The CEO Impact Index

A proprietary Golin study to help communicators effectively shape CEO positioning

October 2025

GOLIN

CEO IMPACT INDEX

INTRODUCTION

H1 2025: The Great Rethink

The first half of 2025 proved to be a severe testing ground for CEOs.

The arrival of the second Trump administration on January 20 initiated a cascade of change that not only impacted the U.S. marketplace, but the global economy. With regulatory policies, standard business operations and technology shifting like quicksand, exerting leadership often resembled a chess game of calculated moves and constant risk management.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the rate of CEO turnover noted in recent years accelerated in 2025. A whopping 27, or 11%, of Fortune 250 companies changed CEOs between H2 2024 to H1 2025, and another 7 Co-CEOs exited their roles in this time. This volatility at the top reflects a bigger trend across the US business sector, where CEO transitions are expected to reach an historic record in 2025, and speaks to an overall reset on leadership.

Three key factors are rewriting the CEO agenda: the increasing political dimension of the role; the global complexity of supply chains; and the breakneck speed at which AI is transforming business and accelerating competition. This has culminated in a moment where leaders of the past are increasingly considered no longer suitable for the demands of the future.

Against this backdrop, the Golin CEO Impact Index (CII) – which measures and ranks the public engagement performance of the top 250 CEOs in the Fortune 500 – shows a moment of reckoning for top business leaders. A moment we're calling: *The Great Rethink.* This rethink applies to everything – strategic priorities, leadership expectations, workforce considerations, public engagement behaviors, and much more.

Now in its fourth edition, the Index continues to show compelling evidence that strong communication skills correlate with successful business performance. Generally speaking, those CEOs who can effectively communicate a vision for the future and mobilize ambitious transformation programs rise to the top of the Index and deliver stronger annual share price growth than their peers.

But our deep analysis shows that CEOs are clearly recalibrating their positioning strategies in 2025 to engage with the utmost precision. Whereas broad engagement strategies were common in years past, making CEOs ubiquitous figures on the world stage, we see a tightening of engagements this year. This is clearly a reaction to the new risks associated with the demand for constant engagement.

H1 2025 was punctuated by many defining moments in the public eye – a jockeying for favor before the inauguration; massive trade upheaval with the U.S. tariff revisions announced in April; several severe security breaches that put CEO safety into new focus; and a few moments of CEOs generally acting badly.

These factors had detrimental impacts on the perception of CEOs. For the first time in our research, we saw a doubling in the volume of "super negative" CEOs – those whose CEO Sentiment score exceeded -10 – underscoring that high speed, high stakes, high visibility risk now comes with the CEO job.

> With all these new considerations, the CEO Impact Index can provide instructive guidance for navigating the second half of 2025. The following report outlines the five most compelling insights from the H1 2025 study and their key strategic takeaways.
>
> While it remains difficult to predict what lies ahead, we hope CEOs and their Corporate Affairs teams can learn from the Index findings to mitigate risk and navigate these most unusual times.

Key Findings

As we analyzed the reputation landscape for CEOs in H1 2025—looking at everything from employee engagement and thought leadership to media sentiment, social engagement and industry influence—five key themes emerged:

1. **The Cone of Retreat: CEOs Rethink Public Engagement.**

   The arrival of the second Trump administration had a "cooling effect" on CEO public presence. While early days were greeted with optimism about the potential for a business-friendly administration, this soon gave way to public retreat. Nearly 10% of CII CEOs saw a negative sentiment score in the double digits – largely a result of exposure to the Trump administration.

2. **The Rethink on Priorities: Policy Above All.**

   Policy-focused conversations took center stage among CEOs in H1 2025 with 26% of CII CEO coverage mentioning the Trump administration (a 600% increase from mentions of the Biden administration in the previous six months). With policy coming to the center, previous notable megatrends, like Sustainability & DEI, faded into the background.

3. **The Rethink on Workforce: AI Takes Hold.**

   AI adoption, particularly the use of agentic AI, accelerated with earned media conversations among non-tech CEOs rising 36% in H1 2025 vs. H2 2024. The highest-ranked CII CEOs are pairing AI investments with comprehensive workforce development—including training, career support, and human-AI collaboration models—while lower-ranked CEOs announced reactive layoffs without strategic workforce transformation, ultimately undermining the human engagement needed for successful AI adoption.

4. **The Rethink on Leadership: No Honeymoon.**

   CEO turnover reached new heights in H1 2025, with 27 new CEOs taking the reins and another 7 co-CEOs exiting from H2 2024. New CEOs scored 8% lower on overall sentiment compared to incumbents, underscoring how today's CEOs face compressed timelines to prove effectiveness, with boards and stakeholders demanding evidence of strategic vision and operational competence quicker than ever before.

5. **The Rethink on CEO Positioning: Intention Over Ubiquity.**

   More than ever, CEOs are demonstrating strategic intention in their public engagements. Prioritizing high-profile outlets, leveraging controlled social platforms like LinkedIn for authentic dialogue, and focusing on quality interactions over vanity metrics has become the defining characteristic of successful CEO external engagement in today's risk-intensive environment.

Key Insight 1

THE CONE OF RETREAT

CEOs Rethink Public Engagement Under President Trump's Second Administration

The single most significant factor impacting CEO engagement in H1 2025 was the arrival of President Trump's second administration, which had a profound and universal cooling effect on CEO public presence. While this may seem intuitive given President Trump's recent challenges to business leaders, this charged relationship was not initially anticipated. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

In early January 2025, many business leaders speculated that a second Trump administration would be more predictable than the first and be more business-friendly than the Biden administration. Thus, the year started with cautious optimism and great expectations from top business leaders – particularly in the tech and AI sectors. Some CEOs even proactively revised their business strategies to align with the administration before inauguration.

But this outlook shifted as the White House moved quickly in its first 30 days, prompting a rethink that literally changed the shape of CEO engagement: In the three previous CII studies, we saw a fairly uniform "bar" shape of engagement, reflecting steady volumes of earned media and social engagement over the period. But H1 2025 shows a "cone of retreat“ – with extremely high volumes of activity leading up to January 20, followed by a sharp retraction from February onward, with only a blip during April's tariff revisions. This retreat was consistent across traditional news channels and on social media.

In total, 50% of total CEO earned exposure in H1 occurred in January and April, alone, and these were caustic windows. Twenty-one CEOs studied saw acute double-digit negative sentiment scores – primarily from exposure in those two months. These 'super negative' CEOs came from 8 sectors, with the largest groups from Retail/Wholesale, Motor Vehicles, Aerospace, Financials and Healthcare – all severely impacted by new tariffs with direct consumer implications.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

- **Evaluate all mechanisms.** Sparring can have an impact on relationships, reputation and share price. CEOs and their teams should evaluate public, private and shared mechanisms to engage and critique policymakers in this heightened environment.
- **Calculate risk.** CEOs are walking a very narrow line to responsibly advocate for their organizations while not becoming a political football. Risk analysis and mitigation strategies are essential for any public critique of policy.

Source: Golin

Key Insight 2

THE RETHINK ON PRIORITIES

Policy Above All

With a new wave of U.S. economic and regulatory policies in H1 2025, CEOs were immediately required to reconsider their strategic priorities. Over 26% of all CII CEO media coverage during H1 2025 referenced the Trump administration – a 600% increase compared to Biden administration mentions in H2 2024. This surge reflects a notable shift in how business leaders are positioned within political and economic discourse, with 33% of coverage centered specifically on trade policy and tariffs.

CEOs most quoted regarding the Trump administration showed clear sentiment patterns. Those expressing willingness to work with the new administration, particularly on trade policy, received the most positive media sentiment. Conversely, leaders who voiced disapproval of tariff policies and suggested passing costs to consumers experienced the most negative coverage. In fact, CEOs with vocal critiques made up the majority of "super negative" leaders noted previously, signaling that political positioning now has measurable impact on executive reputation and stakeholder trust.

With policy coming to the center of the CEO agenda, other megatrend topics faded into the background. The CII uses data aggregation to identify the leading topics raised by CEOs every six months – what we call megatrends – to assess how closely CEOs are aligning with and leading conversations about the biggest forces driving global business. These megatrends evolve over time, and for H1 2025 included: Tariffs and Trade Policy; Economic Uncertainty; Geopolitical Instability; Government Relations & Regulatory Changes; Artificial Intelligence; and Labor Market Dynamics. This marks the first time since the CII's 2023 inception that Sustainability/Climate Action and DEI did not rank among megatrends. Given the politicization of these topics, this doesn't necessarily mean F250 companies uniformly deprioritized them, but rather that it became less advisable for CEOs to be the leading corporate voice on these issues. This suggests a broader rethink on CEO thought leadership as part of corporate reputation development and management.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

- **Promote coordination & access.** It’s never been more important for CEOs to work closely with their government affairs and corporate affairs teams. It’s imperative these partners have a seat at the table to help steer business strategy and ensure the appropriate risk mitigation policies are in place.
- **Brief & plan together.** Ongoing monitoring of the government/policy landscape and scenario planning in coordination with cross-functional colleagues is essential on the issues of greatest materiality to the enterprise. This is essential to identify and prepare for looming risks and uncover new opportunities.

Key Insight 3

THE RETHINK ON WORKFORCE

AI Takes Hold

The first half of 2025 saw AI adoption accelerate, with agentic AI driving two distinct themes. First, CEOs across industries outside technology, including CPG, energy and manufacturing are speaking publicly about AI, underscoring that the AI-powered economy shifts extend beyond Silicon Valley. Earned media conversations around AI among non-tech Fortune 250 CEOs rose approximately 36% from H2 2024 to H1 2025, highlighting that AI is no longer viewed as specialized technology, but rather foundational enterprise strategy that is critical for long-term growth and competitive positioning.

Simultaneously, the highest-ranked CII CEOs continue heavy AI investment while recalibrating their workforces. CEOs increasingly speak openly about a future where AI agents become core workforce members, with humans potentially vastly outnumbered by "digital workers." Several top companies are deploying AI agents for repetitive HR, onboarding, scheduling and administrative tasks, resulting in further workforce reductions. The job impact, alongside record AI investment, suggests talent strategy shifts toward AI-driven operations rather than simple contraction.

Our data reveal a fundamental paradox: AI-powered transformation is a strategic imperative for efficiency and innovation, yet success depends as much on human capital strategy as technological capability. Companies managing this transition thoughtfully – investing in people while investing in AI – maintain competitive advantages in employee satisfaction. Those treating AI adoption solely as cost-cutting risk undermining the human engagement needed for successful transformation.

Despite significant layoffs, CEOs with above-average Employee Engagement scores are retooling workforces through comprehensive training programs, career development support, internal learning infrastructure, and human-AI collaboration positioning (i.e., AI as teammate rather than replacement). In stark contrast, the lowest-ranked Employee Engagement CEOs conduct workforce reductions reactively, disconnected from AI transformation narratives and absent of other investments required to evolve and reskill organizations.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

- **Three Key Points.**
  A critical formula for success is emerging: CEOs must pair their AI vision with 1) tangible deployments that deliver scalable efficiency and value creation; 2) transparent communication about what these changes mean for their teams; and 3) new investments in workforce transformation.

- **Promote AI Literacy.**
  AI literacy has emerged as a baseline job requirement and continued innovation must be undertaken with broad-based employee enablement, not only efficiency improvements, to drive long-term competitiveness.

Key Insight 4

THE RETHINK ON LEADERSHIP

No Honeymoon

In H1 2025, Boards urgently searched for new leaders that could navigate the challenges of today's complex business environment. CEO turnover reached historic heights, with 27 Fortune 250 companies ushering in new CEOs. These leaders arrived with great expectations and immediate pressure to perform.

The research shows being a CEO is challenging, but being a 'rescue' CEO, whose primary task is to drive a company's turnaround, is even harder. A visibility gap between new and tenured CEOs reveals the steep learning curve facing incoming CEOs. Across all eight dimensions, new CEOs scored significantly below incumbent counterparts. New CEOs' Thought Leadership scores averaged 12% lower, while Employee Engagement and Events scores lagged by 15% and 43%, respectively. This translated to an overall CII score 8% lower for newly appointed leaders, highlighting the immediate external deficit in today's multifaceted stakeholder environment.

This performance gap confirms the traditional honeymoon period for new leaders is over. Today's CEOs face immediate pressure to demonstrate tangible results, with boards, investors, and stakeholders demanding evidence of strategic vision and operational competence sooner than ever before. They must simultaneously serve as strategic operators, public-facing communicators, culture architects and policy influencers while balancing short-term performance pressures with long-term innovation imperatives. The first 100 days have become make-or-break periods for demonstrating both internal momentum and external perception.

This unprecedented trend presents both risk and opportunity. Organizations must balance continuity for stakeholder confidence with fresh perspectives to overcome challenges, while new CEOs must rapidly develop operational expertise, strategic vision and external presence. In an era of heightened stakes and diminished margin for error, leading with clarity, empathy and resilience defines CEO effectiveness.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

- **Succession plan.**
  It is imperative for Corporate Affairs leaders to be involved early and often throughout succession planning conversations. They play a critical role in not only helping Boards plan to introduce a new leader but also guide strategic communications throughout the full transition process.
- **First 100 Days.**
  Corporate Affairs teams must develop accelerated external engagement programs, pre-position key messages and stakeholder relationships, and create rapid-deployment communication frameworks that enable new leaders to demonstrate strategic vision and operational competence from Day One rather than playing catch-up in a high-stakes environment where early missteps can have lasting reputational consequences.

Key Insight 5

THE RETHINK ON CEO POSITIONING

Intention Over Ubiquity

In sum, the modern CEO operates in an unprecedented landscape of risk and scrutiny. From geopolitical tensions and regulatory uncertainty to stakeholder activism, political polarization, and even threats to personal safety, CEOs face mounting pressures demanding recalibration of their public engagement. These factors could reasonably explain the 'cone of retreat' witnessed at the start of 2025…but that is not the full story.

Rather than retreating entirely, Fortune 250 CEOs demonstrated remarkable intention in H1 2025, becoming more deliberate about when, where, and how they show up publicly. Our data reveal a compelling paradox: CEOs are simultaneously pulling back from some channels while increasing visibility in others.

In earned media, there was clearly a contraction: from H2 2024 to H1 2025, total CEO media hits dropped by 7% to 1.3M results, and the reach of that media plummeted 30%—losing over 1 trillion impressions to 3.3T. What that tells us is that CEO's voluntary engagement with traditional news organizations declined, while their secondary exposure in social media channels like X (formerly Twitter) noticeably increased (from 20.5% in H2 2024 to 29.5% in H1 2025). This presents heightened risk as over a third (34%) of CII CEO exposure on X is negative compared to 18% on Facebook, 15% on YouTube, and 10-16% in traditional news sources.

But on the other side, event-related engagement surged 23%, while LinkedIn posts also increased by an average of two per CEO. On LinkedIn specifically, success requires genuine engagement: data shows a 0.30 correlation between engagement quality and higher overall CII ranking. The lesson is clear: intention trumps ubiquity. The most effective leaders carefully select platforms, craft purposeful messages, and prioritize quality interactions over quantity metrics.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

- **Continue media engagement.** Don't abandon media relations—top-tier news organizations remain the most trusted, high-reach channels for CEOs to communicate ideas in their own voice, providing an important counter to chatter on social media platforms.
- **Quality over Quantity.** Shift from volume-based visibility to precision-driven engagement that prioritizes platform control, message authenticity, and stakeholder value. This intention delivers superior sentiment and engagement outcomes.
- **Prioritize Engagement.** Build an "engagement infrastructure" emphasizing quality interactions over vanity metrics, while cultivating networks of third-party advocates who can authentically amplify your vision when direct CEO engagement carries heightened risk.

Actions for H2 2025

1: ENGAGE WITH AWARENESS & CAUTION

- Evaluate all mechanisms. Sparring can have an impact on relationships, reputation and share price. CEOs and their teams should evaluate public, private and shared mechanisms to engage and critique policymakers in this heightened environment.
- Calculate risk. CEOs are walking a very narrow line to responsibly advocate for their organizations while not becoming a political football. Risk analysis and mitigation strategies are essential for any public critique of policy.

2: KEEP POLICY AT THE CENTER

- Promote coordination & access. It's never been more important for CEOs to work closely with their government affairs and corporate affairs teams. It's imperative these partners have a seat at the table to help steer business strategy and ensure the appropriate risk mitigation policies are in place.
- Brief & plan together. Ongoing monitoring of the government/policy landscape and scenario planning in coordination with cross-functional colleagues is essential on the issues of greatest materiality to the enterprise. This is essential to identify and prepare for looming risks and uncover new opportunities.

3: EMPHASIZE AI-HUMAN COLLABORATION

- Three Key Points. A critical formula for success is emerging: CEOs must pair their AI vision with 1) tangible deployments that deliver scalable efficiency and value creation; 2) transparent communication about what these changes mean for their teams; and 3) new investments in workforce transformation.
- Promote AI Literacy. AI literacy has emerged as a baseline job requirement and continued innovation must be undertaken with broad-based employee enablement, not only efficiency improvements, to drive long-term competitiveness.

4: SHOW VISION + IMPACT FROM DAY ONE

- Succession plan. It is imperative for Corporate Affairs leaders to be involved early and often throughout succession planning conversations. They play a critical role in not only helping Boards plan to introduce a new leader but also guide strategic communications throughout the entire transition process.
- First 100 Days. Corporate Affairs teams must develop accelerated external engagement programs, pre-position key messages and stakeholder relationships, and create rapid-deployment communication frameworks that enable new leaders to demonstrate strategic vision and operational competence from Day One rather than playing catch-up in a high-stakes environment where early missteps can have lasting reputational consequences.

5: INTENTION OVER UBIQUITY

- Continue media engagement. Don't abandon media relations—top-tier news organizations remain the most trusted, high-reach channels for CEOs to communicate ideas in their own voice, providing an important counter to less regulated social media platforms.
- Quality over Quantity. Shift from volume-based visibility to precision-driven engagement that prioritizes platform control, message authenticity, and stakeholder value. This intention delivers superior sentiment and engagement outcomes.
- Prioritize Engagement. Build an "engagement infrastructure" emphasizing quality interactions over vanity metrics, while cultivating networks of third-party advocates who can authentically amplify your vision when direct CEO engagement carries heightened risk.

About Golin Corporate Affairs

In an era of constant transformation, marked by blurring industry boundaries, increased activist demands, shifting workplace dynamics and reduced consumer loyalty, we believe business transformation and corporate reputation are now inseparable. This convergence demands that companies approach every decision through a dual lens of operational excellence and reputational impact, recognizing that these elements are inextricably linked in driving long-term business impact. Success requires maintaining business discipline — balancing responsiveness to emerging trends with smart strategy.

Our team of seasoned advisors have deep experience across key disciplines and industries, delivering a pragmatic, results-driven approach. We partner with clients across every aspect of communications — strategic counsel, executive positioning, earned media, digital storytelling, investor relations, purpose and sustainability, issues and public affairs, and transformation communications — to shape reputation and deliver business results that last.

About the CEO Impact Index

The CEO Impact Index (the Index) was conducted in partnership by a team of experts from Golin's Global Data & Analytics and Corporate Affairs practices. The CEOs analyzed were selected from the top 250 companies of the 2025 Fortune 500, which ranks U.S.-based companies by total revenue for their respective fiscal years that ended on or before March 31, 2025. Each Fortune 250 CEO was then analyzed and scored based on eight areas of quantifiable executive visibility criteria: top tier earned media coverage, trade media engagement, LinkedIn presence, business awards & rankings, participation in top global and industry forums, employee engagement, megatrends, and sentiment towards CEO. These eight individual scores were then used to determine an overall score and rank for each CEO on the Index, based on Golin's proprietary weighting system. A secondary analysis is also undertaken to evaluate the top Index CEOs' business performances versus comparable sets from the Fortune 250 ranking.

APPENDIX: THE CEO IMPACT INDEX METHODOLOGY

The CEO Impact Index (the Index) was conducted in partnership by a team of experts from Golin's Global Data & Analytics and Corporate Affairs practices.

The CEOs analyzed were selected from the top 250 companies of the 2025 Fortune 500, which ranks U.S.-based companies by total revenue for their respective fiscal years ended on or before March 31, 2025.

Each Fortune 250 CEO was then analyzed and scored based on eight areas of quantifiable executive visibility criteria, including:

1. Earned Media Coverage – The CEO's exposure in business and consumer press in H1 2025. Additional consideration was given to coverage with a positive sentiment, feature coverage where a CEO's voice was prominent, as well as in non-financial news outside of obligatory quarterly earnings coverage. Scores were amplified based on publication readership levels (i.e., the number of monthly readers).

2. LinkedIn Presence – The CEO's prominence on LinkedIn, including number of posts, comments and followers in H1 2025.

3. Business Awards & Rankings – Their company's inclusion and ranking on Fast Company's Most Innovative Companies, Fortune's World's Most Admired Companies, TIME's Most Influential Companies, and Drucker Institute Management Top 250 lists.

4. Employee Engagement – Their company's rank on the Fortune Best Companies to Work For, Forbes' World's Best Employers, and LinkedIn's Top Companies lists, as well as an analysis of the company's presence, score, and CEO approval rating on Glassdoor.

5. Events – The CEO's presence and visibility at core industry and global events in H1 2025 (e.g., Mobile World Congress for a CEO in the telecommunications industry; World Economic Forum for any CEO).

6. Trade Media Engagement – The CEO's visibility in trade media outlets for his/her respective industry in H1 2025. Additional consideration was given to media coverage where the CEO's voice was featured prominently, and scores were amplified based on key message inclusion and reach of the publication.

7. Megatrends – The CEO's visibility on megatrends, as identified by AI as the most prominent topics raised across the business landscape in H1 2025. In a similar way that the Consumer Price Index selects a different "basket of goods" as consumer preference changes over time, this index selects the 6 topics that were most prevalent over the period. For this study, it included: Tariffs and Trade Policy; Economic Uncertainty; Geopolitical Instability; Government Relations & Regulatory Changes; Artificial Intelligence; and Labor Market Dynamics. To score well, a CEO does not need to discuss every topic but needs to have strong visibility on at least one. Additional consideration was given to media coverage where the CEO's voice was featured prominently.

8. Sentiment Towards CEO – The overall sentiment of each CEO's exposure in business, consumer and trade press in H1 2025.

These eight individual scores were then used to determine an overall Index score and rank for each CEO, based on Golin's proprietary weighting system.

Important Note on the Index Methodology: Elon Musk represents a significant outlier in the CEO Impact Index analysis. His multiple leadership roles (Tesla, SpaceX, and X Corp), appointment to the Trump administration, and unique position as a global cultural figure generate unprecedented media coverage and engagement levels that dramatically skew Index findings. Unlike traditional CEOs who typically avoid controversy, Musk's intentional engagement with contentious issues and the resulting volume of coverage – both positive and negative – create data patterns that are incomparable to other Fortune 500 CEOs. For these reasons, Golin has removed him from the core findings and trends.

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