

Before the Story Breaks

The leadership playbook for reputation under pressure

Insights from the Comms Series Open Boardroom
Sydney · 12 August 2026

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A room built to get ahead of the next crisis

On Wednesday 12 August 2026, The Argonauts Series launched its Comms Series with "Before the Story Breaks" - an Open Boardroom bringing together senior communicators, a former federal minister, a crisis-comms specialist, a former CEO of a major healthcare company, a principal of marketing at one of the major telcos, and a national cartoonist, among others, to confront one uncomfortable question: in a world of permanent crisis, **how do Australia's leaders and organisations stay ahead of the next reputation crisis, rather than react to it after the fact?**

The evening was unscripted and experience-based by design. This report is a collaboration between The Argonauts and Golden Yarn. It captures the essence of the discussions in the form of a playbook for leadership under pressure. We hope you find it helpful and would welcome any questions or comments you may have, so we continue in the vein of the Argonauts' mantra - **People. Ideas. Opportunities.** - combined with that of Golden Yarn - **Clarity. Connection. Influence.**

Olivier Vojetta and Louise Dawson



"Such a great concept — truly a place for us to have discussions and bring these into something tangible that will change the way organisations operate."

— Melinda Stuart, First Senator

Your crisis response begins long before the crisis.

The relationships you build, the truths you tell and the behaviours you rehearse in calm conditions determine what happens under pressure.

The old communications playbook is done.

1. **Audiences have merged.** Internal, external, formal and informal messages now collide in the same public record.
2. **Speed outruns certainty.** Narratives form while leaders are still gathering facts. Silence becomes a message of its own.
3. **Trust is operational.** Stakeholders judge what the organisation does under pressure - not what its values statement says.

Three crisis stories revealed one pattern.

Each panellist was invited to open with a quote that they love and to unpack what it says about them in the context of their “favourite” war story.

Allison Rossiter

Former CEO, Roche Diagnostics Australia; former Country Manager, Novartis

“The only way to predict the future is to create it.”

PETER DRUCKER, management consultant, writer, professor

War story: Led Australia's response to COVID-19 diagnostics as the sole spokesperson for two years — 1,400+ media appearances.

The lesson: Tell the truth

Paul Fletcher

Former Federal Minister for Communications & Urban Infrastructure

“Only the paranoid survive.”

ANDY GROVE, former CEO of Intel

War story: Led the 2021 stand-off with Facebook over the News Media Bargaining Code — a defining test of resolve under pressure.

The lesson: Prepare

Louise Dawson

Crisis Communications Specialist, 20 years' experience

“I wanna meet new people and do cool things.”

MATTHEW MCCONAUGHEY, Actor

War story: Recounted defusing a live Street Talk / AFR leak during a sensitive ASX transaction through human-to-human trust.

The lesson: Build trust

Trust must exist before the pressure arrives.

You cannot manufacture trust on the day you need it.

1. **Before a crisis:** map the journalists, regulators and stakeholders whose judgement matters.
2. **Invest early:** be useful, reciprocal and human when there is nothing to ask for.
3. **When pressure lands:** context and credibility create room for nuance.

Trust accumulated in ordinary times becomes an operating asset in extraordinary ones.

Preparation creates decision freedom.

Preparation is not pessimism. It is the discipline of creating options before time, scrutiny and emotion close in.

1. **PRE-MORTEM:** Name the worst credible headline. Define the event that would most damage trust—not merely the most likely operational failure.
2. **REHEARSE:** Practise the first 60 minutes. Test decisions, escalation, facts, legal advice and the first public position under time pressure.
3. **PRE-AUTHORISE:** Clarify who can decide and speak. Remove the approval maze before the organisation is forced to communicate with incomplete information.

“Only the paranoid survive.”

Truth is the only sustainable defence.

Say what you know.

1. Say what you do not know.
2. Say when you will update.
3. Correct the record quickly.

One truth, every audience.

Do not segment reality for staff, media, investors or regulators. Every version will eventually meet.

Truth, integrity and accountability must be lived as operating values—not printed on a wall.

A modern playbook works across three moments.

The aim is not to predict every crisis. It is to build a system that behaves credibly whenever pressure arrives.

MOMENT	FOCUS
PREPARE	Self-awareness · Relationships · Scenarios
RESPOND	Speed · Truth · Consistency
REBUILD	Scrutiny · Accountability · Learning



Cathy Wilcox,
First Senator of
The Argonauts Series

PREPARE: build the conditions for response.

1. **Understand your leadership style under pressure.** Your natural response if you're the spokesperson and the response of the executives you're advising. This helps in recognising blind spots and anticipating reactions.
2. **Map trust relationships.** Identify the journalists, regulators, investors, employees and partners whose judgement will shape the outcome.
3. **Rehearse the worst headline.** Test the first two hours and the first 24 hours against a scenario that genuinely threatens trust.
4. **Build nervous system regulation into the crisis toolkit.** So, whether you're in front of the mic or standing next to the person who is you stay grounded, think clearly and communicate with conviction and authenticity.



RESPOND: establish the truth early.

1. **Hours, not days.** Issue an honest holding position even when the picture is incomplete.
2. **One truth, every channel.** Align the boardroom, frontline, media response and owned channels around the same facts.
3. **Human language, clear next update.** Acknowledge the people affected and state what will happen next—and when.



REBUILD: make accountability visible.

Once the immediate danger has passed, trust is rebuilt through proof—not reassurance.

Independent scrutiny

1. **Appoint credibility:** select a reviewer whose independence is visible.
2. **Release control:** commit to publishing the findings before knowing what they will say.

Executive ownership

3. **Admit fault early:** extreme ownership is more credible than a defensive technical explanation.
4. **Show the repair:** connect actions, owners and milestones to what people experienced.

Defensiveness compounds the crisis. Visible accountability begins to restore trust.



Ahead of the crisis, consider...

1. What is our worst credible reputational scenario?
2. Who can approve a public position in the first two hours?
3. Which stakeholders already trust us enough to take our call?
4. How does our CEO naturally behave under pressure?
5. When will we commission an independent review?
6. How will we counter information disorder without amplifying it?



To go beyond.... The question that closed the room.

“Imagine tomorrow is somewhere in the middle of August, three years from now. You’re a non-executive director or chair. The World Economic Forum has, for three years running, identified mis-, dis- and mal-information as the number one, two and three risks organisations face. Aon Insurance says reputational crisis is not an unusual event — it’s completely foreseeable. How will you manage that?”

— Tony Surtees AM, from the floor

HOW THE ROOM RESPONDED

- ▶ Allison Rossiter: “You can only do what you can do — get the best facts, do the diligence, trust credible sources, and make your best judgement.”
- ▶ Melinda Stuart: questioned whether the premise can be answered at all, given how fast the informational landscape is shifting.
- ▶ Cathy Wilcox: Pray!
- ▶ From the floor: technology already functions as an “informational arms race” — bots are for sale on every platform. Boards must focus on what they can control, or lose the fight before it starts.

*How will
you
respond?*

Experience became the playbook.

The Open Boardroom was unscripted and deliberately cross-sector: operating experience was challenged in the room, then distilled into action.

NUMBER	GROUP	ROLE IN THE ROOM
3	Panellists	Three distinct crises from government, finance and healthcare.
4	First Senators	Invited voices tasked with pushing the discussion beyond the panel.
50+	Senior leaders	Communicators, executives, journalists and public figures in one room.

This paper is a synthesis of lived experience - not a survey, benchmark or generic AI-generated model.



METHOD

The work starts before the story does.

The Argonauts Series × Golden Yarn helps boards and leadership teams find reputational vulnerabilities before they become public crises.

- Private crisis-readiness boardroom
- Leadership pressure profile
- Communications playbook review

Start with one strategic question.

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Next step for your crisis comms preparation

THE ARGONAUTS SERIES & Golden Yarns

COMMS SERIES OCT 26

COMMS SERIES
"Know Yourself"
Hands-on Workshop

KNOW YOURSELF

Wednesday 28 October
9:00 AM - 13:00 PM
Porter House Hotel | Sydney

INVITATION

How do you sustain yourself in a crisis?

Join an intimate group for a half-day workshop designed to help you understand your leadership style in crisis.

Before the session, you'll complete pre work which will determine your leadership style under pressure. We'll use those insights in the room to explore your individual strengths, pressure points and opportunities. You'll leave with practical tools to help you navigate your next crisis with conviction and authenticity.

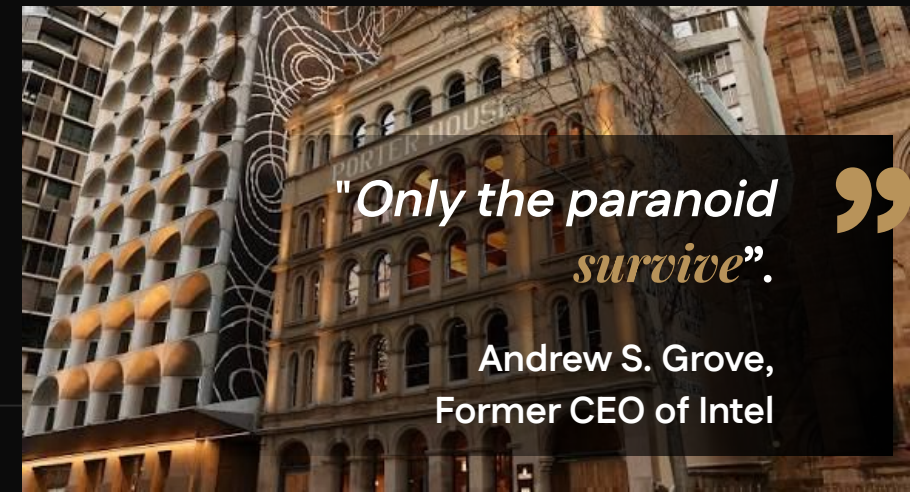
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