persuading certain audiences in support of objectives" (p. Farewell 2011, p.3). Farwell presents strategic communication as "the use of words, actions, images or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences in order to shape their behavior in order to advance interests, policies or to achieve goals" (Farwell, 2012, p101). For Hallahan, strategic communication is defined as "the deliberate use of communication by an organization in order to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan, et al., 2007, p. 3).

Strategic communication, in fact, helps the organization to adapt to its environment by establishing a balance between commercial or economic imperatives and socially acceptable behaviors. It identifies and manages the stakeholders and the issues, as well as the audiences and actors from which problems can emerge. It establishes relationships through communication with those on whom the organization depends to achieve its economic objectives and

socio-political. It is also aligned with the company's global strategy, in order to improve its strategic positioning (Argenti et Al, 2005, p. 83). Steyn has developed a model aimed at operationalizing the concept of strategic communication in business. This model, entitled From strategy to corporate communication strategy: A conceptualization, describes six main stages leading to the exercise of strategic reflection in communication, from the analysis to the

deployment of means and tools :

1. Analysis of the internal environment of the company (profile, vision, mission, values, culture, policies and strategies).
2. Identification of internal and external audiences and the normative and functional links that unite them.
3. Identification, description and differentiation of the key strategic issues of the organization, both internal and external such as, for example, mergers or acquisitions.
4. Identification of the implications of each issue on each audience.
5. Formulation of the communication strategy – namely deciding what needs to be communicated to solve the problem and capitalize on the opportunities offered by the issues. For example, in the context of a company merger, communicate relevant information about the extent of the changes for employees.
6. Development of the strategic communication plan and action plans responding to the communication objectives (Steyn, 2003, p. 176).

Steyn's model (Figure 4) demonstrates that the strategy is articulated upstream of the communication plan. In addition, he specifies that the quality and relevance of communication strategies are proportional to the interpretative accuracy resulting from the analysis of the internal environment, the different audiences, external factors and the challenges of the organization.

This ability to interpret the real issues and the impact of these on the different audiences and the organization is the primary source of the constitutive soil of the communication strategy. In other words, a good understanding of the Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental and Legal environment of an organization, combined with a fine analysis, discussed and validated business strategies and objectives with the various stakeholders, ensures the identification of the implications of each issue on each audience and allows to formulate a communication strategy compatible with the business strategy of the organization and capitalize on the opportunities offered by these issues

"The communication strategy is thus the result of strategic reflection and a decision-making process involving different parties (the head of communication, the general manager or president and the general managers of other areas of the organization), all working together to shape and make these strategic decisions (Steyn, 2003; Cornelissen, 2008). The communication strategy is a derivative of the corporate strategy and it must be aligned with the fundamental values – the corporate culture - shared by the members of an organization. On the one hand, the strategic decisions of the company must be translated into specific communication strategies according to various stakeholder groups. On the other hand, the company's strategies should take into account the issues related to stakeholders and reputation identified by communication professionals (Cornelissen, 2008).

By borrowing certain elements from studies related to the postmodern approach to management (Stroh, 2007), it is generally recognized that the effectiveness of decisions depends on the variety and diversity of decision-makers involved in the process. This situation is achieved by involving and engaging with the various audiences who contribute to the meaning and definition of priorities in the communication process, thus strengthening the "activist role" of the head of corporate communication (Holtzhausen, 2002).

This empowerment, resulting from the experiences of different contributors, does not prevent the company from defining its strategic objective, because it is of paramount importance in the communication strategy. This concerns decision-making in terms of identifying the desired position for an organization and how it wants to be perceived in terms of corporate reputation by its various stakeholder groups on which the organization depends (Cornelissen, 2008).

In the era of stakeholder management (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Berman et

al. 1999), the company's communication strategy must be closely linked to the strategic management of the company and stakeholder relations (Steyn, 2003). From this perspective, the communication strategy concerns how to develop interaction with stakeholders in order to realize the organization's vision and support its objectives, that is, the communication strategy aims to create a favorable basis for relations with the main groups of parties stakeholders (van Riel, 1995). Build, preserve and consolidate a brand image what are the ultimate goals of business communication (Van Riel 1995; Cornelissen, 2008) and are among the most important strategic organizational objectives"

In summary, when the corporate communication function focuses on the strategic aspects of its role, linked to the company's strategies, rather than on the tactical elements, it demonstrates its contribution to the organizational effectiveness of the company. To add value to the organization, strategic communication must be able to solve problems communication solutions, which implies that the corporate communication function must actively collaborate in the development of the company's business strategy, policies and positioning.

Communication professionals have a key role to play in organizations. They manage organizational problems, change communication, reputation and other areas (such as marketing communication) that go beyond the traditional scope of the public relations function that originally defined the field (Zerfass, 2009, p.69). As well,

2-The communication strategist:

The concept of strategic communication invites the need to call on one or more strategic communication advisors within the organization itself. What really defines, in the context of integrated corporate communication, what a strategist is? For Lambotte (2016, p.107), being a communication strategist would imply being both able to reflect on the positioning of his organization and his communication on the basis of a rational (strategic) analysis and also having the ability to implement an adapted, agile and contingent strategy. To be qualified as a strategist in an organization, Dameron and Torset (2012, p.28) explain that it can be any person who has participated in a preponderant, proactive and conscious way in a process whose desired result is the development of the organization, the improvement of its competitive positioning, its transformation or its safeguarding. Thus, the strategist is the actor of the strategy, the one who carries out this activity and who conducts his practices (Whittington, 2006, p. 619). According to the latter definition, we can assume that the actor of the communication strategy is the communication professional, the person responsible for communications. However, this is not always the case. Communication, in its strictest sense, that of transmitting information or creating a common sense, is a task shared by several actors in organizations. It is even an essential function of all managers, regardless of their role or responsibilities. They spend a lot of time communicating, as well as collecting and disseminating information. The first function in management according to comments collected from business leaders by Mintzberg (2010) is moreover to "design and maintain a communication device". The role of communication is inscribed in the model as a membrane that surrounds the manager and through which all management activities circulate. Not only does communication occupy a large part of the manager's time, it is also the means by which management work takes shape (Mintzberg, 2010, p. 70). It therefore turns out that this presence of the "communication" function falls on each manager – mitigating, therefore, the exclusive responsibility for communication to the communicator in the organization. The communication professional must therefore constantly adapt his role to the profile, competence and even the communication expertise of each manager with whom he must work. His ability to strategically advise the company on the speech to be held and the communication tools to be deployed is continually evaluated by all internal and external stakeholders; each manager having his opinion on what to say and how to inform the

different audiences relating to his specialty. However, to cope with the many social, political and ethical issues that have an impact on their performance, managers must take communications into account in their day-to-day management decisions (Dolphin and Fan, 2000, p. 100). It is in this context that the communication professional can fully play his role as a strategist. He can thus better advise the manager on the strategic and operational aspects of communication if the latter becomes aware of the benefit he will derive from it for himself and his organization. Despite this openness on the part of managers to benefit from the strategic advice of communicators, communication practitioners are rarely included in the group of the dominant coalition (senior managers) who lead the organization (Brønn, 2001; p. 315). However, the understanding of operational, financial and business issues remains an essential condition for the communicator to achieve the status of recognized strategist and that of full member of the group of decision-makers of the organization. Moreover, despite all the normative theory regarding what Grunig calls "excellent practices", public relations managers (or corporate communications) are not usually perceived as strategic managers (Bronn, 2001, p. 323). The managers of the other functional disciplines closer to the operating activities (finance, marketing, operations, etc.), at the higher hierarchical level of the company, members of the dominant coalition, as well as the leaders of the functional divisions are rather privileged in this regard. In addition, leaders reporting directly to the President are privileged during consultations with regard to communication strategies (Zerfass and Sherzada, 2015, p. 305). To qualify as a communication strategist, three attributes associated with strategic thinking must stand out: know how to use research-based information, work with a plan, and be involved in senior management (Falkheimer et al. 2017, p. 93). For Lambotte, four axes make it possible to distinguish the role of communication strategist: legitimacy, timing, intervention, the spectrum of intervention and the professional posture of the strategist. The axis of legitimacy calls for questioning the involvement of the professional in making the strategy and the level of intervention that is granted to him. The axis of the timing of the intervention, namely the synchronism of the intervention of the communication professional with organizational needs, raises the question of his ability to find a balance between the development of the strategy resulting from a preliminary reflection (qualitative and quantitative) and to act quickly based on his professional expertise (knowledge and skills) and his intuition. The third axis, that of the spectrum of intervention, takes into consideration exogenous factors (ex. trends in communication, new media, etc.) and endogenous (e.g. training and skills of the team, available resources ...), which would allow the identification of actions and communication services to be preferred in connection with the strategy. Finally, the fourth axis, that of the professional's posture, highlights the importance for the communication strategist to connect directly to the organization's strategy without however aligning or submitting to the strategic objectives of the other directorates (Lambotte, 2016, p.108). To succeed in communication, it is necessary, in fact, to know how to give oneself the means to remain free. For the communication professional, this is an essential condition in order to keep a distance essential to the exercise of the fullness of his profession. This freedom is the guarantee of its effectiveness. To get rid of it is to accept a role of tactical executor and not be able to qualify as a strategist. Company managers refusing to recruit a communication professional capable of criticizing, in a constructive way, deprive themselves of the strategic potential and confine the managerial orientations of communication to an instrumental conception which sooner or later will turn against them (Michel, 2004, p.21). Public relations managers (a term still used in many companies to group internal and external communications activities other than those of marketing communication) or corporate communications who report directly to the CEO are more likely to participate in corporate decisions (Brønn, 2014, p. 60). The presence of the Chief Communication Officer (CCO), (in French, the chief of the corporate communications

director or vice-president for corporate communications) - within the management committee - and the place given to him (Dolphin and Fan, 2000, p. 105) will have a direct impact on the value of his contribution to the organization. In the report entitled *The CEO View: The Impact of Communication*, published in 2013 by Arthur W. P. Finally, in the section on what CEOs want to achieve from the communication function in their organization, it is noted that the organizational structure proves to be essential: "The organizational chart is the purpose. CEOs indicate that they are more likely to consult with CCOs on issues outside the traditional communications portfolio, including, in some cases, even extremely technical decisions or strategies, when the CCO reports directly to the CEO". It is also written that when the head of communication does not report directly to the CEO, the communication function is considered to be more tactical than strategic: "On the other hand, the CCO who report to someone other than the CEO, the latter consider that the function of CCO is more tactical than strategic and often more limited to the communication of decisions taken by others. CCOs who have a direct relationship with the CEO are also more likely to be part of the company's executive committee, which, by definition, reviews all strategic decisions or most of the main strategic decisions" (Arthur W. Page Society, 2013, p. 11) – It appears that the best CCOs are those who go beyond their communication function by integrating into the financial, operational and human resources activities of the organization. This thus contributes to establishing their strategic role as head of communication within the management committee, but also to ensuring that the company remains strategically aligned between the various departments (Argenti, 2017, p. 157). CEOs expect the CCO to bring more than a high level of expertise to the table; they also expect management skills and strategic skills. They see him as a kind of partner who also perfectly masters the workings of the organization and who has a deep knowledge of the company, its products and its services, because it is only at this the moment that the communication manager is perceived as an expert of the company that he can really be able to advise the CEO, and this, on an equal footing, that is to say, at a level allowing to effectively develop and formulate an independent opinion. The head of corporate communication is a spokesman, an advisor and a kind of "minister of External Affairs" of the company. Sometimes the head of communications is even described as the alter ego of the CEO. To effectively fulfill this role, the CCO must have a confident personality. CEOs don't want a blessed-yes-yes as a CCO, they want individuals who can argue and sometimes say "no". The network of contacts of the chief communications officer, inside and outside the company, is another key element for the company. This network provides the basis for reporting moods, trends and emerging issues that the CEO might face. The CCO, as a communication strategist, builds bridges between the company and the various stakeholders, both internal and external. He regularly feels the pulse of the internal and external world of the organization and informs the CEO about what the various audiences and the media think and want (Zehnder and Will, 2011). Value creation, a vital element stemming from the strategic contribution of communication in organizations, calls not only on the skills of communicators, but also on the nature of the relationships they maintain with their leaders. Thus, the professional relationship between the manager responsible for corporate communications, the CCO, and his CEO influences just as much the strategic contribution of the communication function within the organization. The CCO and the CEO must get along and have personalities that harmonize – the "chemistry" must be there in order to establish a close relationship of trust and conducive to the success of a real professional partnership. Theoretically, the CCO should know exactly what the CEO thinks He should be able to communicate without always getting the approval of the CEO. On the contrary, the CEO almost never communicates without having previously discussed with the CCO, in particular for any question concerning the materiality⁴ of the company or during public or media appearances (Zehnder and Will, 2011). The organizations that recognize communication as an essential

dimension of strategy are those where the CEO has an intrinsic understanding that communication can be a differentiator of a commercial activity and can therefore contribute strongly to the strategy (Lambotte, 2016, p.102). The cooperation between the CCO and the CEO is thus seen as the key to the success of the communication strategy. Thus, the communication function can directly and fully contribute to the success of the company's overall strategy. By giving communication managers access to the highest decision-making spheres of the organization, by recognizing this role, their contribution to strategic communication becomes all the greater.

3-The role of CEOs in strategic communication

The Swiss firm Egon Zehnder, the largest private executive recruitment firm in the world, published on its website in 2011 an article entitled Communication from the CEO's perspective - an underestimated challenge? (free translation: Communication from the CEO's point of view : an underestimated challenge?). It reports on the questions formulated and the answers obtained by Egon Zehnder and Markus Will, research professors at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland, following interviews with CEOs of large German companies. Thus, Zehnder and Will asked the CEOs how they perceive the role of communication in their functions daily management and in the various tasks that it involves? We discover that CEOs can devote up to half of their working day to communication. Indeed, they spend the majority of their time communicating the organization's strategic plan, mission, vision, operational initiatives, community commitments as well as the good moves and achievements of employees. In fact, some go so far as to say that "communications are essential to the mission of a CEO" (The Gandalf Group, 2018, p. 4).

For CEOs, effective communication on the part of an executive in a company requires not only a high degree of authenticity, but also a certain innate talent, because if the CEO does not have a gift for communicating or does not enjoy talking to people, he will not be able to cope with the requirements imposed on him personally in this role of communicator. The ability to communicate and to promote communication is thus one of the most important requirements of modern CEOs (The Gandalf Group, 2018, p. 4). To make faced with this responsibility related to communication and to preserve or even increase their level of autonomy, CEOs use and guarantee themselves access to a maximum of communication channels. On the one hand, they make sure to build formal links (with their managers who report directly to them) and informal (with other managers or employees) in order to constantly be informed of the evolution and mood of their organization.

Meeting in person, on a daily basis, appears here as the activity most frequently used by CEOs. Externally, they also create links with different stakeholders to monitor their perception of the company. They use places of exchange of information and services (formal and informal meetings, or even transactional) to establish communication with these audiences. On the other hand, CEOs appropriate different traditional media tools, new media and information platforms, to stay abreast of the latest news affecting their sector of activity.

Supported by communication professionals, they ensure that they know the essential information that can positively or negatively influence the operating activities and the reputation of their organization.

CEOs understand well that the media coverage of topics affecting their organization or their field of activity constitutes a threat and an opportunity for organizations.

They understand that the media and social media have an influence on public opinion. Therefore, they attach great importance to everything that corporate communication can bring them (Zerfass et al.,2015, p.304).

CEOs recognize that corporate communications play a crucial and strategic role within their company. The time when communication was essentially a presentation of tactics seems to them

to be over now. For CEOs, communication allows the implementation of business plans, the mitigation of risks and the promotion of the company's image.

Each employee is a brand ambassador" (The Gandalf Group, 2018, p. 4). Wuolanne (2010) describes well the relationship that CEOs have towards communication. He established a theoretical framework in which five components influence the point of view of CEOs on strategic communication. We thus find :

- 1) the role of communication in the strategic process, referring to the commitment of communication in the different stages of the strategic process.
- 2) the activities of the communication function in terms of internal strategy work.
- 3) the activities of the communication function in terms of external strategy work.
- 4) communication as an integral part of strategic management, with reference to management and the way CEOs see themselves as communicators of corporate strategy.
- 5) the influence of the internet and information technologies on communication strategic.

II. Methodology :

This study is based on a qualitative approach The empirical data were collected in the semi-structured interview framework The number of interviews has been determined in order to obtain a sufficient number of participants to shed light on certain general aspects of the problem (Savoie-Zajc, 2007, p. 100) in particular those dealing with the reality of business management by CEOs and the relationship they have with communication and the notion of strategic communication in their organization Our methodological approach is that of a deductive approach - where knowledge theoretical precedes the reading of reality – aimed at answering the hypotheses stated by a certain number of observations. The preliminary analysis, the formulation of the context and the considerations of research allowed us to formulate our hypotheses and the theoretical framework. We're talking here, more precisely, from a hypothetical-deductive research (Mucchielli, 2012, p.6) where the plan of Our methodological approach is that of a deductive approach - where knowledge theoretical precedes the reading of reality – aimed at answering the hypotheses stated by a certain number of observations. The preliminary analysis, the formulation of the context and the considerations of research allowed us to formulate our hypotheses and the theoretical framework. We're talking here, more precisely, from a hypothetical-deductive research (Mucchielli, 2012, p.6)

III. Results and discussion :

Following the interviews carried out with the nine CEOs, we proceeded to transcribe the contents, then integrated them into the NVivo software package. Coding was then carried out to group the subjects. This approach allowed us to identify 19 recurring topics related to our research object. Each of these topics has been analyzed, grouped and listed according to its link with each of the two hypotheses put forward :

A. Communication becomes strategic when it articulates a message and a process leading to the achievement of a business objective.

B. Strategic communication is an important management function in the organization, because it can occasionally have an influence on decision-making, but it always has an influence on the way of transmitting information related to the decision.

The subjects have thus been determined according to our analysis of the meaning of the words used by the interviewees. Then, we cross-checked the results of our analysis to extract the 19 common topics.

This exercise also allowed us to segment the 19 different subjects according to the two hypotheses. To simplify the understanding of the possible links we have synthesized the two hypotheses by groups of keywords,

The Hypothesis A.

Communication becomes strategic when it articulates a message and a process leading to the achievement of a business objective As part of our interviews, from the outset, all the CEOs interviewed stressed

the importance of communication both for them and for their company. For a CEO in the Energy sector, "Communication is part of the company's DNA". "Communication, we really need it. It's at the heart of everything we do," adds a CEO, Retail sector. For another CEO of the Retail sector, "it is an action, which really allows to bring the execution of the work to another level and to ensure a perfect alignment". There communication is also perceived as a "promise" of the leader to all stakeholders, both internal and external, so that they can fully deliver the action plans and the expected results. Communication is seen as a means – as important as that of money for an organization. For all the respondents, corporate communication is strategic, "because it helps and supports the organization to establish the right guidelines and that it is an essential element to the realization of the idea".

In order for communication to become strategic in a company, it must first of all be perceived as important, even essential for the organization. "It needs to start from the top", as highlighted in English by a CEO of the Finance sector .

"If the CEO doesn't make it a priority for his management team, it will never happen" (CEO, Finance sector). The CEO and the dominant coalition therefore play a particularly important role in this acceptance as highlighted in this excerpt: "My colleagues around the Management Committee table know very well that in the "mix" of managerial skills to be developed, nurtured, maintained, strategic communication is important" (CEO, Finance sector).

This need to communicate, as emphasized by Mintzberg (2010, p. 70), favors management work. Communication thus forms the meaning. It allows, in fact, the transmission of the values, the mission, the vision, the objectives and business strategies of the company.

Communication in business must thus be virtuous :

"For me, whether it is a simple or extremely complex communication, there is a number of values that come with communication: transparency, truth, respect, courage. Whether we have a discussion with business partners, with a colleague with whom we are developing a project, with an employee to discuss his performance, with a journalist on a current topic, with the president of a company that we want to buy, with governments, it is necessary, first and foremost, that communication is exercised within this scheme of values. De facto, it shades all the communication of the company" (CEO, Finance sector).

This notion of the values specific to an organization thus influences the very composition of the messages as well as the tactics and tools that result from them. The exercise of analysis and the search for meaning, at the very basis of strategic communication, is thus influenced by the commercial and operational environment, the culture, the values and the codes specific to the company. A company that sells building materials in only one country and another that performs shows all over the world will not have the same perspectives or the same fundamentals.

And, even if two companies work in the same territories and in similar sectors of activity, their identity, based on their own culture and values, distinguishes them in the way they communicate. "There is, indeed, something that is at the same time

eminently intuitive, but eminently guided. There is a color specific to our organization, then communication, operations, etc., have the color of our company" (CEO, Energy sector).

Regardless of the profile and structure of each of the organizations, what nevertheless unites all leaders in the strategic communication planning process is the importance of always questioning the needs of the audience, what they want to hear, in what way, by whom, at what time and on what platform.

The ability of managers to open up to communication, for themselves and their organization, also tends to determine the level of intervention of communication and its strategic capacity thus, when communication becomes a shared responsibility within the dominant coalition, it can prove beneficial for the entire organization.

"Communication does not necessarily increase my role – it increases the role of the entire management committee – it increases responsibility. It's not unconscious.

It's a decision. It is necessary to take the leadership and the accountability of communication.

It's a question of responsibility. Yes, I could say, we have given ourselves a bigger role, more responsibilities, more work, we can say. But, it's chosen. That's what we wanted to do because we said, it's an investment. If we manage it better at the base, at that moment we will benefit from it. Because basically, we don't want to manage crises. It's managing our communication. If we manage it well, it is a strategic element in the organization. »

CEO - Finance Retail sector Communication therefore becomes strategic not only when it articulates a message and a process leading to the achievement of a business objective, but above all, a priori, when the messages or processes are governed by the dominant coalition that manages the achievement of business objectives and understands the impacts on the organization. The support of the

communication by these leaders thus becomes a prerequisite for their ability to influence :

"Communication is very important (...) and you can't as a manager,

leader, executive, not being able to communicate, not communicating and not considering communications as priorities, as professional skills, because you don't survive, and if you survive, your ideas don't survive, and your power of influence is at its lowest if you haven't been able to integrate communication from the beginning and at the right time and in the right way. »

CEO - Finance sector The hypothesis that communication becomes strategic when it articulates a message and a process leading to the achievement of a business objective is therefore confirmed, in particular

when the dominant coalition is implicitly linked to the articulation of this message. When the communication (message and the process) is guided and approved by the main leaders, coming from the different spheres of activity of the organization at the heart of the operating process, it necessarily takes on a strategic content, because it implicitly responds to objectives the organization's business plan.

Hypothesis B. Strategic communication is an important management function in the organization,

because it can occasionally have an influence on decision-making, but it always has an influence on the way of transmitting information relating to the decision.

There is no doubt, for all the CEOs interviewed, that strategic communication is a management function in the organization. "What we want is for her to determine, help and support the organization to do the right management of communications and that it establishes the right guidelines that we want to give ourselves and even, sometimes, the business strategy. So, to establish plans, projects, tools" (CEO, Retail sector).

"However, it is not communication that dictates decisions," emphasizes a CEO in the manufacturing sector. A CEO, Retail sector, brings a nuance: "I think it's at the heart of the decisions we make, without dictating them". The CEO, Manufacturing sector specifies that it is during the process of making a business decision that communication begins to play a strategic role. "Every time we make decisions that need to be disclosed publicly, we take into account "how we do it", "timing", etc."

This consideration of communication in the business management process is a function shared by different actors of the dominant coalition, and this, depending on the decisions to be taken. The CEO is usually involved in this process or, at the very least, he is informed about it – which allows him to give his approval or not to a communication strategy. Here is an example where a CEO of a public company (traded on the Stock exchange) in the manufacturing sector presents his vision of the decision-making process related to strategic communication :

"In every company, as in ours, there are elements that are white and black and after that there is a gray area. Each company, in this gray area, decides what it discloses and what it does not disclose. It's not the bankers, it's not the lawyers who are going to advise us or who are going to decide how we sell or buy a company. It's us, in-house. There is not a recipe that applies to everything, but you always have a small group of leaders who, depending on what there is to announce, decide on the sequence. Sometimes there is a decision that you say "I have to announce next month", but, naturally, you will decide on the "timing" according to the priorities, the circumstances and the contexts that may happen. Most of the time, you have a little flexibility and then you decide the best time. Often, you have zero flexibility. The requirements to run a public company are much more demanding for the CEO and the Communications department only to run a private company. On the other hand, I think we are better managers, because there is no room for letting go, as they say "we are 7/24". This makes us a better company. » CEO - Manufacturing Sector Indeed, we have found during our interviews that the CEOs of public companies (on the stock exchange) or companies with a high reputation are generally more concerned about the importance of communication in their decision-making process. For example, they all use communication professionals working within their organization. Most also have a communications executive reporting directly to them or a member of the dominant coalition. For these CEOs, communication has a great influence on the choice of information, the way of saying things and the way of transmitting information related to the decision. Communication thus becomes strategic in terms of management.

It is through exchanges touching on the various issues related to a business decision that the members of the dominant coalition come to define the strategies, messages and communication tactics, as highlighted by a CEO, Finance sector :

"We share the strategy through many conversations. So, a first conversation, we settle down, we come back, we talk about it again, we exchange... Rare where we

see a project presented, then the same day approved, even if it is an extremely simple project. We have committees, subcommittees, reflections... It can be laborious at first when you join the organization, because it seems so simple. But, a company that knows how to do things well takes the time to define its strategies well. What happens is that thanks to all these discussions, whether numerous, long or short, once we make the decision, we have evaluated all the options. We are comfortable with our choices and also our discomforts. »

CEO - Finance Sector Consequently, what appears to be the most strategic element of strategic communication is the communication itself. "There is nothing in my office. It's theoretical what I manage. What is concrete is communication. Communication helps to articulate mobilization, to make sense of things, to keep, to bring people back to the essence of what we do. That's the management work we have to do" (CEO, Retail sector).

IV. Conclusion:

Strategic communication can exert an influence on the decision-making of CEOs without being the main or determining element in decision-making. A multitude of factors intervene in the ability of communication to register as a useful source and

strategic in business and with CEOs. Although communication presents itself as a unique management function and as an instrument for sharing information, its role of influence varies from one organization to another and from one CEO to another. They will be more likely to use strategic communicators and strategic communication on a daily basis. The CEOs of these organizations are aware of the contribution of strategic communication to the development, maintenance and defense of the reputation of their organization and, ultimately, their own reputation. These CEOs will also be more open to using strategic communication in their decision-making process – communication is very rarely the central element of a decision.

Thus, at the end of the meetings with the CEOs, we remember that for strategic communication to have an influence on decision-making, or rather on the decision communication process, it had to follow a cycle: Firstly, communication must be aware of the interest and behaviors of different audiences towards the organization. She must grasp the subtleties of the business sector, the issues, the environment, and understand the company itself, its people, its objectives, its stakeholders. To exercise a strategic activity in communication, the dominant coalition that includes the CEO and also, preferably, the communicator of the company must develop its own communication skills and take part in the process of analysis and definition of communication strategies.

The communicator must, moreover, make sure to demonstrate his ability to influence (personality, skills, expertise, listening, credibility, confidence, courage). All these people must collaborate and exchange to reach a point of balance, a common ground, favoring the definition of strategies for communication, messages and, ultimately, decision-making. Finally, the implementation of tactics resulting from communication strategies will be carried out by communication professionals from internal or external. The CEO, the most credible actor in the company, will be the issuer of the decision according to his values and those of the company.

In summary, our research has allowed us to specify a good number of hypotheses with regard to the notion of strategic communication in organizations. We were thus able to confirm that for the majority of CEOs, communication is strategic. It becomes strategic in a company or an organization when the dominant coalition is engaged in articulating the message as well as

in planning and deploying the process of communication leading to the achievement of a business objective. Strategic communication is also recognized as an important management function, because it actively contributes through structured means to the quality of information transmission and the perception of messages by stakeholders.

However, to be fully strategic, communication must be organized. Thus, it must be able to count on specialists and communication strategists. To be a communication strategist, the communicator must demonstrate not only his skills and expertise in his field, he must possess a curious personality, attentive and helpful. He must be interested in all areas of activity of the organization and not only in strategies and communication tactics. He must demonstrate an understanding of the company's business issues. To be part of the dominant coalition, it is essential for a communicator – so that he can register as a strategist – that he masters the financial and operational aspects of the organization. However, this seems to be an important gap in a large number of communicators. General communication training does not seem to take sufficient account of the importance of knowledge in operational management, accounting and financial. Conversely, the mastery of the issues, strategies and communication tactics by the members of the dominant coalition also seems to be an important flaw.

They play an important influencing role in decisions affecting communication strategies, but they rarely have the skills and expertise necessary to make an informed diagnosis. Training on strategic communications planning would therefore be appropriate within management programs.

At the heart of our quest, we sought to find out if strategic communication could influence the decision-making of CEOs. In the end, we can affirm that strategic communication can influence the decision-making of CEOs and that it can be fully exercised if, and only if, the CEO decides so

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- **Appendices**

The interview questionnaire

The questions posed as part of this study focused on the presidents' perception of the strategic element of communication and, more specifically, with regard to four main fields of study :

A) The role of communication in the organization and its primary functions

B) The strategic importance of communication

C) The expertise and skills expected of communication strategists

D) The importance that the CEO attaches to strategic communication during his decision-making.

These questions served as a guide, without being explicitly presented during each interview.

A) The role of communication in the organization and its primary functions

. 1-How is the communication function performed in your organization? Who? What? Come again?

2- .For your organization, what are the essential activities of communication?

3- .In your role, how important is communication? Why?

B) The strategic importance of communication

4- .For you, what is strategic communication? When does it become strategic?

5- .How is strategic communication practiced in your organization?

6- .At what point strategic communication is invited to collaborate in your organization? Is it at the initiation of the projects or during their deployment? An example?

C) The expertise and skills expected of communication strategists

7- .Is there a communication strategist(s) in your organization? If yes, do they work as an employee, manager (member or not of the management committee) or consultant?

8- .Does this person have to be in direct contact with the president to play his role well? Should she report directly to the President? Why?

. 9-Do you see a benefit in integrating communication strategists into activities of exploitation? If so, which ones? .

10- What advice (role, responsibility, competence, attitude/behavior) would you give to the person responsible for the communication strategy so that it is more effective?

D) The importance that the CEO attaches to strategic communication during his decision-making.

. 11-Have you ever found yourself in a situation where the communication strategy has positively or negatively influenced a decision?

a. What were the highlights?

. 12-According to your experiences, should strategic communication take up less space, an identical place or more space in your business decisions? Why?