



## TICP – Episode 28 - The Godfather of IC (Season 03, episode 08)

**Katie [0:10]:** Welcome to the internal comms podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. Listeners, I'd like to set this episode in context because I have a feeling it's one that might be listened to in weeks, months, maybe even years from now. I'm recording this intro on the 15th of April, 2020 in the midst of a global pandemic.

Just today, the total number of Covid-19 cases has surpassed 2 million. The world is in lockdown as we fight this invisible and deadly enemy. Nations worldwide have turned their attention to the people who will get us through this global emergency; millions of selfless, hardworking, and dedicated men and women who, well quite frankly, haven't always received this kind of recognition.

Attention has also turned to how organizations are protecting these essential workers. CEOs are asking how they can best serve, support, and thank those bravely standing on the front line. Indeed, how leaders choose to communicate with their people during this crisis could well define their entire careers.

Now, all of this has enormous implications for us as internal communicators. Our skills, our insight, our plain old intuition has never been in greater demand. We now have our seat at the table, even if the actual table is in our kitchen. So, for all of you working so hard to keep the comms show on the road, here's a very special treat.

Bill Quirk is one of the world's leading authorities in internal comms. He is the author of two seminal books, communicating corporate change and making the connections. Plus, numerous tools, strategies, and models that have profoundly influenced our profession. We recorded this episode in those halcyon days back in March 2020, when it was still possible to actually record face-to-face in our London studio.

So, we do touch on the pandemic here briefly, but we cover so much more. So sit back and enjoy Bill's tremendous wisdom, perception and his many fascinating and funny stories born from a lifetime of hands-on comms experience. Bill. It is an absolute honour to have you on the show. I feel like having you on the show is a bit of a rite of passage for the Internal Comms Podcast.

We really are an internal comms podcast show now we have you in the hot seat in the studio, so that's wonderful, so, thank you very much for your time. I'd like to start, not quite near the beginning, but take you back to 1973, if I may, and you are about to become an undergraduate at Oxford university to study Philosophy and English, I believe. I'm wondering, what were the career aspirations of the young Bill Quirk at that time?

**Bill [3:43]:** Well, I was doing English. So, I did the first degree in English and then I did the master's in research on romantic poetry, and I had no expectation of a career. We were in the happy position in the seventies that we were paid to read books we liked, with the assumption that you would then pay for it by going into a very boring job afterwards.



And since I was doing research on romantic poetry, my dad who was a lorry driver, thought this is completely useless. And I didn't know that it was going to turn out to be incredibly useful. English as a degree, I think is the perfect preparation for life. So, I went to the careers advisors at university and they suggested – it was the Thursday – and they said I should be an investment banker. I think they said it to everybody who came in that day, which I thought was a complete waste of time. And the only thing that has with those kind of career aspirations was there's a quote from Keats, which is I am ambitious of doing the world some good. And I think that was my only vague idea about what I should do.

**Katie [4:44]:** Just out of curiosity, has that love of romantic fictions and poetry stayed with you?

**Bill [4:49]:** Yeah, very much. And I kept slipping into the books. In the first book, there's a comparison between the decentralisation of business units and the plot of King Lear and all that whole Victorian debate about what's the relationship between people? Are you just buying their muscles or do you have different responsibility to them? Equally, how do you unleash the creativity and the imaginative side of people? All of that's been, you know, that's current for the last 30 years.

**Katie [5:22]:** Do you, I mean, I'm just thinking about that because I get the feeling now people are quite motivated by the job at the end of it. I'm looking at Alex, who's helping me record in here, he's quite a few years younger than me, but you would have left with a loan, a student loan to pay off. Do you lament the fact now that people aren't just going to university for the love of learning and to learn and read a subject they just feel passionately about?

**Bill [5:47]:** Yeah, I don't lament it, I think my three daughters went to university with a very different expectation. And one of them did come back and say, "Hang on, you told us it was amazing. And it wasn't." So they went having to pay, wondering about what value they were getting for the money. Applying a consumerist attitude to, you know, "I paid the money, I expect teaching."

And they didn't get what I got, which was, one, a free education and the ability to learn and get excited. So my, you know, my second year when I was 20, I got very excited about literature, romantic poetry. I don't think I'd have that luxury now, I'd be thinking, hang on a second. How am I going to get a job at the end of all this? We all expected that there would be a job.

I don't think that my daughter's generation have that expectation at all. And I think that's a big issue for, when we understand what's going on inside organizations, is the entire set of attitudes and expectations has completely changed. So, I think we thought when we, you know, when we started doing internal communication, we are reacting against the command-and-control 1950s organisation man, that you sell your soul for a job.



We thought, no, we want to be involved and engaged and included at brackets with the expectation we keep a job. I think we got used to the idea that there were no jobs for life. I don't think we expected to have a situation where there was a life without necessarily a job.

So, you know, things have moved on quite a bit.

**Katie [7:16]:** They really have changed. I'm going to jump you forward a little bit to when you were at the PR firm Burson-Marsteller now I read this and I don't know if it's true, but I read that you were asked to become its internal comms expert before you really knew what IC was really, is that true?

**Bill [7:35]:** Yeah, it's pretty true. When I joined, they said, "You are going to be the expert in this." And I said, "Well, I don't know much about it." And they said, "Well, you've got three weeks because in three weeks, you're speaking at the CBR on the subject. So you better get good quickly."

But the shift, I mean, I had some kind of preparation because I came out of university and went into publishing, which is a natural extension. If you love books, you go into publishing, um, where not all the books are very lovable. But I got into this because I was on a plane to New York, and I got talking to a guy to my left who turned out to be a president for a consultancy.

At the end of the flight, he offered me a job in New York. So, I left publishing, moved to New York and started consulting. And that's how I ended up in Burson-Marsteller. So, you know, it keeps in that God laughs with plans. There wasn't much career planning because there was, you know, there were these odd moments where things happened, which have, you know, this is not where I expected to have ended up.

**Katie [8:36]:** That's kind of quite comforting to know for all those people starting out who were thinking, oh, I don't really know what the plan looks like. Think about the next opportunity, maybe.

**Bill [8:46]:** I think, I think you're right, because, I mean, one of the questions you'd asked was about, what were my career plans or aspirations.

And I thought I didn't have any, but I did have an openness to opportunity and risk. I did have a focus on, you know, there is something I do that is useful and valuable. So my expectation, when I came out of university was, you get a job and they have to pay you. Whereas I think the shift now is hang on, you have to be valuable and do something that someone's willing to pay for.

And I think that's been a real shift, which is, you know, why would someone hire you and what is it that you offer? So I think people now have to be more focused on what's marketable



about them. Uh, but you know, thank God, in the world of internal communication, common sense is pretty rare. The ability to, you know, think and articulate isn't all that widespread.

So, there were some basic skills I think, which are still very valuable and very marketable.

**Katie [9:44]:** How did the speech go at the CBR after those three weeks?

**Bill [9:49]:** It went pretty well actually! The thing is, it's quite funny looking back, is no one knew what in telecommunication was. They knew there was something. And so they all marketed it differently.

And the trouble is, every time you explained it, in terms of some other discipline, you picked up all the baggage of that discipline. So when you call it, it's like internal PR, it's like okay, that's lying to employees then. And he said, well, well, it's more like internal marketing. And it's like, well, okay, that's smoke and mirrors for employees.

And so they focused on the idea, about internal motivation, which is you can get more out of your people if you focus on them. Now at Burson-Marsteller, you're always the last audience they ever thought of, you're always the afterthought. And that was an incredible lesson because they would literally go through who do we need to talk to, uh, the city we need to talk to, we need to talk to the media, then there would be a long pause. And then they'd look at me, and I'd go, "Employees?" and they go, "Oh yeah, them as well."

And that taught me a lot of lessons about the hierarchy and communication that, you know, media tends to come first because everyone's terrified of the journalists. The city analysts come second because they would destroy share price, but people they never really thought about were employees because there was a naivety that said, if you tell your employees what to do, they will do it.

Yeah. Probably they won't. Or they'll sabotage it.

**Katie [11:08]:** Was there a point then when you thought, Ooh, I think I might have found my niche. I might have found my field. Do you remember that, that actual feeling or time when you realized this is something I could devote a career to?

**Bill [11:24]:** Yes. I can remember a colleague saying to me, you're like a fish that's found the water. I owe a lot to the clients who trusted me. And I remember when I wrote the first book that came almost entirely out of one client who I would be taken into the board and say, "Here's what we should do." And they would say, "Why?" and you'd have to think, yeah, actually, why? Why should we do this? And so all my four box models, all the diagrams were really on a flip chart in the boardroom saying, look, here's why we should do this.

And the, the most Glaswegian unsympathetic finance director, you could find would go, okay, I understand the logic. And so it forced me to articulate what I felt instinctively and intuitively.



**Katie [12:06]:** See, I think that might be your secret sauce. Cause I, I put on Twitter that I was interviewing you and I knew I'd get a response from people that had questions and a lot of them are using your four box models and your escalator, your communication system.

But if they came out of physically being in the room with a flip chart and a pen and having to convince someone, no wonder they work, they weren't developed in theory with, you know, a hot towel over your head thinking about it, they were developed, you know, having to look in the whites of your eyes of your clients.

**Bill [12:35]:** Yeah, and usually under pressure from very skeptical people.

So the, you know, the clients used to tease me about consultants, what terrible people they are. They've, uh, there, there are people that can tell you a hundred more ways to make love, but don't have a partner themselves. Uh, but the one I liked, I thought it was absolutely right, that resonated with me was a consultant who is someone who sees something working in practice.

And wonders does that work in theory. And that's pretty much my career because you'd, you'd be scrambling to explain or justify what you were saying. And you had to explain it in a language that appealed to systematic engineers who need to understand the logic of this. Whereas anyone who talks, communicates, will go, "Yeah, I'm with you. Absolutely."

And the other thing I think is, most of what I've written is, I don't think it's revelation. I think it's recognition. I think people go, "Ah, yeah, that's kind of what I thought." I mean, most clients would say, "God, he stands up in front and talks to people and gets paid. I've been telling them that for years and they wouldn't listen to me."

So, one of the reasons I wrote the books was with the idea that, um, you know, an internal communication manager, will go to photocopy a bit of the book, take it in, highline it, give it to their boss to say, "See, this is what I've been saying for years. Here's some external validation of it."

**Katie [13:56]:** One of the things I did notice doing some research and preparation for this big show is that you have spent, I'm not sure if it's all of your career, but a lot of your career as an independent consultant to business on the agency side, as it were, as we might call it.

So that gives you a degree of objectivity to it, to a sense. And as I say, independence, I'm just interested in that. Is that always a benefit or sometimes that's a bit of a curse? I'm just wondering on your reflection on that.

**Bill [14:25]:** Yeah, that's a great question. I think independence and objectivity is generally a good thing that, uh, I've always been on the consultant side, but I've had longstanding clients and lots of clients I've gone back to, and lots of clients where you can't simply give them the



advice and run. And some clients where we've put in a colleague to help implement the strategy who then has to work out, hang on a second, how does this work out?

So, objectivity is a good thing, but in almost all projects or a partnership with clients in a micro I'm only as good as the client allows me to be. And, so, I bring in, uh, some independence, objectivity and several four box models. Uh, but the client brings an understanding of the culture, the politics and the personalities, which I don't have, But, you know, I've often been hired to say things and then get fired, which is you're brought in to say what no one else feels they can say. Uh, you know, I can only think of a couple of occasions where they've taken the report. I think of one big global client where we wrote their global report, uh, and the chairman hated it.

Because we said, you know, what no one else would say. And ironically, one of the business units then phoned up and said, we hear that they suppressed your report. You must be good. Come and work for us.

**Katie [15:53]:** How interesting, because you do, I've been in that situation where you're reporting back to a board or executive committee and you think, ah, I'm a- we're ahead of our time here.

This is what, this is never going to happen. They're just not ready for it. And then you think, well, maybe it might happen at some stage later down the line who knows sometimes you're brought back. Sometimes you never see them again, but then two or three years later, you found out eventually they got there. But,

**Bill [16:17]:** but that's, I think that's dead right. We did, I did a project with the end of which the client went, wow, this is rocket science. And so we had to then start working out a kind of maturity model. How do you say, where are you now and how do we get you to this spot with a kind of migratory path. And what are the steps we can take to get you there?

Because we found by saying, look, you know, you should be doing this they'll go, "Can't do that." We need a tough substance that, okay, well, here's the intermediate steps you can be taking rather than leaving them with a blueprint for the 22nd century, help them get somewhere.

**Katie [16:53]:** Yeah, which is just scary. So, I know that you are probably asked a lot about your opinion of the state of the IC profession.

Looking back over your 40, did you say 43 years?

**Bill [17:09]:** Well, I've done 30 years of this.

**Katie [17:11]:** 30 years in this. But I am going to ask you that question. But before I do, I was thinking to myself, as I was rereading your books, I was thinking you must have rubbed



shoulders with so many CEOs and other business leaders over the years. And I just wondered what your reflection is on the state of business leadership.

How has that evolved first? And, and how, how maybe does it still need to adapt and evolve?

**Bill [17:37]:** I think I feel sorry for leaders. Because it just gets more and more complicated, you know, you're supposed to be charismatic, you're supposed to engage people, you're supposed to understand the challenges of diversity, you're supposed to understand all the, you know, people in your supply chain and how they – it's incredibly demanding, I think.

And the big myth that we've had about leadership, which I was shocked by, uh, I've two things I've seen great communicators, leaders who stand up and you say, "Wow, they are brilliant," get fired because the share price doesn't go up. And you think okay, well, you can be successful without being a great communicator equally be a great communicator, not successful.

So there's, you know, there's a balance. The real shocking thing is most leaders are introverts and they're functional introverts that they're promoted because they're technically good. A lot of them don't like people and now they're being asked to go round and relate to people and talk to them. And I remember telling one chief executive you've got to go around and do management by walking around.

That was the big Vogue, go and talk to people. And he said, "Do I have to? What will I talk to them about?" And I said we just walk up to them and say, "Hey, how's it going?" And they might say, "I've had stuff today," and say, "Why is that?" So they did it. He walked around and talked to people. And then he came back and said, "I'm not doing that again."

And I said, and he blamed me. "Why did you tell me to do this?" And I said, "Why, what happened?" He said, "I went and talked to them as you suggested. And then they talked back."

**Katie [19:03]:** They probably asked a question as well!

**Bill [19:05]:** I think he couldn't cope with it. I think he would just, he was very good at broadcasting. Not very good at listening.

So the functional introverts. The, you know, what's been really interesting about leadership is you get different kinds of leaders. So you get, I mean, now you've got communication directors who become chief executives. So if you, the breakthrough for me was looking at a board and thinking, well, hang on a second.

The HR person is empathetic and ruthless. Then you've got the marketing person who's very excitable and spirited. You've got the finance guy who is very introverted and systematic, and then you've got the boss who is, you know, JFDI and you're trying to communicate with them.



And, uh, one of my breakthroughs, I did a presentation back to a chief executive who clearly hated me from the beginning.

He was, uh, was the finance director. He thought all this people stuff was complete nonsense, knew that he had to pretend that he cared and clearly didn't. But the lesson for me, wasn't, you know, why is it these people don't listen to me and understand how brilliant I am and how we should be doing it. I realized he was listening to me.

Like I was Blarney, you know, I was just bleeding heart all over his desk. And so he was discounting what I was saying. And his question to me was "Okay, Bill, if I do everything you've said, and I put this money in and I pay for this programme, what's my payback period? What's the return on investment?"

And I was absolutely stunned because I thought I've no idea what is, how do I answer the question? And that lesson for me was that you cannot keep simply preaching. Let's be lovely to people and let's, let's engage them. You've got to think of it from the systematic point of view, which is how do we use the people we've got to produce a better result.

And I think the lesson I learned, um, you know, I was confronted by a finance director at a computer company we're working for, who said, "You want to use our money to make you feel better." And I thought it was quite harsh, but actually I thought he was right, because those were my values, and we want to engage people, people are at work, they want to contribute.

We need to do this for them. And he was very much like, no, we need to screw more work out of them because we're paying them too much already. And every survey they just keep complaining. And that is, I think that's still a lesson because internal communicators are people people, God bless them, which means I've had a great career with lovely, interesting people doing fantastic things. And then going out for lovely drinks afterwards. It's the right thing to do.

The problem is we are talking to internal clients who aren't like that, who discount and disregard a lot of what we're saying. You know, I, when I trained in the states, I was trained by Californians and we all had a shared assumption and values about, you know, realising people's potential.

And I had to come back and learn how to speak Glaswegian, which was the, you know, "Look, this isn't about holding hands in the sunshine. This is about focusing people on producing the result for the organisation." And I think that's the lesson I learned that we need to learn again.

**Katie [22:11]:** Yeah. I mean, I guess the only bright sort of spot on the horizon might be that we're moving to a place now we'd like to think we might be moving to a place where more organizations are realizing that their competitive advantage probably does lie in the minds of their people because so much can be replicated, but actually wisdom, knowledge, creativity, that's much harder to replicate. So, I don't know whether you've noticed the conversation getting a little bit easier, because leaders are recognizing that.





Bill [22:46]: Oh, I think the conversation's got a lot easier.

I mean, it's, they're huge strides. I mean, it has become, our communication has become a profession. There are mature people in it. There are heads of internal communication who are very good. It's been bad news for consultants because they learn the lesson. They're better than we are. So they, they don't need quite so much strategic advice as before.

So I think it has got a lot easier. What's been, I mean, you're right. Two things have changed. Leaders have switched on that communication is important. You won't really find the leader anymore who will say it's not important. They know it's usually important. I think the audience employees have changed. The nature of employment has changed.

The gig economy has changed. And I'll come back to that.

Your point about competitive differentiation, uh, there's always been this shift from you with employees, you bought muscles, you said to people in the factory, pull this lever for eight hours a day and you get paid. Then we shifted to service in the eighties as a competitive differentiator in which the shift went from, to emotional labour, care for people, respond to people, give them great service.

Then it shifted to intellectual labour, which is all about knowledge management and sharing. And now I think we've shifted another stage, which has a lot to do with principles and values. I think people inside organisations don't simply want to think I make a widget and it makes the world a better place.

I think they start off with, I want to make a difference and I've got a set of values I'm not willing to compromise. And so differentiation has to do with, well, what's your stance on the climate? What are you doing about that? What are you doing about diversity and inclusion? So, what you're expected to do as an organization, what your stances, the issues affecting the brand have expanded incredibly.

And that's the way it has become much more complicated. But if you start saying well different, I mean, service was a differentiator. Yes. And I remember First Direct invented telephone banking was primed for years on the fact that it had invented telephone banking, at the time when everyone else was doing internet banking.

So there, you know, your, your differentiator, I think Jack Dee came back from a tour of the north and said, when a northern landlady is going to realize orange juice is no longer a luxury starter. And I thought that's exactly what you get trapped in, which is what differentiated you in the past is not competitive differentiation in the future.

So you're constantly trying to do catch-up. And so if you want employees who embody all those who think those things themselves, they are going to be more challenging. They can look for more information. They're not simply going to be willing to be spoon-fed. If you don't



engage with the mill, engage with others who understand that it is more complex and demanding.

So if you're saying, you know, we're, uh, our differentiation is we care. We are thinking about issues. We're contributing to the world. We're making a difference. We're supporting people. If you want, if that's your claim, then you've got to have people who are like that and what they need and what the game they will play has changed.

**Katie [25:47]:** To give context to this, and we've kind of touched on it already, in terms of the gig economy. I saw you make a keynote speech in 2018 at the Institute of Internal Communication in Birmingham. And you laid out, if you like, the landscape. And you said at the moment, life is getting more and more complicated, both for business and as a result for communicators. We've touched on it a bit, but I'm interested in what you see are the key trends and forces in the labour market, in the workforce, in businesses in general, that as internal communicators, we really need to understand?

**Bill [26:23]:** Well, I think the nature of employment has changed, right?

I mean, we spent years telling people you can't have a job for life and that expectation's completely gone. And if you look at say the gig economy, I mean, the Californians are arguing now about giving rights to Uber drivers. So the whole debate about, are you an employee or are you not, so organizations de-risked by pushing things out.

So you had AA patrolmen who we did lots of work for in the past, suddenly become independent franchisees. The milkman became an independent franchisee. So you think, hang on a second. People we've been used to, on the, are now self-employed, all the delivery drivers, they're all self-employed. So, the nature of, are you employed by anybody?

Organizations de-risked it. Push it out, if, if someone's not productive, that's their problem now, it's not ours. I think then, then there's the gig economy, which I think is, is really a kind of extension of what we used to call portfolio career, which is you're not going to have the same job for 25 years. And in fact, you're probably going to have to have three jobs simultaneously to do things. So that that really starts, um, questioning, what's the contract?

There was always a contract, which is in here, I give you loyalty, you give me security. And so, you know, what is the contract now? What is the relationship? And I think people are much more, you know, we argue for years. Should you call people employees, or associates, or partners? Uh, I think people do see themselves as much more in partnership.

I mean, I was talking to students who would do studying and telecommunication, and I was really surprised how transactional they were. They're very, they're very what we would have called disloyal. I am going to work against you 18 months here, then I'm going to move on, cash in, my CV. So they're very much now I'm using, I'm jumping between employees.



Sorry. It's a bit like when someone asks you, do you have a customer loyalty card? And then I'll say, no, I have a customer promiscuity card. The idea of if I shop somewhere else, I'm somehow betraying them. So, there is a set of expectations which has shifted so, that, I think that's changed a lot. I think that the audience it's, you said people have paid for the education, often. They're trying to get that back. They don't feel they'd be given anything. Uh, they're not necessarily going to have a home. Never mind getting home at five o'clock.

There's the blurring of employment, which is just employee hours. And they're trying to legislate, don't read your emails, but if you work at home and now know with the virus going on, everyone's going to work at home.

You say, okay, well, look, it's 11 o'clock. I think I'll pop out until the shops. And then that's going to take 45 minutes, which I will repay at the end of the day, or, you know, tonight when the kids have gone to bed, I'll do that. So, you start moving your working hours around, then your organization starts expecting you – you know, I used to have a boss who would phone me up at midnight.

Because it was seven o'clock in New York and he had time to think, "I wonder what Bill's up to." And then he'd phone and I'd literally have the phone cord, but it was then stretched across my wife's face in bed while I was updating him on, you know. So the employees then start thinking, well, what are you doing?

So we had one of the big four who were clients, and they, it was a nightmare because they just kept going 24 hours a day. So, the big boss would be on the beach, uh, on her phone, amending documents that we were doing, and you had three different clients in each, in each time zone, um, version control got completely out of control and everyone was just shouting, you know, 24 hours a day.

So, so I'm saying that the, the expectation that the whole, um, easily defined structure of expectation, hours and contract, I think has changed. For me, that really spotlights the issue about what is the value of an internal communicator. And I know we may want to talk about channels, but the issue is, understand the audience and what's going on with them and how they're going to respond.

The big lesson I did learn from Burson-Marsteller, which was the people that have power understood the audience. You guys in media relations would say, "You don't want to mess with the journalists. They're tricky. I mean, so you need me to come with you to guide you through this because this guy will betray you, you know, turn on you and stab you in the back."

So they would spread fear or manage risk, whatever, whichever way you want to look at it. And so for employees, no one thought it was a risk because you say, well, I'll just communicate with them and they'll do what they're told. And they'll say, well, what's actually happening is I came, we did work. The global chief executive was communicating with this factory in Barcelona.



And it was like something from *Fawlty Towers*. Because he, one, it was just a classic. They said they used email. He wrote in English. He called himself by his first name. And he used baseball metaphors. And no one had a clue what this is about. And it was just fantastic. It just thought, wow, the system, now what's really interesting about it is it's a comedy of errors.

And I think that's really important. We used, which is, it was incredibly well-intentioned. And so much of the work comes across is really well-intentioned. They want to do the right things. They have an instinct; they just don't know how it translates. They don't know, how would I do that? And is it really useful for a Friday afternoon to be interrupted by a voice from God, somewhere speaking incomprehensively about an irrelevant subject. But it was well intentioned.

That's pretty, I mean, I've found that a lot, which is that it's usually well-intentioned. So, if you find you've got a global chief executive who's well-intentioned, you've got a regional chief executive who is also well-intentioned. You've got a business line chief executive who is well-intentioned and you've got the factory managers who are well-intentioned, that's a cacophony of very well-intentioned incoherence.

**Katie [32:12]:** Yes, I can imagine until someone comes in and sort of guides and facilitates them along. So, you wrote your first book, *Communicating Corporate Change*. Is it really 24 years ago? But that's what I worked out anyway. And then *Making the Connection*, uh, more than a decade ago, 2008.

On Twitter, I think it was David Wraith that asked this question, but what is your assessment of how far the discipline has matured? And we've touched on this a little bit. And I'm also interested in those niggling frustrations that you must get occasionally where you think, gosh, really? Are we still having that conversation or that hangup or that problem?

**Bill [32:56]:** Yes, I mean, it is a good question. I remember the end of that, the, uh, conference presentation you talked about. Someone asked that question, are you fed up and tired of preaching the same thing all the time? And I said, "No, I'm not." And I thought, well, am I? Things have matured. They have moved.

I mean, I go into an organization where there's a team of internal communication people and they are smart. They are energetic. They are well-intentioned. Most internal communication people want to make a difference. They see themselves as advocates of employees, they are enthusiastic, I've trained lots of them.

And they're, you know, they share a frustration, which is, we could be doing better. They're not doing as well in the organization as they think they could. They know they've got greater capacity. So I think that has shifted. I think the recognition of that, this is an important issue has shifted if only because reputation is such a big issue and we make home access. But then the, you know, the wall, the wall between internal and external communication, I think has been collapsed. Where everyone's on social media. So you, if you don't engage them they'll just do it themselves. So I think that the organizations are realizing often that the first



audience now – this is going out to my former clients of Burson-Marsteller – the first audience you think about is the internal employees.

So I think that has shifted. If you engage with leaders and say communication's important, the bad news is they may agree with you and say, yes, absolutely, get very enthusiastic and run around saying, let's do it. Let's do it. And then say to the internal communication people "I've already done the thinking. I know what's required. You just implement it."

And that's always been my argument about, we need to shift from being pharmacists back to doctors, which is diagnosing, hang on, what's, what is the problem to which another road show is the solution? So I think, you know, a bit of pushback. So I think that has shifted, I think shifted dramatically.

I think the challenges facing internal communicates have become greater. I mean, I hate to say that, but I think they have. I think the thing that hasn't changed much, if I look at internal communication people, their greatest strength is their greatest weakness. Their greatest strength is they're people people. They love people, they're empathetic, they understand the issues, they can understand the audience, they bring all that to the table. The bad news is they're people pleasers. The people who don't liked people, non-people people, who push back and say, we're not doing that. So you've got different internal clients.

You've got someone saying, I think communication is vital and people need to know about my special project to conserve energy and turn off the lights. Let's, let's do a roadshow. So you get enthusiasts who are loose cannons. You get, you know, you get the IT, the global IT directors who've got a lot of money to spend and want to raise their profile and simply want an implementer to get the posters made with their face on them.

And then you get the finance directors who say, "Do we need to be doing this at all?" So you have to deal with different clients with different – every time we've done a review on internal communicators, the thing that shocked me was, we did a review, I remember there were 43 internal communicators in this organization.

Everyone was very enthusiastic, to go out and hire loads of people. And then somebody finally said, "What do they all do?" And the one message everyone knew was there were 43 of them, which is why I remember it. So, when you spoke to the first director who said, "I just want someone to do posters, but I've got this guy who keeps talking about culture and change."

I think I spoke to another director who said "I need to make change and culture happen, I've got this person who keeps arguing about where the apostrophes go." It is, you know, unarticulated what the expectations are on each side. And I think we've still got the issue about people people who won't be assertive enough and actually "Well, hang on a second. Why are we doing this?"



And if I go back to, you know, media relations people would be saying, "Well, hang on a second, you can't do that because they won't stand for it." And that goes back to understanding the audience. Because when you say to clients, you know, who want to communicate something, "Listen, here's, what's going to happen."

Uh, I mean, I have the advantage of saying, I've seen this happen. When you say your communication, you know, we did one with a well-known car manufacturing company where the supply chain people, who were all postgraduates, were writing a newsletter for the guys in the factory. And it was at, you know, PhD level.

And, uh, at the functional reading age and the factory was seven. And so they didn't think, oh, my communication's not getting through. The factory guys who thought they were complete idiots, just confirm their suspicions of them. And it comes back to my, doing my English degree. One of the great lessons I learned inside organizations is people think in Anglo-Saxon and they communicate in Latin, uh, which no one quite understands when they say that I was standing in the factory.

So I, you know, I think we still have that point in, uh, for years we fought to get internal communication a place at the table. We fought the, fought the argument that this is an important area. Your entire, you know, change project is going to collapse and not reach benefits if you don't engage people properly. After a while, that kind of grudging respect and yes, fair enough, we'll get them in.

The real challenge, I think, was not getting a place at the table. It was getting communicators able for the table because when you got them there, you know, with, with some notable exceptions, but you know, you just have people who would then start arguing whether you positively should go. And you'd be thinking, you know, "Gordon Bennett. I got them in here. Now the board's looking at me sideways."

**Katie [38:43]:** Yeah, you are making me reflect on early days. So going back to 1990, 1995, inside a big bank and that frustration that I had, that people around me, particularly at a very senior level, just didn't get it. And that probably has changed, but I was coming from a place where it seemed so obvious to me.

So what I wasn't doing was bringing evidence into the room. I wasn't bringing the numbers. I wasn't bringing the measurement because it seems so blindingly obvious. And I think that's possibly one of the things we let ourselves down in. If we walked in with more than an opinion, but an actual evidence for why we were right. We would have got further, faster, potentially.

**Bill [39:34]:** Well, if I go back to great lessons that I've learned, I did a feedback to go back to my chief executive, who was the finance guy who just hated me and disregarded what I was saying and said, "Where's the trend data?" And that was the lesson I started going in and speaking Glaswegian, which is here's the numbers that – my proposition to leaders is not, you know, communication's poor, you need to improve it. It's always poor. Because the



expectations change, you know, we've, we've done, you know, I've heard clients say "I've done everything you've said and spent all the money and the surveys come back and said, they're unhappy just, but just for a different reason." And that's absolutely right, which I keep saying, don't ask what you can do for your employees, ask, rather, what they can do for you. So, if you go back in and say, "Listen. It's not the employees' problem." Because the HR people come in and say, "We've done a survey. People are unhappy. They say communication is poor." And then they see these leaders heave a sigh and go, "Okay, well, I guess we have to do something" – brackets.

We go in and say, "You'll never make them happy." All that we've done, 25 years of surveys. You're not going to make them happy. Don't make that your focus. Don't make engagement. We'll come back to that. Don't make engagement, your focus. Start off with, what do you need that to do for you? And if you're speaking to a Glaswegian you say, "How much more work do you need to screw out of these people?"

And so, when we trained leaders in communication, they hated us. Because they assume they're already great communicators. And it was, you know, I think my mother-in-law gave my wife advice when they got married, which was, never criticize your husband for either his love making or his driving. But if you have to criticise him for anything, never criticize his driving. It's the same thing about leaders, which is you don't, you can't criticize their communication.

But when we got back and said, listen, "Do you want to really bend people to your will and get them to meet your objectives?" They would go, "Yes!" It's the same thing, but they would see that it was their interests, they weren't – communication wasn't the tax imposed on them to keep employees happy, which was a lost cause anyway.

**Katie [41:41]:** Yes. I mean, I think I've had a mantra for years, which is, let's not fix communication problems. Let's fix business problems with communication.

Let's talk a little bit about language and meaning. Um, we've talked a little bit about Latin and how we shouldn't really use that, we should use the Anglo-Saxon. You've said that employees are motivated by clarity and our job as communicators is to help leaders crystallize their thinking.

Now, the reason I'm asking you, this is that the state of the sector 2020 has just come out and we hear that information overload and noise that the workplace is getting noisier and noisier. That need to be clear to crystallize, prioritize the message. I'm guessing it's getting even more important to make strategy genuinely meaningful.

The original purpose of, of, of your work is ever more important, would you say?

**Bill [42:39]:** Yeah. Well, there's two bits in that. I think there's meaning – you know, what does this thing mean? And there's being meaningful. And meaningful, I think is, has become a much bigger issue because of simply the expectations of employees about what we all should



be doing, their contribution to the world and society and what the organization was responsible for.

So I think that's a big issue. Meaning, you know, part of doing the job has been quite fun because sometimes it's absurd. It's a comedy of errors, which you, you know, to which I've contributed to be fair. When I was at Burson-Marsteller, I said, we go off with these board meetings usually at the weekend, and you'd say to the client, "What are you trying to achieve?"

And they'd say, "Get them to, to sell more." And you'd say "Right, so what you're really saying is accelerate the productivity of the customer-centric interface." And they go, "Oh, do we? Oh yeah, fab, that sounds good. Pay the man." And so we just, and then no one knew what on earth we were talking about. So we pushed it up.

And I think one of the problems we have as communicators is, you know, I've done English, I've got a qualification. I can afford to sound stupid. I don't worry about dumbing down. Short and sticky gets the message across whatever gets remembered, gets repeated. What gets repeated, gets reinforced. The number of people who stumble out of a strategic conference and they can't remember you say, what is the strategy?

I've had chief executive says, "How can you have run a survey saying no one understands the strategy when we spent a fortune telling them the strategy?" And you go back and look at the 85 PowerPoint slides that no one can remember. And so meaning is, I mean, it starts, the chain, I mean, it breaks very close to the top.

Because, um, you know, I told the story against myself about my communication with my daughters, because, which was a lesson I learned. My wife always says, "If you're such a communication expert, why are you so bad at this?" Aren't, you know, one of the lessons I learned about change is I would get out of the shower and there'd be no towel. And, you know, I'd open the cupboards and no towels.

And that's because my, one of my daughters would have taken three towels wrapped her hair around, and left me naked and shivering in the, in the bathroom. And I would say to her, you know, "Why can't you be more considerate?" So she would look a bit abashed. And then later on, she would come into the room with a cup of tea and give me a cup of tea.

And I would say, "Okay, thank you very much." Then it took me a long time to realize, I was translating no bloody towels into lack of consideration, giving a message, be considerate, which she translated to the action of tea making. Am I making sense? So, the chain of meaning I destroyed very early on in the process.

And so, when you look at leaders and you get leaders on a flip chart and say, "What do you want people to do?" They would say, "Shift the paradigm." So, w-where do you need it shifted to? "We need them to buy in," "To what?"





"We need to get some traction," uh, and "We need to get more granular," and all this is language, which means nothing to anybody.

Because when you, uh, you know, you go into a conference, you say, "Guys, we've got to be more granular and get the low hanging fruit." We just get lost in a metaphor. It's the same thing with cascade. "Let's cascade this." Cascade is a metaphor that we've all been captured by because there is no gravitational pull dragging communication down.

It's I'm going to keep saying to clients, listen, it's not a cascade. You are rolling a Boulder up a hill. It's just getting more difficult. This is the myth of Sisyphus. You know, you're pushing. If you're going to get, if you're going to use a metaphor, let's use it, the right metaphor.

**Katie [46:23]:** You're speaking to someone who wrote a book *From Cascade to Conversation*, and I should have quoted you up front.

**Bill [46:27]:** But I remember referring to that during my speech and saying it was very good. It was exactly what we needed, which isn't, there isn't a cascade. It's a myth.

**Katie [46:38]:** It's an absolute myth. You talked about meaningful, so you said there's a difference between meaning and meaningful.

**Bill [46:44]:** Yeah. So, meaning is simply saying to the authors is doing this.

What are you trying to achieve? What's the outcome you want? Let me get your thinking across. I mean that, that has been incredibly successful and incredibly popular because the great thing is we get leaders on a flip chart. They're talking to each other and saying, "Get them to sell more," then they turn to the flip chart and write "Proactivity of the customer centric interface."

So when you point out, you know, when you talk to each other normally, you're using vivid language and metaphors. But when you start to quote, "communicate," you suck all the interest, enthusiasm out of it and turn it into abstract terms that no one's going to, you know, translate properly.

And so you're absolutely right. They laugh at themselves. It is easy to make change happen when you're doing it lightheartedly, than if you're wagging a finger at them reprovngly.

**Katie [47:35]:** Quite, quite. There's a wonderful line in your book about this, where you talk about language and you exactly say that you say, you know, we, we, we write in Latin for audiences that need Anglo-Saxon and you contrast that with trade unions.

And you said there's a trade union message that you remember, which is "That deal's got more strings than a philharmonic orchestra." And I, I laughed out loud. I was in the Bal region, I laughed out loud, and I thought that's so true because we, we have a highly unionized



workforce and one of our clients, and they do, they speak in that very plain, no nonsense matey language. And it cuts through.

**Bill [48:15]:** So go back, so I think, even though I did English, I mean, I come from Birmingham and I worked in the car factory and the tyre factory, and the silencer factory. So I knew what, what they did, you know the first lesson I got when I went to a car factory, they took me to the toilets and said, "If you're going to steal anything, put them, put it down your trousers."

"If you're going to go to sleep do it in the toilets, 13 barracks, your supervisor –" but they told me what working life was like, and it wasn't remotely what the managers thought it was. Right. And I thought that if we, if you say to, uh, you know, a first-line supervisor or manager, you need to communicate, they think, oh my Lord, if say he needs to talk to your guys, they go, fair enough. I can do that.

There's a great film. A Ken Loach film called *The Navigators* and it's about the privatisation of the railways. And there's a magic scene where the supervisor is doing a team briefing, uh, in a tearoom. And he's saying, "Come on, lads need to, our vision is and our mission. We've got a mission statement here. Don't laugh, don't laugh, calm down."

And you just see the poor guy having the mick taken out of him blind, whilst he's trying to talk in a way that's completely unnatural. And so that the lesson, you know, you're talking, please, and say, listen, when you are talking to, people informally you are more powerful and influential than when you stand up on a stage with PowerPoint because more and more employees are discounting for the lack of credibility.

So, the minute used to go into Latin, they'll go, well, this is complete nonsense. Are you going to shut the place down? "We currently have no plans to accelerate the optimisation" and they all go, fair enough. That's a yes then, is it? Where at some point a leader, when you're doing unpopular change things and people, you have a relationship with say to you, come on Bill, are you – do you believe this is really the right thing to do?

At some point you have to say. I do think so, you know, weighing it all up. It's not the best thing to do, but you know, you, you have got to put yourself into it and you can't do that with formal language because it distances you and makes you incredible

**Katie [50:24]:** When we talk about meaningful, I was, I was quite keen to get your reflection on this rise, I think it's fair to say it has been a rise, of employee activism, where employees are speaking up. I mean, they're even walking out in protest over the way their organisations are responding or handling certain sensitive issues. And I wonder what your reflection on employee activism was and how leaders and we, as communicators, could possibly mitigate the risk of activism?

If that's something we should even be doing? But anyway, I'm interested in your reflection on that.



**Bill [50:59]:** I don't think it's a risk. Coming back to it, I think employee activism is one facet of employees', uh, much great drive for purpose, which is they want to have a purpose. They have a set of values, which they are less willing, I think, to compromise.

Uh, and it's the flip side of, I may not be in this job forever. It could be, well, I might walk out if it doesn't suit, I need to be in an organization with which I'm aligned. This is more of a partnership. I'm not willing to compromise or park my values to get on with the job. And I think activism is just one facet of say, hang on a second. We do not agree.

So if you go back to the employer and you say, well, hang on a second. What are you not agreeing with? Well, I'm not agreeing with the fact that if you would go way down the supply chain, you know, having eight-year-old kids, sew our garments.

And so there's a much greater drive for sustainability. There's a much greater drive for social responsibility. And I think the employees are much more aware now, and it is I think, a generational thing of social justice. So they want purpose. They've got a strong sense of values and they want to contribute some way to social justice, a much greater sense of what's fair and just.

And the big shift has gone from simply, you know, look at diversity, with, a few years back diversity was, make sure when you have a brochure that you've got a representative bunch of people. So, you have to try and work out a matrix of, kind of have an Asian woman and the – now it's not a question of tokenism or representation.

It's really about inclusion and celebration of what are you doing about this? And I think, I think the, uh, go back to your competitive differentiation. I think the quest for that, it's going to keep moving further and further out. How do you, how do you distinguish yourself? And that I think has got more to do with values and contribution almost on the product itself, then you've got, so you've got that differentiator.

You've got consumers. So, hang on a second. I'm much more demanding about who I want to be associated with this brand. And you've got employees, whatever we're going to call them, have a strong sense of social justice, contribution and transparency. So the idea that, I mean, going back to my Burson-Marsteller days, what was very funny is media training.

I'd watched my media training colleagues shutting down the conversation. You know, make your three key points. And then we were training managers to open up the conversation. So we would encourage them, get them to ask you the tough questions, because if you don't, they'll simply talk about it in the bar afterwards. Get it in the room and you could see these two trends going in opposite directions.

But I think now, especially with, with social media is if you don't engage realistically and honestly, with the issues, it'll simply move on without you.



**Katie [53:52]:** So the lesson really for organizations, is to make sure you know the feeling on the ground, what your people really do care about, how they feel about certain issues.

It goes back to that, to that listening and knowing the audience point you mentioned earlier, doesn't it?

**Bill [54:09]:** Well, let me ask you this. Because we've always had feedback loops. The issue is what happens on the feedback gets to the boardroom. But what do you do with the feedback? Because you've always had people saying here's what I think. It's what's the response to that?

So, I think, yes, you do need to know attitudes, but then you've got to, if you're responding to that, as a leader, you've really got to re-examine your own attitudes. So, when my daughters say to me, "Hang on, you can't say that," I've got to try and work out, hang on, do I have an outdated set of values? Do, am I seeing things, you know, if I'm looking back at the 1970s and how on earth they got away with it, do I share in some way attitudes I deplore?

So you've got to have leaders who are actually quite courageous to say, you know, this is ridiculous. This is millennial nonsense. They'd say, hang on a second. This is fair. This is a reasonable question. How do I respond to that? And I, I think it's, it's the leaders that that's where the challenge is going to be.

Not that, I mean, the feedback's going to be make sure you've got your finger on the pulse, but how do leaders respond to what they're told? And I think that's where the challenge is. So as commu- go back to, you're saying how to communicate, to mitigate the risk. I think communicators are helping leaders understand what the issues are and the strength of the issues, and then possible responses to them because you're likely to get a first pushback.

You, you've had similar experience, I'm sure, but I've seen feedback sessions where the charismatic chief executive starts off by saying, someone says, "Why don't we have enough paperclips?" He says, "I believe every person is entitled to their own paperclip and there should be paperclips for everybody." And it's "I, I, I."

I mean, I think, okay. Therefore say, well, hang on a second, why are we short changing customers on the service? And they'll shift to we? Well, we believe this is the best way of doing things, the best balance between cost and, you know, service. And then when they say, yeah, but hang on a second. We've old age pensioners are dying because of what we do.

They'll suddenly say "The organisation feels..." And it's very interesting to watch how they respond to the feedback, because there is a defensiveness in, in dealing with feedback because it's usually, it's either anodyne, in which case, fine. We'll check, you know, the vending machines aren't great, we can handle that. Or it's quite challenging.



And so often you're training leaders not to react because their first reaction is defensive and to use power. And the big change we're going to have, the challenge is the power shift, because when you start saying to an organisation, hang on, we've got very complex markets with a huge amount of issues, got to deal with in public affairs.

And we've got employees who are out on the streets saying that we're deeply sexist and not promoting enough people. You know, those are huge challenges that you're going to have to respond to. And that means, I think communicators have to coach leaders in just sorting through their responses and sorting out which ones are legitimate, which ones were a hang over, which, because they are, I keep saying to my daughters, I am less racist, sexist and ageist than my parents.

And I'm certainly more ageist, sexist, racist than my daughters. So, we're all going through that transition and that shift. And that means you do have to examine, you know, when it comes to managing change, the first change is yourself.

**Katie [57:22]:** It is interesting feedback, isn't it? I remember one chief executive who was rare because she let the difficult conversation roll and didn't close it down.

And I was quite surprised. And, and there's a, I think it's Aristotle, I'm going to quote Aristotle wrong now, it's going to be so embarrassing, but it's something like, you can entertain an idea, you don't have to agree with it. That there is a, there is a point at which I think you have to show people that they've been heard and properly understand what they're saying.

That doesn't mean you change everything to their point of view, but there is a point around that isn't it to actually make people feel like they've genuinely had a voice and that you've entertained the thought. It's so important in all of this, we don't do that enough I don't think.

**Bill [58:12]:** Well, you know, we train managers. And the thing that managers fear when they're talking to people, I mean, apart from public speaking itself, they also fear either, um, the, the loud mouth is going to give them a hard time or silence from their, from their colleagues and you're encouraging them and giving them the skills to start a conversation, going back to your point about conversations.

To get the, to open the conversation to invite things that they don't want to hear or don't know, quite know how to handle. And that's what it takes. If people are going to feel they're listened to, you've got to get them talking and you've got to keep quiet and let it, let it run, let it roll and not feel you're losing control or losing status, or you have to know all the answers or how dare they challenge you.

And that's why the pathing, I think will shift.



**Katie [59:04]:** But it's actually a really fundamental shift. If you wake up in the morning and you think I've got my shareholders, I've got the external media environment I've got, maybe my analysts are influencing my shareholders because that's often an interesting dynamic.

And then I've got my body of employees who may be on side today about this, or they may not be, you know, I mean, this is a completely, I was going to say different paradigm shift and then shoot myself in the head. But anyway, you know what I mean?

**Bill [59:30]:** Okay. There's one point about that, which is when you look at organisations you're trying to deal with shareholders, and customers and employees, basically, you're trying to balance those three off. And what's very interesting as you go down through an organisation, most employees choose two out of three, they don't choose three. So, for the senior level, you choose customers and shareholders. If you're at a more junior level, you choose customers and employees.

And we stumbled across this. We did a survey in which we had, you know, five objectives in the organisation, they had shareholder value, and we just asked people to rank them in order of priority. And it was astonishing because when it came back, it was so beautifully stratified that those at the top like shareholders, customers, those the bottom are like, we should be nice to each other and be nice to those lovely customers and we don't need to make any money.

So, when you're looking at how communications refracted through those levels, you don't have the same set of values. So, when you're having a conversation, you're saying, here's what we're doing. And someone says, that's very unkind to the poor old ladies. Then you have to say, okay, well let's just talk that through. Because you can't simply say right, fine, well we'll change that again. So, you know, it is a process of debate and sometimes of education.

**Katie [01:00:47]:** And sharing different points of view and recognising that we have many different stakeholders to face off to and keep happy. And that, and it's a balancing act.

Let's talk a little bit about channels. I'm conscious of time. I read again in researching for this episode that you had a client in the early days who wanted his people to be more entrepreneurial and creative, but his main channel at the time was a tannoy. And that made me smile. That made me smile.

Today, we sit here, 2020 with a vast array of channels at our fingertips. I just wonder what your observations are on the current sort of channel landscape and the impact that might be having on us as professionals?

**Bill [01:01:27]:** Your clients tend to have great ambitions and objectives. So I do remember the tannoy one, but equally I remember the chief executive of an insurance company who was saying to his leaders, you've got to go on entrepreneurial and dynamic and creative and self-starting and agile.



And, you know, he was on stage with a PowerPoint presentation, in a darkened theatre of 150 people. And you thought this poor guy is completely thwarted by the channel of the room. They're all sitting there in the dark writing, I must be dynamic and creative. So, if I go back to, I mean the whole point about communication escalator is look, you know, your ambitions are high and your capability is low.

So, there's a disconnect here. So, we need to look at the, how we do those jobs for you and who we do them for. So I look at the child, especially with social media and I was listening to B&Q in Yammer, which I thought was very good because it rang very true to my experience, which is IT people driving social media platforms and then thinking, why are we doing this again?

Which I thought was fair to say. I think I'm slightly jaundiced about channels only because the history of channels has been, um, no one, no one fights the internal communication department for those channels. There's always been a turf battle about who runs internal communication, whether it's, you know, media relations or HR or, there's always that argument.

Uh, but no one wants the channels because it's a bit like sending your laundry out. It's like, fine, you run the channels, we'll just tell you what to put in them. So, in a kind of defensive mode, communicate say, well, great. We own the channels that gives us, means we control access to them. And now you've got a lot more, so many channels I think was one of the quotes I heard, which I thought was right.

That's right. On the one hand, this is great because it gives everyone a voice. I remember, years ago we worked with Apple. They had the software called Rumourmonger. In which it basically put the grapevine on the screen. And it was great. And so you think this is brilliant because it's, it's the, the line between informal communication and formal communication is blurred.

And I think that's what social media is that it is giving you a voice. The bad news is two things happen. Leaders, all say, oh, we want one. I don't know what it is. So a number of clients said to me, we keep hiring digital communications people. They're the most awkward people you can get. And they're the most awkward cause they say things like "Why?" or "What're you trying to achieve?"

They're like, no, it doesn't matter. Get me one. I'll have it now. So I think there's the leaders who are intoxicated by the idea of channel. Um, and we have seen some absurd versions of that, but equally it's the communicators who simply say, yes, you know, I've got, I've got a farm of channels here, often doing the same thing.

So they compete. They're just, they're just basically cannibalising one channel with another. Um, and for years, the, the, you know, we've been this kind of channel mania, which is something new comes along, and you go, ooh, this is great. I hate to say this, but I mean, when the fax arrived, it's like, this is amazing.



We could have universal domination with this. And so, each challenge has come along with, all this is amazing. We can be the experts in the channel. And, you know, we do need expertise in channels, I'm not decrying that, but that means that we focus too much on the vehicles and not the destination. And I go back to a question about state of the profession.

Having trained lots of communicators, and we all say, you know, if only they listened to us. We could do so much more. They've got this wrong. Why do they keep insisting on doing this? But equally some of the wounds we have are self-inflicted because sometimes you think, oh stuff it, you know, you want one I'll get one. You'll often have had heads of internal communication saying, well, why am I raising these issues when no one's asking about it?

So, you know, no one's asked me to challenge them. So, if we simply comply and have a lovely suite of channels, we'll be fine. I went, I was speaking at a conference where there was best in practice presentation from an organisation. They did a fantastic presentation. There was kind of, this is the state of the art of channels, and I'm happy to just think of them.

I asked them afterwards, you branded all the channels, the same, they're all kind of similar things. Uh, which for me is a bit of a dangerous signal. It's like, you're trying to remarket these channels a few weeks later that, in fact, the person who did the presentation phoned up and said, we're going to do a review of internal communication.

Can you come in and do it? So we, my team went in and did it, uh, and it was shocking because the challenges were fabulous, you know, state of the art, beautifully burnished, doing everything they possibly could. And the chief executive was furious because it was, it was literally having a fleet of beautifully shiny channels that weren't actually getting anyone anywhere. 43 communicators working together to destroy value.

And that head of internal communication didn't keep their job because they didn't have a connection with the board and the strategy, but they did have a be – and so, judged from internal communication departments, they look fabulous. Judged from the boardroom and the head of communication they didn't. Am I making sense?

**Katie [01:06:50]:** And it does, absolutely, it comes back to that point about what's the commercial value, you know, how is this driving my business forward?

If I want to sell more widgets, how's that helping? It can't just look pretty on the sidelines because it starts to look pretty and also costly or a waste of people's time and attention.

**Bill [01:07:08]:** Yeah. And in that organization, they were trying to double the share price by cross-selling to the customer base and they put in a huge project to put in, you know, CRM, customer relationship management.

That was a fantastic job for internal communications to do. But he wasn't doing it.





**Katie [01:07:26]:** No, again, not fixing the problem that needs fixing. So, there's a few questions here I have to ask you. I just wonder, was there a moment, was there a point when you realized that you were having such a profound impact on an entire profession?

**Bill [01:07:44]:** I wouldn't say profound. And you kind of went back to talk. Yes, there was. I mean, when I'd go into a conference. I was waiting to speak. And someone got up before me, and I saw the number of presentations all had the communication escalator, all called something different. The communication step ladder, or the, all slightly tweaked with no attribution.

**Katie [01:08:01]:** No, there'd be an attribution on the web and your name is spelled wrongly.

**Bill [01:08:06]:** And I just thought, hang on a second. This communication escalator is everywhere. And, that's when I thought, well, at least that idea has, has got through. I-I'm hoping you know, if I look at people, I mean, I'm part of a group of people, a tradition I think, starting with Roger D'Aprix and, you know, Sue Dewhurst and Liam Fitzpatrick. You know, we're all kind of doing the same debate. It's just moving on year by year.

I'd say that what I've done is, um, articulate things that people have already suspected. I think that it's the shock of recognition, not revelation, not I come and Pope's in, uh, uh, the poet Pope rather, definition of wit, which is what often was thought, but ne'er so well expressed. And I think that's pretty much what I've done, which is reduced the complexity of life to a four-box model.

**Katie [01:08:57]:** Yeah. I just, I would defend you there by saying a few things. One is that. To reduce it, you have to ask the seemingly stupid question, which actually is the deepest question.

**Bill [01:09:08]:** Yes, I love the idea of "seemingly stupid," as opposed to actually stupid.

**Katie [01:09:12]:** But it's true isn't it, you walk into an organization, you know nothing about it at that point, unless you've done a little bit of research, it's easier now than it used to be when I first started because of the web. But you can genuinely ask the obvious question, which often is the most important question that for whatever reason, no one wants to address or answer.

And then you take the 85 deck with 93 bullet points on each slide, which I often think has been created because people at senior level don't want to prioritise. They don't want to say, well, actually, it's this one thing, because I'm safer if I say it's this 19th thing, and what you're doing actually is saying, no, let's simplify, let's make sense of it. Let's come back to a core principle and something that I can communicate. So yeah, it takes courage actually to do that as well I think. You've obviously had that in your career.



**Bill [01:10:06]:** I mean, one thing I've been able to say is, someone talk about what we're trying to do, and someone will say, "Can I just argue with you for a minute?" To which the only answer really is, okay.

Because you can't say no and then expect. So just that, that allows you to challenge in a nice way. And I think challenging in a nice way is the real challenge we've got because you've got, I mean when you train people, they say, you say you should challenge it. Absolutely. I'm going to take them on here. Hang on, slow down.

So be able to ask questions where the client says, "Oh, actually that's quite a good question. I hadn't thought of it like that." Where they see the questioning is a service that helps them crystallise their thinking as opposed to an upstart coming into here. There's the thin line between thinking, Ooh, that's very incisive and thoughtful to you clearly are clueless and have no idea about our industry.

**Katie [01:10:57]:** Well, you, you, you said earlier that you, you, you feel sorry for leaders because there's so much on their plate and they have to have such broad shoulders. I was just, as you were saying, I was reflecting on being with a, with a fairly young client in a, in a new job where they have to prove themselves. And I was thinking I wanted to send her a book that's by, um, Edgar Sheen called *Humble Inquiry*.

But there's a way of challenging and getting someone to a certain point that takes on board all their baggage and problems. Do you know, it's exactly what you're saying is, it's a constructive challenge. Yes, it is a challenge, but it recognizes everything else that might be going on with them as well. I think that's, that's so important actually.

**Bill [01:11:43]:** Yeah, I think you're right. The chief executive once said to me at the end of my impassioned presentation, so that "I can tell you what stay on. We've got someone else coming on. Now you could come and sit on our side of the table." And then I watched each presentation coming in where each presenter impassionately said, "You've got to do this."

So, I think being the leader senior on their side is really important that you're seeing it from their point of view and their dilemmas and dilemma I think is incredibly important because it's, it is tough to, you said it's a balancing act. It's, it's tough to do the balancing act.

**Katie [01:12:18]:** It seems to me, in reading your books and articles that you have consistently been ahead of the game.

So, I mean, for example, I read a blog you wrote in 2012, where you talk about the growing importance of integrating internal and external comms. And now we're all talking about that blurring line. You said the wall tumbling in between the two, what's the secret of being farsighted? Do you just have to be naturally curious, but there must be a way a mechanism, is there a tactic you have for being able to think ahead and solving the next problem?



**Bill [01:12:58]:** No. No, I think, you know how I wouldn't say I was farsighted, I would say a statement of the bleeding obvious, but the, you know, how do you see things happening? Um, the blurring of the line and the intricate. If you look at the, the turf war about who owns internal communication, uh, you, you have a client saying, hang on, there's a battle going on at board level.

Uh, if I talked about the review we did, was he the head of left, they transferred responsibility from communication to HR. And that's, that's a battle that goes on all the time. So we did a lot of work to say, okay, look, HR, what's the advantage of each? Cause we were asked to adjudicate.

Then you say, okay, look, corporate comms. What are they good at? They're good at understanding an audience. They're good at crafting messages. They're good at getting the message across. What are HR good at? They're good at leadership frameworks and competency frameworks that surveys and rewards. If you can put this together, it's, it's a, you know, if you get a partnership, it would work.

But in the, the corporate comms side of the war, I noticed that internal communication, the exasperations with it often, the responsibility was being handed to the media, the head of media, because the head of media had a good reputation with the boss. They'd done a good job. So they kind of, you know, th- th- the MD would say, who will rid me of this troublesome internal communication? Give it to the media guys.

And they will come in and say, right. So there is, I think they do need to be integrated, but it doesn't mean you apply the media discipline to, if I go back to Burson-Marsteller, that you don't apply media relations to internal communications, but you'd say, well look, if reputation is important, increased important to brand and to a license to operate, and employees are more influential.

If you look at, um, Edelman's trust barometer, increased makes, the employee who's more credible. And so they need to be your advocates and ambassadors. So, it becomes more important to align internal and external. And you can see if you follow it. I think if you go back to what's the tactics, the tactic is follow the logic of the argument.

So if you say, employees are more powerful for reputation building than of publications, you then start, fine. Then we do need to be aligned with what we're saying externally, but we do need to make sure our employees, one, believed our story. But I think more important now to defend, to be advocates. Isn't simply to be cheerleaders, to go around and say, we are fabulous and we're helping everybody.

I think the real problem you have is, well, hang on a second. You're not helping everybody because you're destroying the third world for the deforestation. Well, how do you defend that? And that's the argument you get much more now. Advocacy isn't about cheerleading. It's about, you know, being able to explain what's going on.



And I think that means you need to really equip employees much more than, uh, than before, because they've got a job externally and it it's, equivalent of a citizen journalists. So that means, I think the, you can see the, the, um, the wall is falling, but it came from two things. One, the media arguing, "e should be in charge of this," and try and work out, okay, well to what extent?

And then the other one, the big shift for me was, uh, the Gate Gourmet strike of BA ah, so I think we're doing work at BA at the time. Gate Gourmet who provided the foods, went on strike. They fired loads of people and the baggage handlers who are married to a lot of people at Gate Gourmet, drag themselves into the, poor old BA, had to put up with a strike, which had nothing to do with them really.

But what's fascinating is, Gate Gourmet fired people like it was the 1970s and when they got them together in the big hall and kind of announced this and you think, wow. So in the 1980s, we'd have been training employees that when they left you, they haven't been fired when they left the factory gates and they bumped into journalists outside, they would please, God say, you know, we fully understand the economic pressures we're under.

We have been treated very fairly, and we were happy to go and of course they'd never say that, but you'd pray for that. What happened was at the back of the room, someone got their phone out and filmed it and then uploaded it. And that was the end of, you know, you didn't have an inside the factory gates secrecy with an external world. It just collapsed at that point.

There was a great episode of *The West Wing*, where Josh gets into trouble because he's photographed doing something inappropriate and he complains and says, "I didn't see any photographers." And CJ says to him, "Did you see anyone with a phone?" It's exactly the same point.

**Katie [01:17:43]:** Yes. I mean, Google had an issue. I spoke about this at the CRPR conference, where they were talking about Dragonfly, which is especially since the search engine for China and somebody in the room was live sending messages to a New York times journalist who was just then repeating that on Twitter. So as it was being said in the room, in this closed town hall about a very sensitive issue, all of this was just suddenly being made public.

Now, when they discovered someone in the room, probably the communicator thought, hang on a minute, we're leaking. The whole conversation was closed down, but that really annoyed everyone in the room. It really annoyed the audience because they were like, hang on a minute. Can't we now have a conversation internally in confidence? You, we live in a very weird world here.

**Bill [01:18:28]:** Oh and that's, that uh, IOIC conference that we were both at. I mean, I was much more because people were tweeting when I was speaking and, you know, I tend to tell



stories and anecdotes as I go, I was much more careful about what I would, and wouldn't say than I might otherwise have been.

**Katie [01:18:46]:** Yes, yes. That you're almost self-censoring. Yeah, absolutely. One of the things I love asking to people who have inspired others, because I have this theory, you can't be inspiring unless you feel inspired is what or who has been your inspiration throughout your career?

**Bill [01:19:05]:** I think I'm part of a conversation that's been going on for years.

So Roger D'Aprix, you know, started this and I think he's the godfather of internal communication. Uh, and he started the whole debate about, we should be looking at this. I keep saying I'm only as good as the clients allow me to be. And a lot of clients have allowed me to try stuff. Um, and so if you looked at clients ... a fantastic investigator, an enthusiast.

I would say Russell Grossman. You know, the great thing about Russell Grossman is unlike me flitting around, he goes into an organisation, digs in and makes change happen. I think that's admirable. I think I talked about the IOIC the Institute for Internal Communication. I think Dominic Walters, he was the past president who I worked with a lot is just unfailingly enthusiastic and engaging.

And he's kept me going and I'd say Sue Dewhurst and Liam Fitzpatrick, I think are continuing the debate and continuing the conversation.

**Katie [01:20:10]:** Yeah. I mean, we kind of touched on this a little bit, but I think I'm going to ask the question just in case there's something else I can eek out of you, which was my final question before we go into the quickfire questions.

How would you describe your contribution to the profession? So, what would you most like to be remembered for? It's an awful question to ask really in a way, because I'm sure there's lots more, you'd like to remember for the future, but up to this point?

**Bill [01:20:33]:** The whole point about articulating what everyone suspected. I think giving some language and I hope, yeah, I hope that simplification doesn't mean dumbing down. Uh, and I, I'm hoping that as you say, if you read some of the stories you laugh, I think there's some of the things we've done have been quite silly and it hasn't taken a huge job to say, well, look, here's what's happening end to end. And I think the idea that, you know, we took supply chain.

We've always, um, if you look all the, or not fast, the waves in a, uh, lean enterprise, total quality management, end to end supply chain management, because you've had, uh, communicators to have to communicate about that. We all said, okay, well apply those principles to yourself. So in supply chain, that's what communication is.



You're transf- you're taking information, turning into meaning and to action, via partners. And I think, as I said, the one thing that communicators, the, the, the undiscovered territory of that, that they have to be had is understand the audience, the other side, understanding the end-to-end process. So, when everyone was producing magazines, that then were burned and no one ever read, or you looked at the, you know, the emails that gets put up on the notice board in the factory in Barcelona.

If you go and see what happens end-to-end, you can see, do you produce the outcome as opposed to communicators being like artillery, man, which is firing messages into the ether and not even knowing, you know, what happens. So I think that, of course, when I'm buried, I am going to have the communication escalator etched on my tombstone. With a big copyright on it!

**Katie [01:22:21]:** Was that- was your escalator one of those things that came out of that moment with a, with a flip chart and a pen in your hand?

**Bill [01:22:27]:** Yeah, I could remember exactly the moment we did it. Cause we were saying, how do we explain to people they're not going to create paradigm shifts with a newsletter?

**Katie [01:22:37]:** Just one final supplementary question. Cause we mentioned employing engagement very briefly and um, I'm thinking of another Bill I'm thinking of, of William Carne, Bill Carne, 1990, I guess wrote that paper for an academic journal, which mentioned the phrase employee engagement and then has sparked entire industry of organisations that now measure it on an annual basis.

I just wonder what your reflection is on that search for engagement? I was listening to a podcast where he was interviewed and he's quite, um, horrified is a strong word. It's not, he's not massively pleased as well as with what's happened since then himself. I just wonder what-

**Bill [01:23:18]:** Well, it's probably right to be horrified because if you go back to, I can remember doing a survey in late eighties, uh, in the oil business where people were massively engaged in the pharmaceutical industry, they're massively engaged.

They're proud. They were recommending it to everybody and they would, you know, they, weren't doing a very good job. So it, um, Rover cars. When we did work with them, um, they had the highest level of employee satisfaction of record on the planet, but weren't actually turning out violent, good cars. But my argument is don't-

I'm not sure what engagement is. Happy people skipping to work. I don't want to demean it, but I'm saying you've got to be engaged in something. So, Abraham Lincoln, the Gettysburg address is saying that the battle of which we are engaged. So, it's not saying we all feel engaged. You're saying unless you're engaged in something, then I don't, I don't think it much matters.



So, it's all about focus for me. The issue is about focusing. You know, what do I want to be remembered for? And if you're remembered for, communication, as a means to an end. Start at the end, that engagement is in something, we're engaged in producing something we're engaged in winning customers.

I think we all have a thirst for purpose. And what people want isn't just, it's lovely to work here. Increasingly, I think people want a sense of purpose and contribution. They want to feel that we are together engaged in something. And if, that's how you build friendships and relationship, when you're commonly involved in something and you feel you're contributing and it's making progress, not it's, you know, the employee experience we love working here and the, and the canteen's great.

So I'm, I don't be scathing about it. I think it's great idea to build engagement. My issue is a focus that energy in something.

**Katie [01:25:04]:** yes. Towards the common goal that's meaningful.

Let's turn to those quick fire questions, if we may. Um, the first one is what would most surprise people about Bill?

**Bill [01:25:20]:** Uh, possibly that I'm now getting a towel in there when I come out the shower. But no, no, but I think the ones who didn't, I didn't mention is the big life change for me was I was dramatically converted to Christianity, which had a big impact on my view of life. And my quest for purpose. Uh, 1989.

**Katie [01:25:43]:** Was there something that sparked well there must've been something that sparked that?

**Bill [01:25:45]:** I went along, by accident to a christening, uh, thought they were all happy clappers and hated them. And then had the full Road to Damascus experience.

**Katie [01:25:57]:** Was something that was said, was there something about the vicar or that what was going on?

**Bill [01:26:03]:** Oh, this is a much longer conversation. It was, we went to this church for six weeks.

It's a very unconventional church and it was a place where we could put the girls, our daughters, in to cresh and you can have coffee and doughnut. That that's what, and then after six weeks I said, we're not going anymore. This is all happy clappers and guitar playing. Uh, and then we did have a dramatic experience that flipped us completely.

Um, so when I talk about my, I now go to a church, run by my daughter, that's probably the most surprising thing. That's not what I expected to be doing.



**Katie [01:26:35]:** Um, that's a whole other podcast. Um, I'm holding myself back physically, cause there's lots and lots of questions I want to ask around that. Part two, everyone.

Um, right. What one book, journal or website should all communicators read?

**Bill [01:26:53]:** Well, I think the quest for purpose and focus in life, I think that, you know, we have that first word. There's a book called *The Purpose Driven Life*, which I read and found very useful from the kind of communicators' leaders' points of view, the ones which Dominic Walter's, you know, initiated me.

It was this thing about, you know, insights, the colours, uh, when you look at personality profiling, there's a of communication style question, which I think I talked about, uh, at that conference, I find it incredibly useful for dealing with leaders because leaders have different personality types.

And the thing we discovered is even though all, you know, it's a complex challenge they've got, they've got all these stakeholders, according to their personality, they select the ones they like. So the systematic, where they will select the, find the an- the city analysts, the marketing people will be very spirited.

So, we discovered that according to your personality, you filter both your communication, you communicate and the responsibility you take on. And so, we found a way of taking that model, and showing it to leaders and saying, listen, you have to communicate in all four styles. So you can't simply stick where you're comfortable.

And then we gave them a model for how you communicate in each style. And that's been incredibly useful because it gives you a language to talk to leaders so much so that if this is another, maybe another podcast, one thing is my wife and I have done for years is train- my view is all this communication is terribly useful if it works at home. That's the test. If you're still married at the end of this, you're doing very well.

So we trained couples. In their relationships. So we said in companies, you get huge amounts of training, in your home, you get nothing and you don't have an extended family anymore to coach you.

So we coached couples by using communication, how to communicate with each other more effectively. That must be fascinating. It was. And then we use that for countless stars with couples, which explained why they argued or what they, what they found interesting. So, I just found that whole model opened a whole way of having a conversation with leaders in which you said to them, listen far from being, you know, I'm not here because you're terrible.

I'm not here as remedial exercise, there are four things you have to be able to do and the great news is you're already brilliant at two of them. And they'll go, good. So it's a question of, let's just look at which other two. you could be brilliant at and help you achieve those. And





that completely changed the conversation, from you're bad and I need to fix you, to, you're brilliant. And you can be brillianter.

**Katie [01:29:32]:** Yes, absolutely. What would you do tomorrow? If you knew for certain you couldn't fail?

**Bill [01:29:39]:** Uh, I would do rock guitar. It'd be the one thing that I picked up was learning to play the guitar and I've always thought it would be great to complement, eh, the communication escalator with Stairway to Heaven.

**Katie [01:29:55]:** That's got to be our play-out music I think. If you could go back in time, what careers advice would you give the, I don't know, let's say 20-year-old Bill.

**Bill [01:30:07]:** I think the 20-year-old Bill was, didn't think, we never planned for our jobs anyway, but I think I'd say, listen, you think that, you know, life may be boring after university, but actually your jobs are fun.

You get to work with nice people doing interesting things in a challenging way. This is going to be very engaging and you'll get to be engaged in something, which is the, uh, no, I, I don't, I think life has turned out so much better than I'd have expected at 20. Absolutely. From the minute I sat on that plane and I started a conversation with the guy to my left. That completely changed my life.

**Katie [01:30:49]:** Do you remember what you were actually talking about?

**Bill [01:30:53]:** Yeah, yeah. Uh, well, to be true, to be honest with him, that he was asleep and there was a girl on the aisle I was trying to chat up, he went, he woke up. And so I helped to engage with conversation, but I was reading a book on change.

And he was reading a book on change and that's how we got talking. And then we started, started drawing. He drew triangular diagrams that I knew at that point as it to be a consultant, you just need to be able to draw a triangular diagram, a square diagram and a circle diagram.

**Katie [01:31:21]:** And finally, um, we give all our guests a billboard and you can put on that billboard a message for millions to see. What message are you going to put on that billboard?

**Bill [01:31:34]:** I think I would put a quote from Auden, which is "It is later than you think."

**Katie [01:31:41]:** Is that just to get us a little bit more focused and speed up a little bit?

**Bill [01:31:47]:** It's not, I think it's just, you know, what's an interesting question about. Uh, planning and thinking, which is, I see there's a, there's a point to which you...



I think you're always planning slowly. We need to be thinking further ahead. So, you know, I'm at a stage in life where you were kind enough to say, I wasn't coming to sit in the crib. I probably am so the torch probably needs to be handed to the, to the much younger Sue Dewhurst. But I think there is a, you know, I think that there is about now looking at age and stage, they say, one of the things I was taught was that you need to think about life every seven years so that the, you know, your 21 life is different than 28, 35.

Now it's a bit like that TV program, *Seven Up!* In which they follow... Well, there's a guy from our college who was on that. I remember they were filming in college. So the whole thing about, you know, just reviewing and I think most people don't look ahead and review. We're so focused on day-to-day, especially as communicators, you're always peddling furiously.

And one of the lessons we learned, I think when we did reviews of communication functions, is that 70% of your effort day-to-day is going to very low value activities. So, if you can pull back from the frenzy. Forward-thinking.

**Katie [01:33:09]:** Forward-thinking. Bill, it has been an absolute pleasure to have you on the show.

Thank you so much.

**Bill [01:33:18]:** It's been, it's been fun.

**Katie [01:33:22]:** So that's a wrap for this episode of the Internal Comms Podcast. To find out more about the books and the other resources that Bill and I mentioned head over to the show notes on AB's website. That's AB comm, A-B-C-O-double-M.co.uk. And while you're there, you might like to sign up for our monthly IC newsletter, it's called I saw this and thought of you.

It will give you updates on the show plus other newsy nuggets from the world of internal comms. And if you did enjoy this episode, please give us a shout out on social media. Or perhaps you'd like to blog about the show. And if you think it might be interesting to other IC pros out there, you can help us become more discoverable to the IC community.

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