

Narrator

Welcome back to a new episode of *Engage*, a podcast from the CIPR. Today's panellists explore some of the most common threats as well as opportunities facing organisational reputation and share real-world examples of navigating these challenges. They discuss essential steps to monitor potential risks and prepare for crises, and share best practise for integrating resilience into PR strategies, demonstrating how a proactive approach can safeguard and enhance organisational reputation.

Charlotte West

Thank you for joining us today. We're going to talk about some big, meaty issues around reputation, risk, and resilience. My name is Charlotte West, and I'm VP of Global Communications at a large tech company called Lenovo. And like many of you listening today, this is a topic very close to my heart. In a world of perma-crisis, and poly-crisis, and probably many other crises names that haven't even been thought of yet, as comms leaders, what's really clear is that we're under more pressure than ever to navigate some of these really complex issues for our businesses and for our clients.

I'm delighted today to be joined by two fantastic guests who I'm going to give a little intro to and then ask them to pile on a little bit. First is Sarah Thomas. Sarah is Group Account Director at See Media, and is no stranger to dealing with crises and issues in her career. Her career has spanned working for big corporations like IBM and agency giants like McCann Erickson. But I think what's going to be really interesting today is to hear from Sarah because she supported the UK housing sector through many crises and issues over the past 20 years. I know we'll have some fascinating and probably quite surprising stories and insights to share with us today.

Alongside Sarah is Rod Cartwright, who many of you may know as a special advisor to the CIPR's Crisis Comms Network. Rod has been the telephone number, top of the list to call for many big crises over the years. I'm not sure if he's changed his number recently, just so he doesn't get those calls. But he's worked to advise both in-house and agency teams on their preparedness and resilience.

So, good morning Sarah and Rod. It's lovely to have you both here. Can you just both add a little bit of context to my introduction to you with maybe some of the examples of the experience you've had in crisis over the years and a few of the scenarios to just tease the listeners about what we're going to be talking about today? Rod, do you want to go ahead first?

Rod Cartwright

Yes, Charlotte. Thank you. This is absolutely the meet and drink of what I do day to day and have been doing throughout my career, both agency and then as the last five years as an independent. I actually went independent a month before the pandemic hit, which was quite interesting. But I guess when the world is struggling, shall we say, being a specialist in issues, crisis, risk, and resilience, there are worse things to be dealing with.

I guess my focus is broadly on four areas, and that's been the case throughout my career, which are the preparatory piece, which is often forgotten or under-invested in, and I know we'll touch on that. Issues management, as distinct from live fire, crisis comms and crisis management. Then, of course, the training piece, which a bit like the preparedness is often not given the time and energy that it perhaps should be.

I suppose, broadly speaking, the work that I do breaks down into two broad categories. There are the operational issues from exploding tumble dryers to baby milk that doesn't function perhaps the way that it should do, through to what I call cultural issues and behavioural issues. A lot of work around increasingly activism across social media, academics, disgruntled employees. That trend of internal cultural and behavioural issues, I'm seeing becoming probably the lion's share of what is out there at the moment. I think the PRovoke Media 2024 crisis review, that notion of behaviour, culture, and all of that is now absolutely fundamental to the work of all issues and crisis practitioners.

Yes, I may work on something more acute than this, but in 2014, I was part of a team of four flown in to support the chairman, CEO, and board of Malaysia Airlines after the tragic disappearance of Flight MH370, which to this day remains an old solved mystery.

Charlotte West

Rod, that's a great tease as to what we're going to be covering shortly. Sarah, can I come to you now just to give us a little bit of perspective about some of the things you've dealt with over your career, which will be vastly different? We've all dealt with many different things, probably things that we never, ever dreamt we'd deal with. Sarah, I'd love to hear from your perspective.

Sarah Thomas

Thanks, Charlotte. Similar to Rod, obviously, housing organisations deal with the same organisational issues and crises that crop up on a regular basis. But I think the added prism of focus on issue and crisis management is, obviously, they're dealing with what is the general public on a daily basis, often at times of crisis for them as individuals as well. When you're managing an individual's housing and accommodation, which is fundamental to their well-being as an

individual, sometimes that goes wrong. Regularly, we're dealing with things that just happen to clients and their customers, be it incidents like fires, where there are service issues that cross over to media inquiries, where housing associations are dealing with damp and moulding properties.

But some of the incidents that perhaps are a little bit more notable and unexpected, a couple of ones that would be interesting to mention. We once dealt with an organisation where they happened across somebody who'd been, unfortunately, in a property that had been boarded up a dead body for six years. It had been handed over from a local authority to a housing provider with a man actually in the property. It wasn't discovered until six years later when the property was broken into by some local youths.

So that obviously garnered worldwide attention and created all sorts of issues, really, about why it happened in the first place, duty of care to individuals, the sad state of society that somebody could be undiscovered for such a long time, so it threw up all sorts of issues.

Then a more recent incident, I'm sure we've all heard about the Novichok poisoning incident in Salisbury. But I think what most people don't realise is the lady that actually died as a result of being given a perfume bottle out of a skip bin, she actually died in a housing association property. Obviously, that led to that property itself being ripped to pieces, all of the contamination issues for all of the other housing association residents that live nearby. And to a certain extent, we're still dealing with the ongoing impact of that particular property in the local area being a bit of a tourist attraction. What that's meant in terms of stigma for the area and the people left behind once the initial stories died down. I think that's the piece that people don't necessarily realise around the impact of these incidents for a housing provider is they've then got to manage the ongoing reputation of the estate or actually people who live in social housing, generally. That's a really big issue.

Rod Cartwright

It's quite interesting because a lot of definitions of crisis are very introspective. They're about the impact on the organisation's reputation, a fundamental impact on the ability to conduct business as usual. But listening to Sarah, ultimately, the hallmark of a crisis is the human impact, the human effect that requires a very human response. I think we can be quite technical and technocratic in the way that we go about dealing with very human experiences, just struck by what Sarah was saying.

Charlotte West

Yeah, I agree. I think what's interesting to me is that we sometimes joke slightly facetiously in PR, we're not brain surgeons, we're not dealing with life and death every day. Maybe we are, given what Sarah just described. I don't imagine any of us, when we first started our careers in PR, thought we'd have anything to do with Russian spies. So Sarah, that's definitely one to go down in your book that you write when you retire, maybe at some point. As sad and awful a scenario as it is, what an incredibly fascinating... I hesitate to use the word project because that sounds like it's a commercial thing, but a thing to work on in terms of what you will have learned and the decisions you have had to have made through that.

Sarah Thomas

Sorry, just one more thing to say on what Rod just said. It's certainly interesting. Obviously, we work for a lot of housing providers, and those that are more mature in their response to a crisis very much look at it from the point of view of not necessarily today's impact on us as an organisation, but very much on what will we leave behind in our communities or for our customers. We're very much trying to influence our clients to take that wider view.

Charlotte West

Okay, before we get really into the meat of things, because we're three PR people on the call, we could talk forever in a day, I'm going to bring us back to you, Rod, and I'm going to ask you to be not as brief as you can be, but top line, certainly. The genesis of this podcast was, in fact, a report you wrote where you synthesised the many, many reports that are out there, Edelman Trust Barometer, Ipsos Reputation and Trust Report, and a load of others in between as well. Can you give us a top line of the findings of those reports and the themes that you took away from it?

Rod Cartwright

Yeah, and just super briefly, by way of background, why did I even bother in the first place? It's because I was sitting at the beginning of 2023, ploughing through 300 pages of these pre-Davos reports. I said to myself, God, wouldn't it be lovely if someone had summarised these? Last year, I did five reports. This year, because it felt that risk is 24/7 and 365. Rather than just doing the 5 pre-Davos ones, I did 8 across the past 12 months. Essentially at a very top, topline level, I guess it was a game of two halves.

On the one hand, it was the fact that what we see is not a particularly rosy picture in terms of the risk landscape, whether over 2 or 10 years. Particularly the sense of the really, really interconnected, if you like, mutually reinforcing nature of an ever-growing list of top-tier risks which underpin, whether you call it poly-crisis or perma-crisis, as you said at the outset. Things like

geopolitics, mis-, dis-, and mal-information, cyber insecurity, of course, climate catastrophe, the fear of economic collapse, which is now both corporate and individual.

Also, what I call the long tail impact of the COVID-19 experience, which we're pretending psychologically, never happened, but there's a lot of data that says it is absolutely making its presence felt at a very human level day to day. Those are some of the themes. And then there were 10 crucial questions to consider and address, but we'll come back to those later, I'm sure.

Charlotte West

Yeah. Thank you, Rod. My first question is going to be thinking about what's new and different around crises today. Very late last night, I sent Rod a WhatsApp message, and it was a picture of the dissertation I wrote when I was at university. I wrote around crisis management. I was doing a business studies degree. I wasn't doing a PR degree. Wrote about crisis management with my big case study, be it this does date it, the Exxon Valdez oil spill crisis. My dad was in the oil industry, so I had great insight into that.

And I started reading it, and I was thinking, I did that typical thing that we all do, perhaps when we're trying to be super intellectual. I started with a quote and I ended with a quote, a Machiavelli one at the beginning and a Henry Kissinger one at the end. But just Machiavelli was in the 1500s talking essentially about crisis management or issues management, I should say, not ignoring issues. This is like, in a way, nothing new that we're talking about. We've been talking about this forever. From your respective vantage point, what's changed? Certainly looking at your career, what's changed in how you think about crises and issues now? We'll get into some of the detail about how we prepare for them, and we address them. But what feels different today, I guess, is my question.

Sarah Thomas

Looking at it specifically from the perspective of the UK housing sector, the biggest change for us has been around external sentiment and the fact that there's so much more focus on the sector. When I first started working in the housing sector, there were one or two media inquiries, but they were for things that were really quite severe. But these days, and to be fair, quite rightly so, there is a lot more media interest on those things that are going on in the sector that really housing association residents shouldn't have to be dealing with in this day and age.

Specifically, there's been the two major things, which is obviously Grenfell, which has created a scrutiny around fire safety. But then obviously, damp and mould is now something that not just local journalists are interested in, but national journalists and broadcast media are interested in,

too. Obviously, that's created a volume and the scrutiny all around. I think it's great for residents to have an outlet where they genuinely feel heard.

That still doesn't cover everybody, though, because not everybody has the opportunity to be able to articulate for themselves. But there's certainly been a shift in people being generally interested in what's happening to these people.

Charlotte West

The way that you refer to your residents as clients or customers, does that feel like a shift in your career? Certainly. So that plays into the external sentiment part, I guess, doesn't it?

Sarah Thomas

From my perspective, a lot of our clients call their housing association residents, customers. But I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that always because often they don't have a choice. They rent their home from them because of where they live, and they can't go and choose to rent from somewhere else. I tend to try to persuade my clients that they have residents that they should be treating like customers, but that then shouldn't necessarily call them customers.

But you're quite right. There is still, obviously, regulations have changed, and the way housing providers treat their residents is now regulated in a way that they do have to treat them more in a traditional customer approach. I think the other dimension that has changed that is obviously social media because it makes stories so much more accessible. It gives an immediacy to responding when things go wrong on behalf of residents. That has changed how we deal with issues and crises, too.

Charlotte West

We always say in our job, words matter, and they clearly do, don't they? That's a really good example of the nuances of using different words. Rod, let me jump back to you from your perspective. What feels different now?

Rod Cartwright

It's funny, but I did my dissertation on crisis as it relates to world systems' theory. Yes, I was fun at parties. But what was really interesting and the relevance here is that in doing that 30 years ago, I discovered that the word crisis is widely misused and misinterpreted because I think we tend... Common parlance, the word crisis means two things. One is it's automatically some kind of disaster or catastrophe, and the second is that it's an end point. But actually the word, forgive

the dull etymology, dates back to a Greek word meaning decision or choice or judgement. The first time it was ever used in English, it was used to mean the point in a disease which determines whether the patient recovers or deteriorates.

I think if we actually go back to the basic roots of the words, and remember that a crisis is only ever a turning point. It's a point of inflexion with potentially as much opportunity as risk. I use this in my training and in my practise because I think if you go into a crisis thinking we are trying to stop bad stuff happening and limit the damage, you forget that there is a major opportunity to be had, depending on how you behave and how you communicate.

Charlotte West

No, but I think it's interesting. It shows things haven't changed so much. I think we all agree speed has changed, and that's a massive factor for us all. But the fundamental principles of what we're trying to do are still the same, even if the issues are different and the environment's different.

Rod Cartwright

I agree. I do think there are a couple of things that have changed, though. Funnily enough, I interviewed Jamie Shea, who was the famous NATO spokesman in Bosnia at a conference last year. And I said, "Look, you've been around since you were born in the '40s. You've seen the end of a world war, you've seen the Cold War, you've seen three or four major global depressions. Is what we're experiencing now actually that different?" He said, "On some levels, it's not. There have always been acute things going on."

I brought this out in a report, there are a couple of things. One is the speed. The second is what I call the intersectionality, the fact that you've got all of these dynamics all playing off and reinforcing each other. Then I think the third, which is one of the 10 key things in the report, is what I call the terrible twins of mis- and disinformation on the one hand and polarisation on the other. So I think speed, intersectionality, and polarisation are like never before.

Charlotte West

Yeah, I agree. Okay, we're going to talk about some things around how we get prepared, how we navigate issues, the role of leadership, and maybe how that's changing a little bit for all of us in our experience there, and thinking about the talent and the skills and even the tech that we need to think about in this whole space.

So, let's start with getting prepared. I still use this phrase, and I always then go on to qualify it, is, "I believe in planning, but not in plans." I've been with organisations that have got tomes of crisis

management plans, thick folders with gazillion pages and phone trees and all of the things that you would expect, which probably never even get opened. Maybe the first page gets opened whenever we need to open that manual.

I think there is this sense for me of there is a balance somewhere in how we prepare. We can't prepare for everything. Sarah, you would have never, ever prepared for a Russian spy poisoning. That would never have been on the risk matrix. People would have laughed at you and think you'd gone crazy if you'd put it there. So let's talk about preparedness. Sarah, how do you tackle that from your client's perspective?

Sarah Thomas

I think to prepare is essential, but it is the level of detail to which you can go down to in terms of preparing. So I think you prepare your process and how you're going to react and perhaps prepare based on categories of types of issues that you're going to face. Then we tend to have a bank of a certain amount of messaging prepared for clients as well that helps them to think ahead of how they want to come across as an organisation. Really would talk through with them, how do you want to be seen in the face of an issue or a crisis, and be ready to respond in that way.

Obviously, also having tools in place to be able to log issues and incidents so that we can track patterns, common issues that we can then help inform in terms of operation of the organisation, because obviously, if things are regularly going wrong in a similar area, then there's an operating issue there.

Charlotte West

Yeah, that comes back to Rod's point. I think he closes the report with about, it's not just mitigating the risk, it's maximising the opportunity. So that's a good example of where we should do that. Rod, what's your advice to people, and how do you walk them through the process of preparing?

Rod Cartwright

I think it's fascinating how many organisations tend to view the preparedness phase, a bit like an annoying insurance policy. None of us love paying for something that we may never use. Then when the balloon does go up, or the proverbial hits the fan, they realise they're probably going to spend three or four times as much playing catch up as they would have done investing in the first place. So, I think trying to help the executive suite and others to understand the actual value, the monetary and financial value of preparedness, viewing it as an opportunity rather than just a cost.

The point about opportunity is that by properly looking not just at the risks that you face, your risk register, your risk appetite statement, your heat map, it's how do those risks actually materialise as human scenarios in the real world? How do you train people on that? How do you stress test them through live fire scenario exercises? Everything I do, the maxim for my business is human preparedness, organisational resilience, and business performance.

Because as you say, Charlotte, you can have tomes of preparedness. You can have tomes of content there. But unless you've worked out your people, your human beings, your human systems are ready to use those materials and that content, then it's good money after bad. But I really like Sarah's point and your point about... Someone said about 9/11, it wasn't a failure of security, it was a failure of imagination. I remember doing a risk and scenario workshop, and we finished it, and the head of legal eyeballed me and said, "So now that we've been through all the foreseeable scenarios, can you guarantee me that we're prepared for everything that might happen?"

I was feeling a bit punchy that day, and I said, "The only circumstance in which I could answer that question in the affirmative is if you or I were God, and I don't believe that to be the case," and we didn't get fired. But I felt it needed to be made. You cannot foresee the combination of scenarios. So preparedness is absolutely everything.

Charlotte West

Yeah, I think you're right. It's not that you might have imagined one or another one, but it's when the two happen and they're interconnected. That's the thing that you never imagined. Rod, you've done work with airlines, I know, which typically is always the go-to for one that should have the best crisis preparedness that you can imagine: high-risk business; big impact to human life, should anything go wrong; absolute worst-case scenario. Are they the best at this in your experience?

Rod Cartwright

Are airlines good at it? I think they're incredibly good at the operational side of a crash and tragic loss of life, because frankly, that is what an airline exists to do, is to get people safely from A to B, and if they don't, then they need to be thoroughly prepared.

I think because it's a well-known case study, the United Airlines handling of Dr. David Dao is a good example of where something operational rapidly becomes very behavioural. I know I'm obsessed with the culture and behaviour thing, but that case is a brilliant example of where

corporate culture, training, and human reactions are the source of the crisis, not so much to do with an engineering fault, with a plane going tech.

Charlotte West

Yeah, we can turn them into crisis by the work that we do, can't we? That's the whole point of not doing that. We've talked about preparing, but we know the risks for our business, for our clients. We can plan to a certain point, and there's always the unknown, of course. But how are we using data? How are you using that in some of the work you're both doing for clients across your respective businesses, and using that even in a live scenario to inform how you react in real-time? First part is thinking about how you use it to inform the preparedness, but then also in the real-life situation. Are there some good things that you're using? Are you seeing it become more important than it has been before?

Sarah Thomas

Yeah. From our perspective, we don't use data to a very large extent because it's not a that useful tool for us, other than the fact that it's useful for us to be able to spot themes and trends and monitor sentiment as such. But I think the other area where we should be using data more is about what impact on issue and crisis communications, customer expectation plays a part, really, because I think certainly in housing associations, there's a real opportunity to avoid getting into a situation where a customer feels that they need to contact the media purely because their expectation isn't met, and that's because the organisation hasn't been realistically setting expectation.

Rod Cartwright

Data is very interesting because at the end of the day, if you stand back from crisis comms, what is crisis comms and crisis management? It's fundamentally decision-making. I think that every organisation should have a really good tech stack. I think there are some great tools like NewsWhip, which allow you to map the likely trajectory of where things might go. But at the end of the day, for me, both in principle and practise, data are just there to aid decisions. I think in the age of AI, we need to be very careful about the famous paralysis through analysis, but also remembering that at the end of the day, crisis comms requires human beings to make human decisions informed by data, so I think you should be data-informed, not data-led, because if you remove human agency, you don't end up with that human response that's all important.

Charlotte West

I'm going to come back to that human bit in a second when we talk about skills and talent, because I think that is really important, the bit that perhaps we don't generally talk about enough in terms of the people we need working in this area of comms.

I just wanted to touch on data from my own experience. We track our reputation. That's how we measure our impact. It's what we report to our leadership team and board of directors, and we measure it against various indices and against various industry peers and competitors. What we can see through that data that I find really useful is where we have lots of fence-sitters on certain topics where they don't have a particular opinion one way or the other, and that gives us a really good steer to how we might focus more in that area. We turn those fence-sitters into people that have actually got a point of view and an opinion in a positive way so that they then defend us and give us the benefit of the doubt in a crisis situation.

Particularly on the ESG side, of course, like everybody, we're probably indexing more there because we can see that actually we're turning more of those fence-sitters into advocates, which will help us should there be a crisis, so we're finding data very useful from that point of view.

We do use NewsWhip as well, interestingly, Rod, that you mentioned that. The simplest way I use it is when... We're all used to these emails, when you get an email from a leader that says, "Oh, my God, I've read this. It's going everywhere. It's a crisis. It's a disaster," and we all roll our eyes a little bit and then go and look. NewsWhip is so powerful for me to be able to say, "It really isn't. Chill out." Okay, I probably used different words for that, but that's essentially the message that we're trying to say, is that this is not going everywhere. Just because 10 people have sent it to you doesn't mean it is everywhere. It means those 10 people have seen it, and that's probably about it.

Rod Cartwright

Can I just add one other point about the use of data? Because I think that one of the assertions, one of the gauntlets I throw down in the report is that organisations, very understandable, obsess quite rightly with their reputation. They also obsess with going back to business as usual, BAU, as quickly as possible, business continuity.

But I've been trying to urge people to think slightly differently, which is that there's something that's even more important than reputation, which is actual relationships. Because you can seemingly take a hit on your reputation, but when you start to systematically go through your key stakeholders, and I do this with a lot of clients to say, is that reputational hit actually impacting relationships with customers, with employees?

The other challenge is to say that you can go back to business as usual relatively quickly. But I've coined the phrase reputation as usual, because the length of the tail on a reputational crisis can be infinitely longer than the business impact. I think highlighting the importance of the recovery phase in the crisis, thinking about reputational continuity, and going back to reputation as usual, which ultimately, going back to relationships is what determines the long-term trajectory of those relationships.

Charlotte West

That point about reputation as usual. I love that phrase, and I will steal it, I'm afraid, so thank you for that. But one of the interesting things we look at when we look at our reputation is we don't say, "Oh, we need incremental growth every year to increase it by two points every year for infinity." Because A, we all know that's not realistic. But B, we all know as an industry that whatever we do our reputation is, is pegged essentially to the reputation of the industry as a whole.

Take airlines, for example. Rod, it's the easy one. There's a big airline crash. Then all airlines' reputations suffer, not just the airline that had the plane that came down and lots of people died. I think we've done quite a lot to try and explain to leadership around, do you know what? This isn't linear like sales. Oh, sell more every year or brand awareness goes up every year. It's not like that. It's based on the industry as a whole. I think you could say that probably for every sector as well. Maybe there are some nuances, but it's probably, I think, a pretty fair comment.

Thinking about leadership, one thing we've always said is, there's more of a seat at the table, perhaps now more than ever for us as comms leaders, given the things that have happened over the past few years, COVID in particular. We're called on to advise much more than... Not just advise, but listen to, respected. I've sat in meetings over the past couple of years where the first question comes to comms. "Comms, what do you think?" Not the business team or not the legal team. Like, "Comms, what do you think? How would this help harm, etc, our reputation?" Again, looking at it from a client perspective in your industries, is that just me in a bubble of seeing it in the tech sector or is that reflective, do you think, for how leadership is taking this much more seriously?

Sarah Thomas

No, I think that's fair. I think across the housing sector, it was never as much as an issue as it would have been in IT and engineering, manufacturing, the sectors I started off my career in. But certainly, we regularly advise very senior leadership teams about their reputation and their approach to certain activities. I think they are certainly more responsive to hear not only... They

don't just want to know what statement are you going to write, but they are actually interested in our opinion about how they actually handle a scenario or a situation.

Rod Cartwright

It's back to the thing I mentioned earlier about the tendency to view the whole issues and crisis space as an insurance policy that you maybe will invest in properly at the margins. I think I'll probably shuffle off this professional coil with the industry moaning about the fact that it still hasn't got the seat at the very top table that it deserves. I think in a way, that's to some extent in our own hands, because I think there are two languages that the board and the C-suite require. One of them is business and data literacies. Talking the language of what are the lead business metrics that actually matter to the organisation. I think being able to show demonstrably relationship impact beyond reputational impact is really, really important.

The other is this familiarity with areas that we as comms people might view as adjacency. The reason I included reports that looked at security and business continuity and employee engagement in this year's report, is even if they're not our lead competence, we need to be able to show that we're fully aware and talking the language of BC, security, and employee impact, so that when we're talking with the lawyers or the HR function or strategy or risk, that we're sticking to our swim lane in terms of the expertise, but we're showing a broader awareness and talking the language that executives want to hear including the metrics.

Charlotte West

Out of those themes that came up in this year's report, were there any issues out of those 10 that were... I don't know if they were in number order when you wrote them up, or that was just how you fancied writing them up. But which was the one that you're hearing resonate most when you're out talking to people, or people are most... What keeps them awake at night, I guess?

Rod Cartwright

Can I be naughty and pick three?

Charlotte West

All right. I'll let you have three.

Rod Cartwright

Thank you so much. They weren't in number order. I think the ones that certainly are coming up both in discussion around the report and in my practise, are this thing of mis-, dis-, and mal-information and polarisation, and I grouped them together. People are really concerned about how do you communicate in this febrile, uncertain environment?

The second one, if you literally pinned me to a wall and said, "Pick one," it would probably be the intersectionality piece, the mutual reinforcement of different dynamics. I guess the one that surprised me, perhaps, was the idea that the number one business disruptor in the last 12 months has been the human impact of the pandemic in terms of stress, anxiety, depression, and absenteeism. I think we are ignoring a massive human dynamic that's creating huge risk for organisations of all kinds.

Charlotte West

Sarah, I know that a big macro level and then micro level, looking at the work that you do, I think some of those would still play out, even though they feel like big global macro issues. Is that fair?

Sarah Thomas

I think that is very fair. For people who aren't so familiar with the housing sector, they would not realise how acutely the sector is impacted by all of the factors that Rod's talking about. But they're things that definitely keep the sector awake at night. Sustainability is a massive challenge and pressure for the sector who've got targets to make sure all of their homes comply with stringent energy efficiency ratings, but very little direction or funding from central government to achieve that.

We're still, as a sector, very much impacted by COVID. Obviously, there's been changes in social care, availability of resource. There's a lot of people out there that are suffering very much more than they ever used to, which has an impact on how we can help them to manage their tenancies. Just general operational issues. There were a lot of residents who didn't want to have contractors in their homes. So, in some cases, there's still a backlog of repairs out there that built up. It just goes on. Obviously, there's issues around the supply of homes. There is still a housing crisis out there. There are not enough homes built for people to live in. That is obviously connected to issues around finance in the sector as well. All of these things have a massive impact.

Charlotte West

It's interesting how, just reading, Rod, the order that you wrote the top three, just so you know, I've got it printed out here. First one was geopolitics. The second one was misinformation and

polarisation, which you mentioned. Third one was cybersecurity. I think if I was writing my top three out of your top 10, they'd probably be my top three. Certainly one would be my top one. That's for sure. It's always interesting the way we write these things, whether it's subliminal that we're writing them in order or not.

Rod Cartwright

I think what's really interesting is that you can look at all these big macro things going on and say, "Oh, this is all a bit high for Lutent and intellectual." But the reality is that, as Sarah says, what is the experience of being in social housing? It's a function of income, it's a function of social class, it's a function of prejudice. The cost-of-living crisis is down as much to geopolitical insecurity, how that impacts supply chains, and the price people are paying in supermarkets. Global immigration is impacting our local politics.

I think that in working with organisations, I tend to say, "Don't think of these big macro things as distant." The famous quote from Anthony Eden about Poland, a country far, far away, of which we know little. That doesn't work anymore. Global goes local very, very quickly. I think you've got to stand back and go, macro and micro are a cigarette paper apart.

Charlotte West

But that is a perfect segway to talking about skills and the type of people that we need in roles, because that is a shift, I think, if we're just looking at entry-level graduates and thinking about degrees, I'd take somebody that's got an international relations degree or an economics degree over a business study still, but over a PR degree, probably. We can teach the PR skills, but what they bring is an insight and an understanding and an empathy with the world and what's going on, whether it be at this level up here, and how that might impact the UK housing market, for example. That's my view of skills, thinking about the types of people that we need that can be fast paced, that can make decisions quickly, that have empathy, EQ over IQ, et cetera. But I don't know. Do you have a similar view?

Rod Cartwright

Yeah. One of the ideas I talk about in the 10 challenges at the end is this, I think, amazing idea. It's an idea from a professor at MIT called sense making. It's actually about 30 years old. But this idea that our role as communicators and leaders is to help our organisation make sense of all this swirling context around. I describe it as the hidden comms superpower because I don't think there's any function that is more attuned to helping people make sense of complexity than comms.

As you say, therefore the skillset, data literacy, yes, AI literacy, yes. But that ability to read the world around us. I wouldn't put any degree above any other, not least because I'm not sure we absolutely have to have people with degrees. In fact, some of the best people I've ever worked with came through the PRCA apprenticeship scheme. I don't think we should fetishise tertiary education.

Charlotte West

That's a whole other podcast there.

Rod Cartwright

It's a whole other podcast. But I do think that craft skills, they say, hire for attitude, train for skills. One of the key attitudes is around the openness to making sense of context.

Charlotte West

Yeah. Sarah?

Sarah Thomas

I'd probably come at this from a slightly different perspective. I didn't go to university, and to me, that's no barrier to be working in this type of role at all. But I think what people need, if they're going to work in this type of environment, is a bit of empathy, an ability to be able to work with people at all sorts of levels, to have really broad shoulders and a great deal of personal resilience.

I love this type of work, and I have to say, I found it really tough over the last couple of years in the housing sector because it's non-stop and the volume has increased so much, and it's hard work. It's more around the capability of the individual and whether they can put themselves in the shoes of the people who need to hear what they've got to say about the organisation.

Charlotte West

I love the broad shoulders piece. I think we forget sometimes the... Maybe if we think about it too hard, it all becomes a bit scary, but the decisions that we're advising leaders to make, they can make or break businesses. Therefore, the impact that one decision has on the future of that organisation, the people it employs, the ecosystem that it supports. I will get a bit scared if I think about that too much.

I think the one other point I would make is this idea of operating in the grey. What's the right decision? What's the wrong decision? It's rare that we know that in a moment of time where we've got to make a decision in a very quick space at the time of what to do. I love people that can feel comfortable dealing with ambiguity because nobody's going to tell you what the right thing is to do. You've got to make a decision often with data, being informed by data, but often with your best judgement and your best guess, and your experience and your gut instinct and all of those things. That's still an important factor for me, for sure.

Sarah Thomas

I think the one thing I'd like to add to that is, I think sometimes it's obvious what's wrong, and there's some definite that is definitely the wrong approach. But I think as long as you work through how you're going to approach an incident, there are more than one successful route.

Rod Cartwright

The thing about empathy, I think, is really interesting. In a previous agency, we used to do a global piece of work every year looking at people's expectations of leaders as leaders and communicators. One year we asked about expectations of leaders in a crisis, and the data came back. We gave them 17 behaviours. The least important relatively was showing empathy. We went back to the research team and went, "This is crazy, what's going on?"

They said, "Look at the most important, relatively speaking," which was having a clear plan of action and number two was identifying the nature of the challenge. Then we realised it's not that empathy is unimportant. It's just that unless you match it with action, so we coined the term operationalising empathy because people have two questions: do they care? Empathy. Great. Now, what are they going to do about it? Action. I think that balance of empathy and action is very, very important.

Charlotte West

Yeah. No, that's a great addition. Thanks for that, Rod. We are getting close to the end. I think we've summed up things pretty well, talking about how we get prepared, how we navigate, the role of leadership, how that's changing. This topic about talent and skills, which I could talk about forever because I think it's fascinating to think about how we future-proof this industry and make it even better than it is today.

I'm going to ask you maybe to... A few closing thoughts, if you wish, but if not, certainly any extra reading or extra listening that people can do that are listening to this podcast today. Sarah, let me start with you.

Sarah Thomas

I'd like to use this as a bit of an advert for anybody out there who hasn't considered working in comms in the social housing sector. It really is a very rewarding, fascinating area to work in. We're always looking for talented people to join the sector. Give it a try.

Charlotte West

Thank you, Sarah. Rod?

Rod Cartwright

Again, this sounds a bit advertisey, but one of my hats is, I'm Special Adviser to the CIPR's Crisis Communications Network. Charlotte, you've kindly joined one of our panels, and we've got an amazing events programme, most of which is captured either as audio or video from the last two or three years. We have two or three blog posts a month from committee members and the community at large. That's a remarkable community, and I strongly recommend joining it if you can.

I think what I'd love people to take away from the report is the idea that although there is this really challenging risk landscape, I try to provide a reminder that there's real opportunity lurking beneath that sense of permacrisis. The opportunity is basically to use risk management, crisis preparedness, resilience building as sources of huge positive value rather than just viewing them as these irksome, costly insurance policies.

Charlotte West

Thank you both. I'm going to give two podcast suggestions. One is a BBC podcast called *When It Hits the Fan*. Former Sun Journalist and former Royal Family Press Officer. That's an understatement of what his job title was, but anyway. If you've been doing this job a long time, you listen to a few of those, and you feel like, "Okay, I get this now." But there's some great stories that they tell around certain scenarios that they've dealt with and how they reflect on the news of the week. The other one is called, if geopolitics is top of your list like it is mine, there's one called *Disorder*, and it's hosted by a former British diplomat and an American political author. It's a gold mine of insights and information. Fascinating from a geopolitics point of view.

So, it has been a great discussion. I think my takeaway really is the last comment in the talent discussion that we were talking about around this role that we have of sense making as comms leaders, and that that is our superpower. We refer to it in different names. I sometimes call it about outside-in, giving that outside-in perspective all of the time, but it means the same thing.

And I think that this work around building companies' reputations, navigating risk and building resilience, then that's where we come in to play more than ever. Maybe one day, our job titles will be something like Chief Resilience or Chief Reputation Officer or 3R Officer, I don't know. But it's certainly a fascinating area to work in. And Sarah, I like you. I love it. It's hard. Long days and long nights, but I love it, too. Thank you both for joining.

Narrator

Thanks for tuning in to this episode of *Engage*. We'll share links to training and other resources signposted in the episode in the episode show notes. Remember, if you have any other tips or guidance on this topic that you want to share with other practitioners, you can continue the conversation on LinkedIn using the hashtag #Engage.