

Communications in 2026:

Lessons from Davos on Communicating through Global Change and Fragmentation

JANUARY 30, 2026

■ THE CONVERSATION

The idea of a unified global narrative has always relied on underlying alignment. When governments, markets and institutions share motivations, common frameworks and coordinated messages follow. The power of global issues alignment stemmed not from the fact that global is good, but from the underlying commonalities that support unity.

It is now clear that the alignments have weakened. Diverging political priorities, economic incentives and regulatory approaches have eroded coherence. What remains is not a single, unified narrative but a fragmented environment, where signals travel unevenly and meaning shifts by market.

Davos did not cause this shift. It made it visible. Long positioned as a forum for shared forecasts and collective commitments, this year's meeting revealed how far motivations have moved apart. Power, markets and institutions are adapting in parallel rather than in concert.

The progression of conversations reflected this reality. Early discussions at Davos focused on geopolitics and economic posture (i.e., alliances, trade, tariffs and security exposure) before pivoting to AI. Even there, unity proved limited. Initial debates focused on competitiveness and productivity, then narrowed to governance, regulation, security and privacy. The movement was not toward consensus, but toward clearer lines of difference.

Three signals stood out.



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Narrative volatility is structural, not episodic. Themes shifted rapidly, often before earlier debates were resolved. This volatility reflects competing priorities operating simultaneously, without a shared hierarchy of objectives.

Narratives harden faster than facts. Traditional media outlets continue to set the frame with rapid amplification across digital platforms. Early interpretations often crystallize into the dominant takeaway. Once established, those frames are difficult to unwind.

Global signals no longer produce global outcomes. U.S. political and market signals still matter, but they do not translate uniformly. Stakeholders interpret the same events through local lenses like regulatory regimes, political pressures and domestic priorities, often arriving at different conclusions. Where motivations diverge, unified response is no longer possible.

■ THE TAKEAWAY FOR COMMUNICATORS

The lesson from Davos is not how to communicate globally. It is how to communicate when alignment can no longer be assumed.

In periods of alignment, unified messages travel far because objectives reinforce one another. In periods of divergence, the same messages fracture as they move. The communicator's task has shifted from managing a single narrative to preserving credibility and clarity across multiple environments and audiences.

This environment rewards **discipline over volume, preparation over improvisation, proof over intent and selective engagement.**

1. Discipline over volume.

When motivations diverge, saying more does not create clarity. It increases the risk of misinterpretation. Effective communication now begins with:

- » **North Star messaging:** Durable messages anchored in clearly defined values and intent.
- » **Values-led approach:** Consistency at the level of principle, not phrasing, with local adaptation where necessary.
- » **Setting red lines:** Defining where not to engage, to avoid being drawn into debates where alignment does not exist and outcomes cannot be influenced.

2. Preparedness over improvisation.

Misalignment accelerates pressure to comment before facts are settled, particularly on politicized or high-visibility issues such as geopolitics and AI. Being prepared requires pre-determining positions on likely pressure points, having clear message owners and defined approval pathways. The objective is not speed alone, but the ability to respond with clarity and restraint.

- » **Pre-built messaging:** Build a Q&A and set of holding statements for the highest-likelihood pressure points, including geopolitics, privacy, AI's impact on jobs and other unique industry issues.
- » **Message and media training:** Map and rehearse internal roles and approvals so communications, legal, government relations, HR and technical owners can move quickly and consistently.

3. Proof over intent.

As alignment weakens, skepticism rises. Statements of intent carry less weight than demonstrable action. Credibility now rests on evidence: what is measured, how decisions are governed and how risk is managed.

- » **Proof points:** Metrics and governance should be used to demonstrate accountability, including how decisions are made and how risk is managed.
- » **Validation:** Third parties should be incorporated wherever possible, including using partners, customers and credible experts.
- » **Evidence-based examples:** Values-based statements should be backed by concrete examples and proof points, not generic language.

4. Selective engagement.

In a fragmented environment, engagement should be intentional and limited. Visibility is not influence. Engagement is most effective when there is new information, clear impact and a solution to offer. **Restraint is not defensive. It is strategic.**

■ WHAT'S AT STAKE

This approach does not restore a unified narrative. It does something more practical. It protects credibility where consensus is absent, preserves optionality as conditions evolve and reduces reputational risk driven by misinterpretation rather than action.

In a world where alignment is conditional and often temporary, the role of communications is no longer to unify audiences around a single message. It is to ensure that what is said is clear, defensible and durable wherever it lands.

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