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What should communicators do to improve reputation of the EU Institutions

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INTRODUCTION :

- I usually use a tuning fork to show, in a simple gesture, how to improve reputation. It's all about creating harmony through alignment. But you first need to define and communicate what music you want to play.
- I would therefore like to show you that it all starts by a well-defined and managed idea of who Europe wants to be. What it does, and how it is then perceived will be the result of who it is and wants to be in the future. Not the contrary. Reputation will be only as strong and robust as alignment of all communicators on the wished identity.
- Improving the reputation of the EU institutions is a 5 steps journey : communicators need **first** to align on who Europe wants to be; **next** they need translate this vision of their essence and role into their stakeholders' language, based on a good knowledge of their expectations and realities ; communicators should **then** measure the gap between the wished reputation and the way Europe and its institutions are perceived by their stakeholders ; based on this gap analysis, they will **then** be ready to get organized and decide on priorities to improve the reputation of the institutions and align on processes and governance ; the end of the journey is to implement communication action plans and to monitor their impact on perception and reputation.

DEVELOPMENT:

1 – Align on identity

Be aware that a strong reputation comes from a strong sense of identity : who does Europe want to be for its different stakeholders ? And what is, within this role, the specific and unique role of each of the related institutions ?

For example, akkanto has recently conducted an identity audit for the European Council, around a thorough analysis of its current corporate visual identity. We highlighted that its image and reputation will highly depend on how aligned all its internal actors are on the idea that the unique identity of the Council is to be the bridge between Europe as Institution and the Member States, to act in an impartial and consensual way, to bring along cohesion and togetherness while respecting plurality. The Council's essence is to secure serenity in decisions, to guide the future of Europe in a responsible way.

Based on this vision of who the Council wants to be, the other institutions could articulate their unique role and essence and build a common identity for Europe, while making their respective role clear and known by all actors.

2 – Translate this vision into stakeholders' realities and expectations

Understand carefully the expectations of the different stakeholders of the different EU institutions : how can we adapt the role and essence of the EU institutions to the expectations of their different stakeholders ? How can we talk in their language, adapting the communication on the role of Europe to the reality of the different audiences.

Concretely, what companies expect from Europe is different from what citizens, consumers, employees expect from it. There are multiple parties involved in the future of Europe, but they all align on one vision of Europe : they need to be guided and supported by the institutions to increase their level of well-being in general.

3 – Dare to confront with reality

Measure the current gap between what Europe wants to be and what it is perceived as being by its different stakeholders. Assess supportive behaviours which are the consequence of the perception.

This measurement can be done either via the collection of existing measures – the institutions are very rich in surveys, studies and data of all sorts – or via the generation of new specific and dedicated data. Whatever the collection method, what counts is to measure not only what is being known of what Europe and its institutions do, but above all how it is perceived, how it impacts the reality of the different parties and to what extent they are ready to give their support in return : work in Europe, invest, support in times of a crisis, invest, live in Europe, buy European products and services, study and stay with their talents.

4 – Get organised to govern reputation together

Reputation cannot be controlled, as it is built by the sum of the perceptions of the stakeholders, but it can be measured, monitored and managed. EU institutions need to get organized to set up priorities, decide on who will do what and who will serve as identity watchdog for Europe and its institutions. Each entity needs to perfectly know its role in building up the image and reputation of Europe. A reputation grid, with clear reputation pillars needs to be defined and communicated.

Most of the organisations who decide to proactively manage their reputation organise a Reputation Council with all key communicators, and synchronise their agendas, their messages, as to convey optimal synergy in all their outgoing messages. They stop working in silos and understand that coordinated communication actions will nurture reputation in a sustainable way.

5 - Act and implement

All actions that have an impact on the image and reputation of the EU institutions should be done in clear alignment. Each communicator needs to always align his/her action on the identity guidelines and the reputation intent of Europe and its entities. On the one hand, actions should be filtered as to fully nurture the reputation grid and the reputation grid should, on the other hand, stimulate creativity of communicators.

It happens frequently that some actions that had been decided upon, when filtered through the reputation grid, are either postponed, or fine-tuned or even cancelled. Communicators need to accept this, in all humility, as the reputation of Europe and its different institutions is at stake when all instrument's play a different part, generating cacophony and hence confusion, even if each of them is a virtuoso.

CONCLUSION :

- **Sum up:**
 - from alignment on identity and role to alignment of all communication actions, in a proactive or reactive way. From cacophony to organized symphony.
- **Extension :**
 - Invitation for Europe to take its responsibility, as responsibility is a key driver of reputation, it counts for at least 55 % of the reputation of companies and institutions.
 - Communication will never be enough to improve the reputation of Europe : Europe first needs to show to the world that it is fully responsible of the destiny of its inhabitants, as citizens, employees and consumers.