

Establishing a Future-Ready Framework for Issues Management

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Ragan Communications · Group Learning Session · October 15, 2026



I help organizations see around corners

Issues management sits at the intersection of business, reputation, regulation and stakeholder expectations.



APCO

Deputy Managing Director, West Coast Region

FOCUS

Crisis and issues management, preparedness, stakeholder engagement and reputation strategy

EXPERIENCE

Corporate communications, investor relations, public affairs and legal training

TODAY

A practical framework you can adapt to your own organization

My goal today: make issues management feel less abstract and more operational.

THE CENTRAL TENSION

Issues move at the speed of social media.

Organizations often respond at the speed of bureaucracy.

Issues move fast

A leak goes viral in hours

An activist campaign mobilizes in days

Misinformation spreads before facts are established

A short video reshapes perception overnight

Organizations move slowly

Functions hold different pieces of intelligence

No agreed criteria for when to act

Leaders are surprised by predictable issues

Response plans are written after choices narrow

The goal is not simply to respond faster. It is to see earlier and decide better.

Issues management is reputation management

Every issue is a test of judgment, behavior and trust.

1 Signals

Emerging issues often begin as weak signals. Early recognition preserves options.

2 Cumulative

Every decision contributes to reputation, not only the highly visible ones.

3 Action

Stakeholders judge organizations by what they do under pressure, not messaging alone.

4 Resilience

Foresight strengthens trust, stakeholder relationships and the ability to recover.

Reputation is defined by decisions made before, during and after pressure.

Six forces have changed the game

Organizations rarely face only one force at a time.

Regulatory & political velocity

Policy shifts happen faster and with less warning.

Consumer activism at scale

Organized campaigns can emerge and mobilize quickly.

AI-enabled misinformation

Synthetic and coordinated content complicates the fact base.

Cross-issue contagion

A business decision can become a labor, ESG or human-rights story.

Stakeholder fragmentation

Audiences hold different, sometimes contradictory expectations.

Scrutiny without context

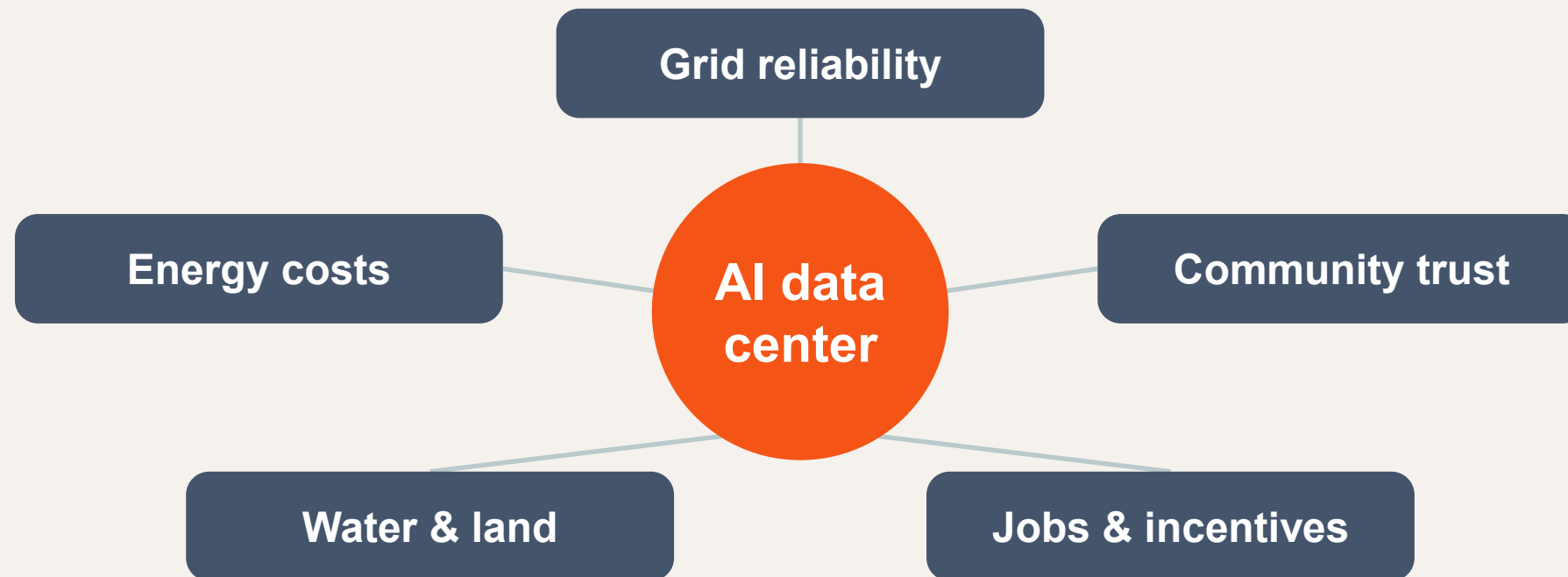
Past decisions resurface and are judged by today's standards.

The intersection of two or three forces is what overwhelms traditional response systems.

A CURRENT EXAMPLE

One issue. Five storylines.

AI data centers illustrate how a technical project becomes a reputation ecosystem.



The management question is not “Who owns the data center issue?”
It is “How do we connect the decisions, stakeholders and risks before the story connects them for us?”

THE COMMON FAILURE POINTS

Most organizations have crisis plans.

Very few have an issues management system.

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|-----------------------------|--|
| 1 Crisis plans only | Activated after escalation, when choices are limited and costs are higher. |
| 2 Siloed monitoring | Legal, communications and public affairs each see only part of the picture. |
| 3 No prioritization | Every issue feels urgent, so leadership follows the loudest voice. |
| 4 Unclear ownership | Cross-functional issues fall between functions and decision rights remain vague. |
| 5 One-time exercises | The landscape changes, but the plans and playbooks do not. |

The key distinction: a system creates shared criteria, ownership and action before escalation.

A future-ready system answers three questions

The answers must be shared across functions, not held by communications alone.

1

Can we see it?

Detect weak signals and connect external and internal intelligence.

2

Do we know what matters?

Separate noise from material business and reputation risk.

3

Can we act together?

Align decisions, ownership, posture and next actions.

These questions are the bridge from a collection of plans to an operating discipline.

THE FRAMEWORK

Four connected capabilities

Each pillar reinforces the others, and the cycle never fully stops.



The system is continuous: discovery changes priorities, priorities change governance, and action creates new intelligence.

See the landscape. Decide what matters.

The objective is not a longer list. It is a clearer allocation of attention.

DISCOVER

Start with known business priorities, then look beyond them.

Scan across mission-critical, industry, societal and political, enterprise and emerging issues.

Combine external analysis with internal subject-matter expertise.

Output: a comprehensive issue inventory.

MAP & PRIORITIZE

Scale: How large is the conversation?

Momentum: Is attention growing, peaking or declining?

Exposure: How directly is the organization implicated?

Risk: What are the business, stakeholder and reputation stakes?

Prioritize: What are the issues we need to strategically manage? What can we influence?

Output: a shared vision for how to spend corporate resources.

A heat map is not the answer. It is the beginning of a better leadership conversation.

Align the organization. Prepare, act and learn.

This is where analysis becomes an operating discipline.

GOVERN & ALIGN

DECISION CRITERIA	When do we monitor, prepare, respond, engage or lead?
ESCALATION	Who gets notified, who decides and at what threshold?
OWNERSHIP	Who carries the issue across functional boundaries?
DECISION FORUM	Where does the organization align on posture and action?

PREPARE & ADAPT

POSITION	A clear point of view and strategic posture.
STAKEHOLDERS	Influence pathways, priorities and engagement plans.
SCENARIOS	Likely triggers, decisions and ready-now materials.
LEARNING	Tabletops, after-action reviews and regular reprioritization.

The most impactful starting point is often one page of agreed decision and escalation criteria.

Monitoring describes the conversation.

Intelligence guides the decision.

BASIC MONITORING

DATA	News and social media
HORIZON	What is happening now
OUTPUT	Volume and sentiment
AUDIENCE	Communications team
TRIGGER	When something goes wrong

ISSUES INTELLIGENCE

News, social, regulatory, legislative, scientific and stakeholder
What is happening now, what is changing and what may come next
Prioritized issue map, implications, ownership and action criteria
Cross-functional leaders with authority to act
When an issue crosses an agreed threshold

The intelligence layer transforms monitoring into choices, ownership and action.

AI expands the field of view.

Experienced judgment determines what matters.

DETECT

Process diverse signals at scale and surface anomalies earlier.

CONNECT

Reveal relationships across issues, markets and stakeholder groups.

FORECAST

Identify signs that attention or risk may be accelerating.

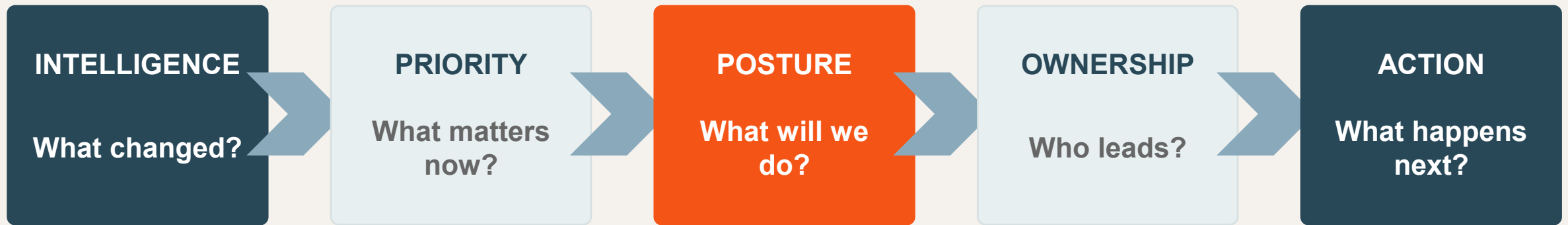
QUERY

Let teams ask focused questions of the information in real time.

DATA + TECHNOLOGY + SUBJECT-MATTER EXPERTISE + SENIOR COUNSEL

Intelligence without governance is just a report

The value appears only when insight reaches a decision forum with authority and accountability.



The meeting is not the system. The repeated cycle of pre-read, decision, action and follow-up is the system.

The Issues Working Group

A structured cycle that turns intelligence into aligned, cross-functional action.



WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Two organizations. Two different starting points.

The framework adapts to the problem the organization actually has.

Global P&C Insurer | GOVERNANCE

CHALLENGE

Multiple teams managing related issues independently, without one shared view or response posture.

APPROACH

Combined internal priorities with external analytics, created a tiered issue map and established a quarterly Issues Working Group.

SHIFT

From fragmented monitoring toward a proactive, cross-functional discipline.

Global CPG Company | SCALE & PRIORITIZATION

CHALLENGE

More than 125 potential global issues and no consistent way to focus leadership attention.

APPROACH

Mapped and scored the landscape, added credibility and expectation criteria, then built targeted plans for top-tier issues.

SHIFT

From an overwhelming list toward a proactive, multi-year issues model.

Maturity does not look identical. It means the system solves the organization's real decision problem.

Five markers of a future-ready organization

Self-score each marker from 1 to 5.

- | | | |
|----------|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Systematic discovery | A structured process to find issues before they find you. |
| 2 | Data-informed prioritization | Evidence, not volume or hierarchy, shapes issue tiers. |
| 3 | Governance with teeth | Agreed criteria, named owners and clear escalation paths. |
| 4 | Cross-functional integration | Legal, communications, public affairs and operations share one view. |
| 5 | Continuous adaptation | The issue map and readiness resources evolve over time. |

Do not aim to become a five overnight. Identify the next capability that moves you one point.

PRACTICAL STARTING POINTS

Build the muscle one step at a time

Pick the action that addresses your weakest capability.

THIS WEEK

Map the current state

Use the five markers.
Compare notes with one colleague in legal and one in the business.

THIS MONTH

Run a discovery session

Bring key functions together and ask: What are the 20 issues we should be watching?

THIS QUARTER

Build an issue inventory

Analyze and prioritize the highest-impact issues, then align on management tiers.

THIS YEAR

Stand up governance

Pilot an IWG, document decision criteria, name owners and run one tabletop.

The strongest programs did not appear overnight. They began with one step that created momentum.

Build the system before you need it.

- 1 Issues management is reputation management.
- 2 The goal is not to monitor everything. It is to know what matters and what decision it requires.
- 3 Intelligence, governance and preparedness must work together. None is sufficient alone.

Questions and Answers





Thank you!