The need for trusted advisers

The context we have discussed suggests that the days of the omnipotent CEO 'wizard' at the top of an organisation are numbered. The CEO's job is associated increasingly with inter-personal communication and building relationships. This is why they spend so much time meeting and speaking with colleagues, customers, analysts, partners, officials and competitors. The information and expectations that exist around these relationships frame their decision-making. Indeed, the chief executive can be seen as the organisation's great aggregator. They pull together and synthesise information from a range of sources which they then dissect for strategic clues and cues. It is from this process that patterns and themes emerge which the CEO can start to mould into strategy.[13]

At the heart of this permanent process of learning, however, is a fundamental contradiction for the organisation's decision-maker in chief. The CEO role requires unbiased and credible information. They need to hear the hard truths, as well as a range of different views and objective assessments. Unfortunately, even the senior executives who surround the CEO do not always fulfil this need. They can be guarded, unwilling to raise difficult issues, obsessed with promoting their own agenda, or unable to see the biases inherent in their own arguments.[14]

This information gap is one of the reasons why chief executives need a close relationship with trusted advisers from inside and outside of the organisation. These people help to provide a vital reality check and are an important source of intelligence. For the CEO this advice is largely informal and conversation based. Consequently, advisors do not have to be a member of the board to influence their thinking. Having influence is dependent on being a valuable source of intelligence rather than where a person sits in the organisation's hierarchy. However, it is important to acknowledge that in highly structured, hierarchical organisations gaining direct access to the chief executive can be difficult if an adviser is not formally a member of the senior-executive team. In such situations it is necessary to develop influencing strategies that target those managers who do have the ear of the CEO. This involves shaping insights and intelligence in such a way that it attaches to their agenda. Advisors need to develop a network of connections and understand who their knowledge is important to – and why.

Regardless of where the public relations practitioner resides in the organisation, we would argue that the forces currently shaping the world of organisational leaders requires them to develop a close and direct advisory relationship with their CEO. It is to this common ground that exists between the two roles that we now turn.