

# 7 Skills PR Leaders Need to Succeed in the Coming Years: Do You Have What It Takes?

By Ken Jacobs  
April 8, 2014

**What skills will leaders of communication organizations need in a few years?**

Think speed, flexibility, boldness, adaptability, a global mindset, vision and personal growth. I spoke with 10 corporate and agency leaders, and these seven key attributes emerged. Here's what they had to say about them:

## 1. The need for speed

While it seems that we're already working at lightning speed, these leaders predicted that this will increase exponentially in the future.

**Steve Cody**, co-founder and managing partner, integrated communications agency **Pep-percomm**: People are making mistakes in nanoseconds, and who knows how much faster it will get? Things are only going to get faster, so it's going to take leaders who can quickly provide brevity, accuracy and authenticity. The speed will weed out potential leaders who can't learn on the job — there won't be time for that, as the job will be even more demanding.

**Andy Polansky**, CEO, **Weber Shandwick**: The pace of change will only increase. That provides both opportunity and risk.

**CEO, Mitchell Communications Group and Dentsu Public Relations Network**: We'll have to get even faster at research, knowing the data that matters, both understanding and being able to find the information required, and then having the insights you need to make better, faster decisions.

Everything will continue to compress, which will require being able to activate much more quickly and efficiently, and with greater results. Things happen in real time. Social media was a game changer in this regard. So you have to activate not only with speed, but on strategy, and in a way that's relevant to the target.

It will be more critical to be efficient — you must identify processes that allow you to scale and move quickly — and effective. Your solutions can't just be faster and cheaper, but better.

## 2. An increasing emphasis on flexibility

Flexibility has always been a hallmark of solid leadership. Our leaders predict that in an

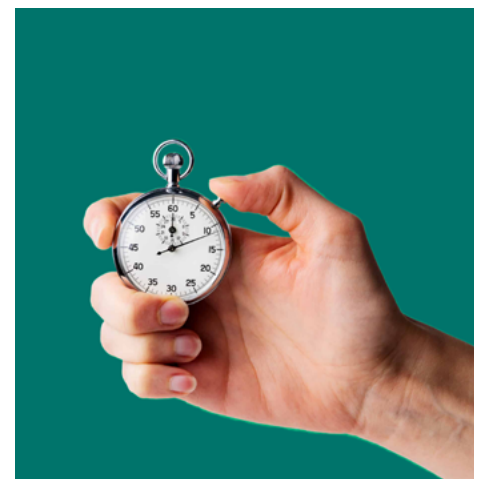
# Your solutions can't just be faster and cheaper, but better.

era of rapidly changing communications, this skill will be in even more demand.

**Peter Marino**, VP, communications, **MillerCoors**: I think even more flexibility will be required in the years ahead, because business pressures will increase, and clients will be seeking more immediate gratification, so strategic chops will be more important than ever.

**Chris Atkins**, managing director, public relations and internal communications, **PricewaterhouseCoopers, LLP**: Flexibility in outlook and temperament will be key, because with such revolutionary change occurring within a business cycle, you need someone

who can acknowledge change is happening, and take the steps — sometimes painful ones — to make sure the enterprise can make the changes to remain relevant, to be able to say, "Wait a minute. That's not how we should be" (continued on page 2)



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doing it tomorrow, even though that's how we've been doing it."

### 3. A willingness to be bold

Two leaders with reputations for boldness predict that this attribute will gain greater currency.

#### **Todd Defren, CEO, high-tech agency SHIFT Communications:**

They're going to need to be bold. Clients care less and less about where good ideas come from, care less about the pedigree of the

agency, care less if you're an advertising or a PR firm. The leaders who are going to thrive are the ones who create and evangelize bold, market-changing ideas. Who cares what you call your agency? If you have bold ideas and can execute, you'll reap the benefits.

#### **C. Renzi Stone, chairman and CEO, integrated agency Saxum:**

The era of disruption and experimentation in the marketing communications world will continue through 2016 and likely beyond. The savvy marketers of 2016 will have to be bold, thoughtful and creative because innovations

in technology will continue to create new specialty shops and niche experts within our discipline.

### 4. The ability to adapt to new technologies

As technology plays an ever-increasing and defining role in communications, future PR leaders will need to not only stay on top of technological trends but also understand the implications for the practice.

#### **Anthony D'Angelo, APR, Fellow PRSA, senior manager, commu-**

#### **nications, ITT Corporation:**

It will be critical to combine and incorporate the first principles of public relationships and organizational communications with the techniques of new technology. Do so, and you'll be among those well equipped for leadership. A lot of people have one, but not the other. Many do well with face-to-face communications, but what if the other face is virtual? It's a combination of philosophy and technology. Yes, they need it now, but it will be even harder in the future. I think the bar will be set even higher.

#### **Barri Rafferty, senior partner, CEO North America, Ketchum:**

As so many things come in and become part of the real world, such as Google Glass, you have to think about





# NEXT BIG THING

how they have an impact on how your message gets out there. We, as communicators, must think about the format of different stories, new ways of communicating and the growing importance of visuals. In the past, photos supported stories; now they've become the story and communicate the message.

Take the time to figure out the implications of the technology and what skill sets you need in the company to take advantage of these changes. Which bandwagon must we jump on, or not?

## 5. A global mindset

Many communications leaders are currently thinking globally. Our leaders predict that with the world shrinking, all will need to do so in the future.

**Renee Wilson, chief client officer, North America, MSLGroup:**

We will become even more global. In two to three years, the skills of collaboration and influence will be even more important. In the past, in traditional organizations, there was

a hierarchy, and it was about command and control. Now we've evolved to a more collaborative approach, and this will be even more important in two years. You've got to influence across borders, and you can't do that via dictate.

**Mitchell:** In three years, we'll all have to think on a global level. The world is becoming a small place. Many of our clients and brands are crossing borders and becoming truly global. At the same time, you need deep understanding of the local markets and the ability to think about audiences in a local way.

**Polansky:** The maturation of the PR business on a global basis will continue. Those that have the global mindset will be rewarded. Multinational companies looking for growth aren't looking to the United States, but many PR companies are still focusing on the United States. What we do for our senior leadership is the Weber Shandwick 10x10 program, where we send 10 midlevel managers and high-potential employees around the world, for their personal development and to bring more of a

global viewpoint back to their offices.

## 6. A strong vision, with the ability to see what's ahead

Today's leaders believe that tomorrow's leaders must share a strong vision for their followers, while seeing what's coming next.

**Marino:** PR leaders will need one eye focused like a microscope on where their business is and where their people are right now, and the other eye like a telescope on what's coming around the corner, at what's next, like a new tool or a new digital application. It will

**It's not about evangelizing; it's about intelligence gathering.**



be essential to correctly prognosticate what's ahead and bring it back so you can act on it faster than the competition.

**Atkins:** We don't know what demographic and technological changes will come, but the ability to look around the corner, and the ability to stay connected to your market (the talent market, the market for your products, regulatory, etc.) is critical. Leaders are out there talking to customers, to influencers, to government. It's not about evangelizing; it's about intelligence gathering.

**Polansky:** I think it's more a function of business strategy, but you certainly need to surround yourself with vision. The firms that build the right talent pool now will be well prepared for the future. You're building your business now for what you want it to be down the road.

## 7. The desire for personal growth and accelerated learning

The previous six points make clear that the leaders of the future must continually learn in order to succeed.

**Stone:** The attributes of a leader are timeless: powerful vision, impeccable character, strong work ethic, leading by example, thoughtful disposition and being opportunistic.

Every leader makes history in the present moment. Some will miss their moment, through distraction, complacency, laziness or lack of ability to adapt to changing times. The leader three years from now is the person who undertakes personal growth as a leader every day.

**D'Angelo:** It means an acceleration of learning. I was recently at a school of information technology and they were talking about careers that hadn't even been invented yet. The premium for continual learning is going up and up and up. Be humble enough to be the perpetual student.

# Other Topics by Ken Jacobs

## How to Lead Through Uncertain Times

Leading suddenly became vastly different in March, 2020, resulting in new challenges for leaders that have continued through this day. Attendees of this program will learn the specific leadership tools they need to lead through ongoing uncertain times, regardless of what happens in their organization or the outside environment.

## How to Lead Through The Turnover Tsunami/ The Great Resignation

HR experts and economists are predicting what's been called "The Turnover Tsunami" and "The Great Resignation" as a result of executives looking to change their positions in record numbers. While no leader can completely prevent this from having an impact on their organizations, attendees of this session will learn both larger strategies and practical tips to help minimize its effect.

## How to Lead the Leaders and Leaders-in-Training On Your Team

Leading the leaders on your team and your next generation of leaders, AKA Leaders-In-Training, requires specific strategies and tactics. This session, based on interviews with three communications industry "Uber-leaders," provides powerful insights to effectively lead leaders, who in turn may be stars in their own right, as well as up-and-coming leaders.