



LEADING HR | Meeting Recap

The Essential Power of Effective Communications in Today's Uncertain World



by

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In today's volatile environment, where geopolitical tension, economic uncertainty, and technological disruption converge, one challenge—and mandate—kept bubbling up to the top of a recent conversation with CHROs of the M1 Community: The essential power of communications.

In a conference room hosted by Ralph Lauren chief people officer Roseann Lynch at the fashion house's New York design studio, CHROs discussed people analytics, artificial intelligence, and more in the stylish office space decorated with richly colored rugs, Southwest-influenced leather furniture, and quotes from the American fashion icon's founder. But the conversation quickly turned again and again to how much communication strategy has become the most powerful tool CHROs own as they're increasingly being called upon to lead through ambiguity.

Whether the conversation drifted to tariffs, DEI scrutiny, rising economic anxiety, or technology's impact on executive communications, what emerged was a shared recognition that the current moment demands leadership driven by hyper-communication, and an embrace of transparency, agility, and deeply intentional storytelling.

It's little surprise communications was such a hot topic: M1's [research](#) has shown more than half of the community's membership who self-reported they have responsibilities outside HR said overseeing comms was among them. Below, five key takeaways from the discussion. As always, let us know if we can help connect you with other community members.

1. Communicate what you know—even if it isn't everything.

A recurring theme in the conversation was the importance of honest, timely communication in moments of ambiguity. Several leaders acknowledged how easy it

AT A GLANCE:

- Communication concerns topped the meeting agenda, revealing a shared recognition that the current moment demands leadership driven by hyper-communication.
- If communications aren't effective, it "can become a reputation issue. It can become a balance sheet issue. It can become a massive risk issue if you're being targeted," one leader warned.
- CHROs worry about how to communicate with parts of their organizations about fraught social and policy issues, such as training for visits from immigration enforcement or health care benefits that cover abortion.

is to fall into silence while waiting for answers to crystallize. But employees notice the absence of communication—and fill the vacuum with speculation.

One participant reflected on the recent controversies about DEI, saying “the one thing we did wrong was we didn’t communicate that we were [not changing anything].” Leaders said that sharing what was known, even if it was incomplete, offered critical reassurance. One CHRO said her CEO took a straightforward but effective approach: “I promise to tell you what I know when I know it.”

This kind of directness doesn’t just calm nerves; it builds credibility. Especially in today’s climate, CHROs said people value leaders who can say “I do not know, but we’ll keep you informed.”

2. Global alignment requires structural clarity.

For organizations operating across borders, the geopolitical environment is creating a new set of tensions—particularly around DEI, contracting standards, and compensation laws. Several leaders described how divergent regulatory expectations between the U.S. and Europe are straining internal alignment.

“There are still demands—real service-level agreements baked into contracts … that you’ve got to navigate as a U.S.-headquartered firm,” one CHRO said. Another added: “We had to revisit our operating model and just get really clear about what decisions get made where and by whom.”

That kind of clarity, and the communications that surround it, are essential for compliance as well as for internal collaboration and client engagement, CHROs said. “How do we make sure our client teams actually understand this complexity as well?” one leader asked, noting how easy it is for even well-intentioned efforts to backfire without clear lines of responsibility and communication.

3. Tariff uncertainty isn’t just a policy issue. It’s a human one.

The recent shifts in U.S. trade policy and the threat of expanded tariffs are rippling well beyond finance and procurement teams. CHROs in product-heavy businesses described how global sourcing changes are triggering downstream challenges that directly affect people, from factory workers overseas to creative teams back at home.

One HR leader who had to cancel orders in China said her company’s creative teams didn’t get any context about what was happening and became frustrated by back-and-forth instructions as policies oscillated. Once they understood the fluctuations were about adapting to tariff pressure in real time, people got it. “It’s giving them the why,” one CHRO said. “Just communicate, communicate, communicate, and then communicate more when you think you’ve communicated enough.”

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and then communicate more when you think you've communicated enough.

- CHRO attendee at the Ralph Lauren meeting in New York

Even teams that aren't typically considered part of the "strategy" process need to understand what's going on and why. Global factory workers who are deeply invested in working for large multinational companies need honesty too, one CHRO said. "It's so obvious, but when you're moving so fast, giving the context behind all these moves and making sure that cascades is the tough part."

4. Missteps can escalate quickly, so plan ahead.

Several CHROs emphasized how quickly a communications oversight can spiral into a reputational or commercial crisis. Stakeholder scrutiny is high, narratives spread fast, and backlash can come from unexpected places.

If communications aren't right, it "can become a reputation issue. It can become a balance sheet issue. It can become a massive risk issue if you're being targeted," one leader warned. Scenario planning for messaging can help, as can running "war games" to explore different outcomes and prepare talking points in advance. Planning for volatility, rather than reacting to it, is quickly becoming a defining competency for CHROs.

Some CHROs expressed concerns about how to communicate with parts of the organizations about fraught social and policy issues, such as training for visits from immigration enforcement or health care coverage that covers abortion. If communications get in the wrong hands, they could be mischaracterized. "A lot of our worry was around third-party contractors we use," one CHRO said. "You worry about them getting picked up and used against you."

5. The CHRO-CEO partnership has never been more critical.

Other leaders shared stories of navigating internal resistance from executives about communication that could spread online, wary of public misinterpretations. One described how her company's CEO, despite being a deeply inspiring leader, refuses to hold company-wide Zoom meetings out of concern they'll be taken out of context.

Others echoed this tension, suggesting CHROs consider pre-recorded videos, curated talking points, or behind-the-scenes influence. As one executive put it, "If you're afraid of it going public you probably don't want to say it."

Another added, "Every CEO has a brand. And yes, they're afraid. I think that fear is real." But CHROs can step in for their CEOs as trusted communication architects. As one put it, "there is a moment that all of us have met in this role where we may have been underestimated or under-appreciated." That's changing. "We see the systems view of our organizations."

