

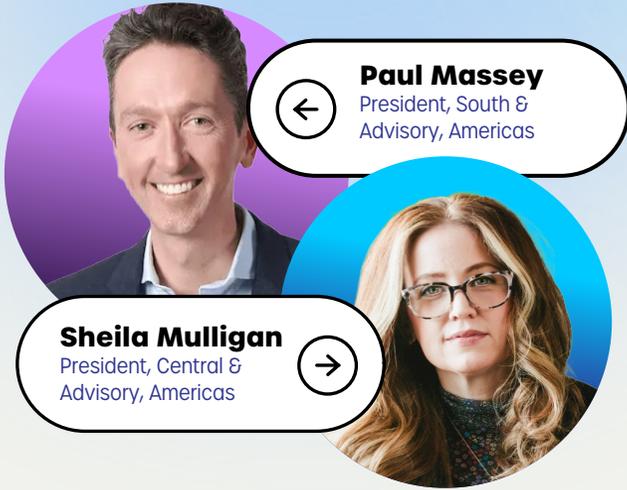
# Leading at the Intersections



**STRATEGIC SHIFTS REDEFINING  
MODERN CORPORATE AFFAIRS**

INSIGHTS FOR COMMUNICATORS





A NOTE FROM

# Paul Massey and Sheila Mulligan



**2026 is sure to be a year defined by persistent uncertainty and rapid change.**

Take a moment to reflect on the dynamics at play at the intersection of business and culture:

Geoeconomic ruptures threaten stability. Polarized politics in the U.S. are rewriting the rules of reputation. A booming vices economy distracts from a volatile real economy. Pressure to accelerate AI adoption is transforming the future of work. Every domain of leadership has become more challenging, and stakeholders are watching every move.

For corporate affairs leaders, this level of complexity requires modern ways of sensemaking and communicating—focused on creating business and stakeholder value, rooted in agile, resilient ways of working, and informed by tech and AI-enabled intelligence. To do otherwise risks profound consequences: eroding license to operate, being left behind in the race to integrate AI, missed cultural, stakeholder and market signals that jeopardize long-term value creation opportunities.

One positive signal: half of leaders report high confidence responding to stakeholder activism, managing geopolitical risks, and addressing regulatory pressures, according to a [recent survey](#) of Fortune 1000 communications and corporate affairs executives conducted by our Weber Advisory team in partnership with Gravity Research.

It's with this context in mind that we asked our team, which partners with C-Suite leaders to help them understand the

forces redefining the global business context – and identify the next right move in a constantly shifting policy, media, technology and cultural landscape – to offer reflections on five key shifts in the modern corporate affairs agenda.

#### THIS YEAR'S LEADING AT THE INTERSECTIONS REPORT EXPLORES:

- **How to think about value in a time of disruption**
- **New expectations for corporate diplomacy**
- **Cultural intelligence as a core leadership currency**
- **Evolving mandates for responsible business strategies**
- **Marketplace pressures to accelerate AI transformation**

Along the way, we look at potential impacts of the U.S. midterm elections, pursuing B2G strategies in an America First context, the renewed relevance of community impact, AI as “normal” B2B tech and more.

We hope you find this a timely and informative read – and we'd welcome any questions or feedback it prompts.



# 01



## How to think about

# value in a time of disruption



**IN UNCERTAIN TIMES, IT'S TEMPTING FOR CORPORATE LEADERS TO DOUBLE DOWN ON ECONOMIC VALUE AND THE BOTTOM LINE.**

Yet, the counterintuitive move is to expand focus to the full spectrum of value the business creates. Financial value will always be a key driver, but a company's license to operate extends far beyond profit. It's precisely at a moment of great disruption that strengthening other value drivers, such as functional value, emotional value and societal value, has the potential to pay dividends. Companies that hold true to their purpose and connect in emotionally resonant, relevant ways with their stakeholders are best positioned to navigate the turbulent times ahead.



**Maureen Golga**

Executive Vice President, Advisory, Innovation Lead



**Kerry Needham**

Executive Vice President, Advisory, West



**Ben Branham**

Executive Vice President, Advisory, New York



# Looking ahead

## 3 value trends to watch in 2026

01

**It's all about affordability:** As the U.S. midterm elections draw near, the cost-of-living crisis and widening inequality gap will drive the cultural conversation. Consumers are questioning the fundamental role brands play in their lives and whether those brands truly understand what they need. Brands that deliver value for dollars without gimmicks can lead the moment.

02

**AI innovation messages can't ignore workforce anxiety:** The market may be celebrating productivity gains, but employees are still calculating what AI means for their jobs. Companies that pair AI adoption with visible investment in reskilling, redeployment, and transparent workforce planning will build resilience. Those that don't will fuel distrust.

03

**Corporate speak is no longer neutral. It's a credibility risk:** As society collectively strives to decipher between truth, fiction and misinformation on all platforms, over corporatized language undermines credibility with stakeholders. Companies that talk to stakeholders as humans—with emotion, empathy and candor—will strengthen trust and demonstrate an intention to do right by employees, customers, partners, communities and the environment.



### U.S. Midterms preview: where value & values collide

President Trump will not be on the ballot in 2026, but his brand and policies will be.

As the United States marks 250 years of the “American experiment,” voters will head to the polls in midterm elections hinging on twin issues—affordability and accountability—after nearly two years of global and domestic volatility.

Last year's off-cycle elections revealed the potency of kitchen-table economics and voter dissatisfaction. But polls show that this year a range of intersecting priorities that span trade policies and energy and healthcare costs to housing, immigration and AI regulation are also shaping their perspectives. These complex matters are informing political rhetoric and exposing companies and leaders to increased reputational risk. Corporate name-checking by politicians and activists—compounded by the Administration's transactional approach to the private sector—heighten pressure to engage; however, doing so can incite backlash and amplify scrutiny among a polarized stakeholder ecosystem.

A variety of other factors are colliding to shape public discourse, too: Administration pressure on the Federal Reserve and government agencies, including activities that challenge election integrity; geopolitical alliances and military influence, including access to strategic resources; the U.S. Supreme Court weighing cases with sharp social and economic impact; competing partisan redistricting efforts with influence on razor thin margins in Congress; campaign cash flooding the system; and our increasingly ideological media landscape in near-constant disequilibrium.

Trump has defined the Republican party for a decade. At times, Democrats have only found common ground opposing him. The election will show how the parties plan to grapple with the big issues of today and tomorrow and provide momentum for their leaders going into the presidential election. 2026 may mean a lot for 2028.



**John Files**

Executive Vice President, Advisory  
Public Affairs Lead, North America



# 2026

## ↗ New expectations for corporate diplomacy



**IN 2026, AMERICAN MULTATIONALS WILL BE PUSHED INTO MORE EXPLICIT FORMS OF CORPORATE DIPLOMACY.** *Analysis from 2025* showed that U.S. brands largely remained resilient abroad even as perceptions of U.S. political leadership declined sharply—proof that companies have earned a measure of independence from Washington’s brand. But that separation will be tested as U.S. government actions—like recent interventions in the Western Hemisphere—and rhetoric grow more confrontational, less constrained by international norms, and more openly challenging to the sovereignty of other nations. Foreign governments, employees, and civil society will increasingly expect U.S. companies to demonstrate local accountability, continuity of commitments, and values distinct from U.S. politics. Reputation will hinge on companies’ ability to engage visibly—without appearing disloyal at home.



**Meghann Curtis**  
Executive Vice President,  
Advisory Public Affairs Lead,  
North America

# Looking ahead ↗

## 3 trends that will shape corporate diplomacy in 2026

01

**The foreign policy proxy test.** In 2026, foreign stakeholders will increasingly expect U.S. companies to demonstrate real independence from Washington and prove they are not proxies for U.S. foreign policy. Generic neutrality will no longer suffice. Firms will need to show where decisions are made, how local interests are protected, and which global commitments endure regardless of U.S. political shifts.

02

**Local engagement as strategic risk management.** Stakeholder engagement abroad across local value chain markets will become a core reputational defense. Companies with deep relationships across government, business, and civil society will absorb geopolitical shocks more easily. Those without local credibility will face faster backlash and limited room to respond when U.S. actions trigger regional tensions.

03

**Executive speech under scrutiny.** Corporate leaders will be expected to speak—carefully and selectively. Silence will increasingly be interpreted as alignment. In moments of geopolitical strain, local stakeholders will look to corporate leaders for reassurance about stability and long-term commitment. Effective CEOs will engage visibly abroad—without politicizing—affirming respect for local institutions and continuity of investment.



### B2G in an 'America First' Moment

2026 will see the tech sector continue to be the engine for U.S. economic growth and a driver of business-to-government (B2G) services. In today's America First climate, tech companies both big and small can most effectively communicate their positive economic impact by focusing on local storytelling centered on outcomes the government already cares about: workforce upskilling, manufacturing revitalization, energy resilience, defense readiness, and public-sector efficiency.



**Eben Gilfenbaum**  
Executive Vice President,  
Advisory





03

# ↗ Cultural intelligence as a core leadership currency



## **C-SUITE LEADERS FACE MORE PRESSURE TODAY TO PIVOT IN RESPONSE TO EVERY CULTURAL FLASH POINT THAT'S DRIVING DIGITAL DISCOURSE.**

Amid this constant chaos, it's never been more important for companies to both know their own true north and know when to engage (since fans, foes and bots are primed to fill in the blanks themselves).

As culture reigns supreme, employees and consumers will give very little grace to companies that don't understand them. Having the mindset, knowledge, and skills to navigate across different cultural groups - *without losing one's own identity* - will be a mark of successful leadership in 2026.



**Kristine Fitton**  
Executive Vice President,  
Public Affairs & Social Impact  
Strategy Lead, North America

# Looking ahead ↗

## 3 ways to build cultural adaptation fluency in 2026

01

**Internalize organizational values:** Corporate purpose and values must be more than a feel-good exercise. When internalized, they are an operating system for organizations, a north star that lights the way forward in crisis, and a signal of authenticity to stakeholders.

02

**Dig deeper into cultural intelligence:** As ideological divisions persists, tribal identities will continue to trump facts. As issues spark in culture, AI is making it harder to believe what we see, while ideological passions lull us into seeing what we want to believe. It's not enough to know *what's* trending in culture. Leaders must have the tools to understand the *why*.

03

**Scenario plan perpetually:** As cultural communities and influencers leave larger digital footprints, it becomes easier to synthesize their perspectives through AI models, understand potential reactions and game-out their future actions. Scenario planning, once an occasional part of long-term planning, is now a routine part of navigating everyday cultural minefields.



### Cultural adaptation in the attention economy

In the attention economy, cultural currency is shaped by both people and platforms. Meaning still comes from human belief, but reach is governed by systems that decide what spreads, scales, and sticks. Cultural adaptation now requires leaders to design for audiences and algorithms at the same time, knowing when to optimize for visibility and when to protect meaning. Relevance depends on fluency in both.



**Laura Wilson**

Executive Vice President,  
Social & Influencer Strategy Lead,  
South



04



# ↗ Evolving mandates for responsible business strategies



**THE LANGUAGE OF RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS MAY EVOLVE (FOR REASONS BOTH PRACTICAL AND POLITICAL) BUT THE FUNDAMENTALS REMAIN CORE**

to how companies balance competing material business pressures and stakeholder tensions to build and protect reputation and competitive advantage. The new playbook of effective strategies reframes every challenge—AI, energy, talent gaps, resource constraints—through an impact lens. How companies meet these challenges signals to stakeholders and markets how prepared the company is to weather the disruptions ahead.



**Kate Olsen**  
Executive Vice President, Advisory Thought Leadership Lead; Social Impact & Sustainability Lead, North America

# Looking ahead ↗

## 3 responsible business challenges to track in 2026

01

**Define the future of human work.** The AI integration race raises significant ethical, humanitarian and sustainability questions that lag innovation and business models. Stakeholders will be looking for the answers in responsible business strategies, expecting to see human-first integration plans, investment in workforce readiness and long-term opportunities for next generation talent.

02

**Close the climate action gap.** The era of multilateral cooperation on shared climate goals is over, but the long-term risks remain. Companies are caught in a new normal of “China First” green tech and “America First” energy dynamics. Without frameworks for coordinated climate policy, finance and action, all material business risks must now be evaluated against geopolitical and cultural factors at home and abroad.

03

**Parse the values from the vibes.** In a polarized and fragmented information ecosystem, the lack of consensus reality stymies corporate appeals to connect on shared values and common causes. People are quick to judge corporate purpose promises against their personal ideological viewpoints. To navigate the vibes, companies need an authentic responsibility strategy anchored in their business model and attuned to stakeholder expectations.



### The renewed relevance of community impact

Communities across the value chain face rising economic inequality at a time when the social safety net and disaster response infrastructure are under threat. As public funding and small donor dollars decline, corporate philanthropy is a bright spot. Companies have resources communities need and the investments pay dividends for talent development, innovation and reputation. Effective community impact strategies will deftly avoid political flashpoints to advance programs that meet tangible need and connect to business priorities expressed in practical terms.



**Jennie Hendrickson**

Senior Vice President, Nonprofit Sector Lead, North America



# 05



## ↗ Marketplace pressures to accelerate AI transformation



**THE RACE TO INTEGRATE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND UNLOCK ITS EFFICIENCY, INTELLIGENCE AND FINANCIAL RETURNS IS RESHAPING INDUSTRIES, SUPPLY CHAINS AND WORKFLOWS IN REAL TIME.**

The media looks for winners and losers perpetuating a binary view of the AI revolution but the disruption is too multifaceted to capture in a headline or soundbite. Companies that stand apart drive a clear transformation narrative that proves the business case and answers stickier questions about the human side of change.



**Mike Connery**

Executive Vice President, Global AI Acceleration Lead

# Looking ahead ↗

## 3 AI transformation challenges to track in 2026

01

**Real time stakeholder insights.** AI has fundamentally transformed how we understand stakeholder perspectives. It allows us to capture stakeholder signals in near real time from publicly available data, while delivering a far more granular and nuanced view of sentiment aligned to our communications goals. For corporations, this raises the stakes: stakeholder expectations are clearer, more visible, and faster-moving, requiring organizations to respond with greater precision, speed, and accountability.



**Katya Sotiris**  
Executive Vice  
President, Global Data  
Solutions Lead

02

**Machine readability intelligence.** Audiences increasingly use AI to understand a crisis, issue, and company. To protect and enhance their reputation, companies must use machine readability intelligence assessments to understand how they show up in AI search, which sources drive results, and be equipped to use the right communications to correct mis/dis-information about them.



**Josh Wu**  
Executive Vice President,  
Analytics & Intelligence

03

**Human-centered generative creativity.** In the time it takes to say "Midjourney," the AI landscape has already shifted—new tools have launched, and existing ones have leveled up. Our creative toolbox is expanding at a dizzying pace. But here is the silver lining: we are the curators. The creative community decides which tools survive by upvoting the ones that truly synthesize information, unveil insights, and accelerate production. AI evolves fast, but we still define the standard for what makes great work, *great*.



**Chris Ferguson**  
Chief Creative Officer,  
South



### AI as Normal B2B Tech

For Business-to-Business (B2B) marketing AI is changing the game but not as a replacement for the MarComm tech stack. To find their edge, business leaders must demystify AI capabilities, be intentional about where and how AI tools fit in the marketing funnel and be clear-eyed about the digital transformation roadmap, regulation and privacy concerns and workforce impacts. Defunding vital technologies to go all in on AI will only slow innovation and erode value. Be AI enabled, not enthralled.



**Michael Tirone**  
Senior Vice President,  
B2B Marketing, South



# About Weber Advisory



The Weber Shandwick Collective's global c-suite advisory unit—Weber Advisory—is a modern corporate affairs capability built for every facet of the CEO and corporate enterprise agenda. In an era where understanding cultural nuances, political trends and societal shifts is essential for navigating the business landscape, Weber Advisory offers a comprehensive suite of services and technology built to empower agile corporate affairs executives to create and protect stakeholder value in high-stakes situations, including geopolitical issues, mergers and acquisitions, stakeholder activism, major crises, leadership transitions, and business transformations.

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