TICP – Episode 49 – Engagement: how it started, how it's going
(Season 06, episode 01)

Katie [0:09]: This episode of the internal comms podcast is brought to you by Acid Test. AB's unique and powerful tool for aligning organisations around a common cause. Now we all know communication does not equal understanding, if it did well, our jobs would be a lot easier. The acid test of internal communication is whether there is shared understanding.

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Katie [2:25]: And we're back. Welcome to season six of The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. I don't think it's a coincidence that the best performing organisations are also the best communicators. Every fortnight, I'll be putting a leading light from the world of business comms and academia in the hot seat to unearth new, inspiring, and thought-provoking ideas to improve the way organisations communicate with their people.

And today we have a rather special guest. The term employee engagement is commonplace in the world of internal comms, HR and employee experience. Indeed, probably many of us would say that a vital part of our job is to understand, measure and increase engagement. But where did the concept of engagement come from?

Step forward, Professor William Kahn. In 1990, this organisational psychologist was studying for his doctorate at Yale University. He published a paper in the Academy of Management Journal, entitled Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work, and completely unexpectedly the concept of engagement at work took hold.

31 years later how true have we been to the professor's original idea? I was blown away when Professor Kahn agreed to sit in my podcast hot seat. Today, Bill is the professor of management and organisations at Boston University's Questrom School of Business. He is a distinguished and award-winning academic with numerous books and countless articles and papers to his name. Just as an aside that 1990 article was the first to mention the importance of psychological safety at work and we touch on that too. I love this conversation. There is

always something for me, so rewarding in understanding the origins, the birth of an idea. But on top of that, Bill is warm, genuine, and full of insight into the human condition at work. So, without further ado, I bring you, Professor William Kahn.

Katie [5:08]: Professor Kahn it is a complete honour to have you on The Internal Comms Podcast. Thank you so much for appearing.

William [5:16]: Delighted to be here.

Katie [5:18]: Now in my introduction to this show, I will have given the official bio, your official resume, I guess, of your, of your career to date. But I was just wondering out of complete curiosity, if you're at a dinner party in the days when we could go to dinner parties, how do you describe the work that you do?

William [5:42]: It's a great question. Well, I introduced myself as an organisational psychologist and I emphasise the word organisational. So no one talks to me about their own deep, dark secrets and their family dynamics. Um, I've actually learned never to get on an aeroplane and mention the word psychologist, just because then you're trapped for hours, um, before I can put my headphones on.

Um, but essentially I introduced myself as a psychologist who really focuses and cares about the relationship between individuals and organisations. Because it is, it is a relationship and my work has always been about bringing as much balance to that relationship as possible. And so then I go into a little more detail about, about what that means and I'd say the high-level focus there is that individuals, and I'll get into this more when I talk about engagement, individuals have actually a lot more choice and control over who they are and organisations than sometimes organisations would like. And so I sort of play with that balance and that relationship in my research, my writing, my teaching.

Katie [6:46]: When I reached out to you, I had a slightly sinking feeling because I could see how many articles and books and presentations and studies you've done since 1990. And here I am yet again, drawing you back to something that was published 31 years ago.

William [7:03]: Yeah, no kidding.

Katie [7:04]: And I did wonder how you'd feel about that. Did you have any kind of premonition 31 years ago that here we would be in 2021 talking about that article that appeared in that journal all those years ago?

William [7:17]: Not a single clue.

It was just me finishing my dissertation, trying to get a job, trying to publish an article for my dissertation. And that's pretty much all I was focused on. I had no idea that it would not be just another article that same gunder that sunk way under the ocean of many thousands of

other articles. So, to find myself still talking about this is astonishing; someone once called me the father of engagement and then someone else, much to my chagrin called me the grandfather of engagement, which meant that I was much, they thought I was much older than I am. So.

Katie [7:54]: You were just very, very young 31 years ago. That's what we need to say.

William [7:57]: Yes. That's what we need to say.

Katie [8:01]: Obviously, many scholars and academics had studied sort of human endeavour. If we want to say that in the workplace before, what was your kind of new take your new angle? What was unusual about your thinking and approach at that time without work?

William [8:18]: I would say I took very seriously the idea of personal agency and choice. I think a lot of scholars before me had assumed that people either worked hard or they didn't sort of like an on-off switch. And I actually considered people much more sophisticated and nuanced. And I think that people have the capacity to make real choices by the way, not just consciously, but unconsciously, about how much of their real selves, their selves, they want to access and use and employ and bring into the work they do.

And I used a stage metaphor of actors, inhabiting roles, and we've all seen how clunky and clumsy and stiff actors are when they don't do that. When they can't find something in the role that sort of connects to who they wish to be in that moment, they can't find something in the role that lets them express a valued important part of their selves. And I then decided that was a great metaphor to use, not just in the stage, but also in quote-unquote, regular organisational life. And so I just really considered people much more sophisticated and nuanced than people had previously.

Katie [9:38]: Would you say that this applies to any individual in the workplace? I mean, we think of engagement particularly with knowledge workers, but, um, do you feel that it's applicable, even if you're at the end of a, of an assembly line, for example, could you still be engaged?

William [9:59]: So it's a great question. I mean, it's funny knowledge workers. I actually did most of my work, over the years, in caregiving organisations, healthcare workers, hospitals, social service agencies, I've explored those kinds of settings more in terms of assembly lines - I think it's much harder to be engaged. I think roles that allow people choice and agency about how they approach it, how they engage it are much more hospitable hosts for people to engage as much as possible.

So, I'd say the more freedom, the more possibility of discovery and mapping out one's territory, the better able one is able to make choices about what parts of themselves to engage that said, I am sure there are people on the assembly line who are much more present

emotionally, psychologically, physically than others are. And I think that's, I think that's sort of related to the idea of personal engagement.

Katie [10:55]: So, let's get into the nitty-gritty of this because you outlined three psychological conditions that drive engagement, which, and I'm quoting here 'are powerful enough to survive the gamut of individual differences.' Can you share these three psychological conditions with us?

William [11:15]: Yeah, of course, the three conditions are, and I do this in no particular order because I think they're all really important and valuable. One is this notion that people don't talk much about, which is psychological availability, meaning people need to have sort of a reservoir of, for lack of a better term energy, they need to be able to sort of be available in a non-distracted way to be present. You know, the idea sometimes is that our personal lives what's going on outside our work roles can hijack us, can take us away because something is so pressing or demanding or important. That we just don't have the presence of mind, so to speak, to sort of engage in what our work is. So, one idea is just how available people are.

A second one is safety. I know safety's become sort of much more of a buzzword these past 10 years or so, but when I, when I sort of developed the idea years ago, it was much more the idea of when we engage there's some inherent risk or vulnerability. We're often showing parts of ourselves that are more personal, as opposed to impersonal, we reveal parts of ourselves. And for me, safety was what I discovered in my research was, are you able to do that without fearing the consequences, right? Either to your job, your career, your own sense of shame, the relationships you have, that is one of the sorts of cost benefit analysis we all do at every moment of how honest and open and vulnerable to be. So that was the safety piece.

And the third piece is meaningfulness. That is, you know, I think we're very sophisticated resource managers of our true selves. And I think we bring ourselves, in fact, I'll use the image of invest. We invest parts of ourselves. In work in or roles in organisations in relationships, frankly, when we feel like there's going to be real dividends, and I'm not saying we are a rash, I'm not saying we are these cool, rational actors, hedge fund managers, right. Who simply are making investments just for dividends, but a piece of it. A piece of engagement is, does it matter enough for us to engage? And that's really where the meaningfulness came, came in.

So those, those are the three conditions, availability, safety, and meaningfulness. And I did not do the kind of research that would sort of really distinguish which of those was more important in any one single instance.

Katie [13:54]: I'm tempted to make the link. When you talk about meaningfulness to this current drive that many organisations have for their purpose for a purpose statement, why do we exist? Does it help bring meaning when an organisation has a true purpose or you're a little bit, are you a little bit cynical about that search?

William [14:14]: I mean, I believe in intentionality, I believe that human endeavour is much more powerful and compelling, and it attracts people and resources and energy when there is

a statement or a mission that matters in the world. And for me, mission statements are, answer the question very simply, what do we exist to be, or do?

And if there's an organisation that has a compelling purpose in the world, people are drawn to that because it connects with, with their own preferred identity with who they wish to be in the world as well. Um, so I think purpose, admissions or reporting when I get cynical is when either organisations create purpose mission statements that are only for the benefit of attracting resources, but they have no intention or ability or capacity to actually live those out.

Or I get a little cynical when people use purposes as a way of exploiting others. That is, and this happens a lot in non-profit organisations, right? People are drawn to organisations because they're doing a mission that matters to the world. And then those people get exploited. Um, simply because they're willing to put in more time, energy and hours and not get sort of compensated for that investment of their own selves is not honoured appropriately.

Katie [15:33]: Coming back to your work with healthcare organisations, presumably. You know the equivalent of the assembly line worker. But if we take someone, I'm making this up now mopping the floors, presumably there is a way of explaining the power of the work that they do in that environment. For example, we all know the danger of terrible viruses now that can plague these hospitals and you can actually end up sort of becoming more ill than you were when you first went in. That person, keeping the floors clean that's vital work.

So, there is ways of connecting people to the deeper meaning. If we want to make that effort to do it, presumably.

William [16:11]: Absolutely. That's a great example of, you know, I've known organisations that are so sophisticated in their understanding of what you just said, that they actually bring those tech-, you know, they're called technicians. Bring those people, mopping the floors actually into a room where 10 people's lives have been saved and people stand up and applaud the technicians, right?

So, they, they connect their work directly, not just to the negative part, which is if you don't do your job, people are going to die. But to the positive part, which is they celebrate the direct connection between someone's work and a really wonderful outcome.

Katie [16:47]: I had to mention also safety, psychological safety. And you said there's, sort of the over the last decade, a lot has been written about this just as an exercise. I put psychological safety in Google this morning, there's 370 million articles, just in case you want to quantify your impact. I was wondering whether psychological safety and that emphasis on it is part of the imperative that we all have as organisations and individuals to focus on more on diversity, equity and inclusion. Am I right to see that link do you think?

William [17:24]: So, I would say there's always been an imperative to focus on safety, but people, people haven't necessarily sort of acknowledged, its importance. Right? So, I, I'd say there's always been an imperative. I think there is a particular need for groups that are relatively subordinate and therefore vulnerable in the world, which is where a DEI sort of really focused on diversity, equity and inclusion.

I would say that people are becoming much more aware that given the lack of an equal playing field, people of colour and women. Are at much more risk for showing their true selves and becoming vulnerable in the workplace. And it is an incumbent on those in power so, a shorthand is often sort of white males like me. It is incumbent on us to actually create, create conditions for safety, for others in ways that allow them to show themselves with less risk and vulnerability. Does that answer your question?

Katie [18:25]: It does. It does. And I was also sort of pondering this last night and I was thinking about books like, I don't know if you know, Humble Inquiry by Edgar Schein and Black Box Thinking by Matthew Syed, but both of those would suggest that as well as being fantastic from a personal perspective, because I can bring myself into the role and be myself.

It's actually fantastic from an organisational perspective, because we speak up, we say this isn't working. We say, I think this went wrong and this is why when the opposite happens, we don't learn from our mistakes. So, and again, I don't know if I'm right to draw that sort of conclusion to it.

William [19:00]: When I teach, I'm always very aware of the people who are silent in the classroom, because I believe in, in the silence are deeper truths that have not yet been revealed. Right. And so, and so I really look for those silent people, particularly when those silent people represent minority groups or dominated groups in our society. I do whatever I can to bring them forth because they are, and it's not just for them as human beings, right. It is for them as well, but it's also, it enriches it enlivens the conversation and deepens something. There's something about people on the margins have more license and liberty to be creative, than people at the centre. So I want to always find or reach out to the people on the margins to see what they can add to the centre.

Katie [19:49]: I heard you say on another podcast that the industry and we have to call it that, that sprung up to measure and track engagement violated the original concept of personal engagement. And I did again, a little exercise. I checked your article again. There is, you do not use the words, employee engagement once.

I couldn't see that ever. No. So something got lost to something got misinterpreted in the shift from personal to employee engagement. It seems like that's what happened. Could you, could you talk us through that?

William [20:27]: I think that's exactly what happened, you know, when you think about it and that, even though it's just a word shift, it's an incredibly important shift that the whole frame ships.

Right. And I love the use of the word frame because when you go into an art gallery and there's, and there's pictures on the wall, right. There's art and there's frames around the art. What the frames do is they draw your eye into what you're supposed to look at and what you're supposed to safely ignore.

Right. The personal engagement frame is what does it mean for the person to be as engaged as possible to sort of bring their self into and habit or character as way of enlivening that character, right. They get to live more deeply and become more present and the organisation and the group benefits. Absolutely.

Right. That that's the frame that I was working on. What the shift was the shift from, personal to employee was actually a huge frame shift as well. The shift for employee is from the organisation's perspective, not from the person's perspective, but we're now looking from the org. Like it's all shift and point of view.

For the organisation's perspective, how can we get our workers, our employees to be as, as engaged that is as absorbed and hardworking as possible. Right. And so that shift of point of view is really a shift of intention, right? It's the organisation's intention of course, to get as much work and ideas and impact and investment of time and energy out of, out of any individual employee in order to benefit the organisation and its goals, its missions and its profits.

Right. And so, the shift became; how do we measure how hard people are working and how much they're working and how do we try to change your organisation to get them to work as hard as possible. That was the shift. And I totally understand it. Um, and my interpretation is what I was offering in the spirit of personal engagement, is way too hard to measure. It's just too hard. In fact, I never even tried. Right. I did this qualitative in-depth discovery of what engagement was and the psychological ambitions. And I did it by interviews and observations and more interviews and more observations, writing and talking. I never once tried to create a paper and pencil test that would measure safety, meaningfulness, availability and engagement.

I didn't do it mostly because I just, I'm not good at it. And I don't think that way I don't much care about it. Right. But the people who then wanted to exploit it and not for, not for bad reasons, they wanted to explain it because they thought there was value in it.

They're the ones who therefore reduced this very nuanced, sophisticated idea of inhabiting a role. They instead, they created something that they could make. Right, which is why Gallup, and all these others created these employee engagement scales. And that's why the shift happened because it, because you could measure it.

Katie [23:33]: And all of a sudden, they wanted to know within their sector where they were benchmarked and had they improved on last year and all the rest of it. And they got caught in the system. I've got to do the annual survey. We did it last year and so on and so forth.

William [23:47]: Yeah, ironically it becomes in my mind a disengaged process. Right. It becomes a routine; something wrote we have to go through. Right. But I'm not sure how many of them truly look at the data and pinpoint what are the kinds of things we can do to help individuals really feel honoured at the centre of, cared for, negotiated with about the kinds of roles they wanted to have it, how they want to do it. None of that really happens.

Katie [24:16]: No. So the effort is on measuring it, but by measuring it alone, that doesn't improve it. And also deep down, would you say that the whole act of measuring it might be a little bit of a fool's errand in a way? I mean, could it ever really be measured?

William [24:31]: I don't think that what I'm talking about in terms of what it means to be presence can be measured through a survey.

Katie [24:40]: Yes. Yes. I, I can absolutely see why you say that.

William [24:45]: Also, I would also add one more piece. When I developed the idea of personal engagement. My notion is you can go in and out of being engaged or disengaged. Any minute. Right? So, we're having a conversation and I'm trying to be as engaged and vulnerable over it as possible.

But there may be a couple of questions where I don't connect to. I find myself psychologically withdrawing. I may even put like a boundary or barrier up and then five minutes later I'm coming in again. Right. And. Uh, so it's, uh, it's a much more fluid thing that has to do with what happens inside me and also in our own relationship as I experience it.

Right? Yes. I don't know how you measure that. Right, because, because it's not, you know, it's not an enduring state. It's fleeting based on what's happening at the moment inside us, inside me and between us. Right. To then give somebody a survey says, are you an engaged person? It's nuts to me.

Katie [25:41]: I also heard you say on another podcast that actually real engagement, and one of the reasons that leaders might deep down shy away from true engagement as you defined it, is that real engagement is messy.

Um, I don't know if you remember saying that. Can you explain what you mean by that, but what does it look like true engagement inside an organisation?

William [26:04]: So true engagement means we are licensing people to use their voice, their own voice, which means we cannot control what they're going to say or how they're going to say it, or how loudly they say it or how quietly they say it or with what kind of emotion they say it, all of that is messy, right?

It cannot be easily controlled. I think, I think, you know, organisations are steeped in the illusion that people can disconnect from their emotions when they walk into the building, like

taking their hat off and put it on a hat rack and they walk in, and they do their work and then they leave, and they put their hats back on and then they leave.

And those hats for me, represent emotions and relationships and messiness and the real stuff of who we are as people. Right. None of that is easily digestible in normal organisational discourse. Right. For me to be in a meeting and for me to find myself frustrated with my boss and say it, and that frustration is a really important piece of data, right.

For me to be really present engaged means I, I slammed my hand down. I say, I can't believe we're doing this again. Isn't anyone else frustrated? That's a port that that's a piece of data, right? That's engagement. We don't want that in organisations because it's messy and it might trigger emotions and it might trigger real relationships and people talking what's really going on inside that relationship.

That's messy and people don't want it.

Katie [27:36]: We can imagine then the leader that is open to engagement is someone who does a lot of, a lot of listening, is quite comfortable with, uh, with tension, with disagreement, almost looks for the outlier that's not speaking. It's an interesting set of leadership behaviours, I guess then that we would be looking for.

William [27:56]: Yes, in terms of competencies and what, the only thing you left off that list was; the most mature leaders are the ones who are comfortable with their own emotional messiness. They're able, because, so if I'm going to, if I'm going to acknowledge my frustration or my pain or my sadness, or my loss or white joy, I need leaders who understand those experiences that are able to contain their own reactions as opposed to push them and therefore push me away.

Katie [28:29]: Right. Fascinating. Fascinating. See, I told you I was a psychologist. Yes. I'm also curious about activism then in the workplace. I, it would appear that we're seeing more walkouts or certainly more employees putting their hands up and saying, you know, not in our name, are you doing this? We don't agree. And I'm struggling to stop myself from using this phrase, bring your whole self to work because that's how organisations, that's what they say they want, do you think the drive for activism is part of this? Do you see it as a connected whole?

William [29:03]: It's funny. No one's asked me that before. It's a great question. I would say that when people are not invited and able to use their voice in open, healthy ways, they will use them in other ways. Right. And so, organisations, when I say organisations, of course, I mean, leaders.

When leaders are able to invite everyone into the right conversations and ask for their voices and pay attention to them and honour them as valuable and meaningful and important and create conditions of safety, where those voices are true and so they show up. Then activism will not be necessary, right?

Activism is a way of, you know, sort of like they develop unions, right. Unions develop because workers did not have access to real conversations in which they were honoured as true partners of the organisation. Therefore, unions had to spring up and therefore voices became adversarial. And it just became unhealthy in many ways.

The same thing, the same thing as for me, is really for activism. When we invite people into a messy, lively conversation, which can be noisy and chaotic. And then we're able to sort of synthesise and work with that and honour all these different voices and create, and create something together. Activism won't, won't be necessary. And it certainly won't be destructive.

Katie [30:30]: I think we might've gone over this slightly, but I'm just gonna ask you it again, just to see where it leads. So, I read an article you wrote back in 2013 in, um, I think it was called Psychology Today and it's entitled The Heart of Engagement and we'll put a link to it in the show notes, but you write about why engagement is lacking, even when the right leavers are being pulled.

So, you talked about things like reward recognition, having the right resources, the opportunity to grow and develop, but you're saying at many of these organisations, you know, can do all these things and still miss the essence of engagement. What is that essence?

William [31:07]: So for me, I think it's actually relationships.

You know, when I think the essence of engagement, it really is a relationship between people that enables them to unpack and explore why in any particular moment, one or both of us are either present or absent when, right like you and I are right now, having a conversation. We've just started this relationship.

Like we went from a transaction, which is, you know, you're interviewing me. To over time will be a relationship. The essence of engagement is at any moment when I feel, or you feel that I am now sort of protecting myself or disconnecting, are you able to say, Hey Bill, what's going on? Right? Or am I able to say Katie you know, what, can we just take a time out? I'm actually feeling like this isn't what I thought we were going to do. And I'm a little uncomfortable with it, right?

So the, and those by the way, are very difficult moments that we're often not trained in, unless we're blessed with really good parents and good authority figures and good friends.

We're often not trained in, certainly not reinforcing the workplace to be able to have those messy, wonderful, engaging moments. That for me is the essence of engagement, which is why. These employee engagement surveys are ludicrous because they there's no way they can capture those fleeting moments, that, and work on them in the context of relationships.

Katie [32:31]: If organisations has spent all that money, actually supporting leaders at all levels, getting comfortable with uncomfortableness.

William [32:39]: That's exactly, exactly. Right. Right. And you know, and I, and I use the word maturity. I, I believe in the idea of maturity and that, by the way, not related to age, maturity is about, do we take responsibility for the relationships that we create in the world?

Right. And it doesn't matter whether you're the manager, the senior executive, the person working the floor or the front desk, it doesn't matter. Engagement occurs. True engagement occurs in relationships and in organisations when people take the responsibility for understanding how they've contributed to relationships going well or badly.

Katie [33:19]: Yeah. Makes perfect sense. So, the global. Pandemic, I guess I can't not ask you a question like that. Cause it looms so large for all of us. Of course, it's disrupted the way that we work and interact with our colleagues. And some commentators have said, you know, well, it's flattened the hierarchy because on zoom, you're all our boxes are the same size.

I think that's possibly an oversimplification. Do you see any long-term positive trends emerging from this crisis? Do you think.

William [33:51]: Hmm, that's a good question. So, I am impressed by organisations that are using this pandemic as an opportunity to make very clear and intentional choices about when and why we should get together in person and when we no longer need to. Right.

I mean, I love the idea of, of very intentional conversation, which is we need to bring people together for collaboration, creativity, coordination, celebration. Everything else, let's let people create the workspaces and the work lives they need to get their work done.

Right. So, let's be very intentional about when we join and when we need to be together as fully as possible. And when we need to be a part, the reason I liked that so much is because I think every relationship, whether it's a marriage or partnership, a group, an organisation, every relationship needs to have the space for people, people to be independent and individual. And have this space for us to join together and collaborate and coordinate. Right.

And I love the idea of people being much more intentional about when we have our own personal agency and when we have our connections with others. And that for me has been, you know, that for me has been the potential and the possibility of what the zoom life has taught us over the last year or two.

Katie [35:21]: Yeah, absolutely. Now this is the $64 million question, and it's a little bit of an unfair one, but I'm asking it very much on behalf of my listeners. So our job, as people who are responsible for helping organisations improve internal comms is to help employees feel informed. Help them feel a sense of belonging to a community, help them sort of understand a common goal and a clear vision and where we can, try to, you know, foster open dialogue, honest dialogue, meaningful dialogue, inside organisations. As someone who studied organisational behaviour for so many years do you have any hints and tips for us?

William [36:05]: So, I think people misunderstand the word communication a lot. I think they frame it as a one-way provision of information from someone who knows to someone who doesn't know. Right. And when I think of communication, I think of opportunities to create belonging. Opportunities, to create and discover together, as opposed to simply I have information that I need to push out and share in order to influence and convince others. Right? I'm a firm believer that there's a difference between things we do to others and things we do with others.

And I do know that that engagement and connection and community are much more likely to happen when we do things with others, not just to others. Right. And I think simply one way communication is doing things to others. I think doing things with others is bringing people in much, sooner and earlier and, and sort of honouring their ideas and their voice being clear with them about what it is we're trying to create together.

As a leader I know where we need to go, but I don't know how to get there because there are people in the room who know much more about, about their jobs and their roles than I ever will. And I need to honour their expertise and assume they know more about what they're doing than I do. My job is much more like an orchestra director or conductor, which is bringing people into the room honour the fact that they, I'm going to kill this metaphor, honour the fact that they know their instruments much better than I do, and can play that much more beautifully and figure out sort of the score we're working on and then point to them and acknowledge them and bring them in. Right. And we're, we're creating something together.

And communication is a part of that process. Right? If I were to say anything about my whole field, if we've learned anything about my whole field of organisational psychology, we know that when people are involved in creating and designing something together, they're much more likely to make it happen in the world, than if I simply come in and tell them something.

Katie [38:15]: There's so much in that answer.

William [38:18]: So, so my advice always is bring people in early, bring them in often, honour their voices, and therefore there'll be much less need to simply write something and push it out at them because they'll already know it from the inside.

Katie [38:33]: It's making me think also that.

You know, we spend a lot of time, for example, before the chief executive gets up and gives his one-way broadcast. Uh, I think you're absolutely right on that score. And then we might allow five minutes at the end for Q and A's and we've rigidly written every single question and answer we can think you might get and actually why?

William [38:55]: And by the way, that assumes a level of fragility. On the part of the, on the part of that senior executive, that if we have to write out everything, this person must be very fragile when it needs to be scripted and cannot himself him in this case, be fully present and engaged and available to actually learn and learn and grow with others in the room.

Katie [39:18]: Exactly. That's it? That was going to be my point exactly. I'm now thinking of kind of the meta skills above that, that you could help the leader in the room. Just be able to say, do you know what that's such a great question. I don't know the answer. I'm guessing someone here does.

William [39:35]: Yes, that is awesome. And by the way, so what you described by the way, I'm just thinking of that this big board room at a meeting, right?

I would actually totally flip it. Right. Instead of having the senior executive up there, pushing information out, I would talk. And then there's five minutes question and answers. I would. For me, it would be, let's bring people together in small groups to talk about things, get their ideas, right. Let's do, let's do that in a cascading way.

Let's do that over the course of a couple of weeks. And then the role of the CEO is to essentially stand up there and say, here's what we've learned from you. And based on what we've learned from you. And by the way, I need to tell you the larger context, because I'm looking at stuff that you're not looking at it only because I'm on the boundary of the environment right now, let's put those together and let's talk about what we're going to do.

And here here's what I learned. Right? Do you guys have any reactions to this? That's flipping it completely. And again, that person becomes the conductor, which is really bringing out the voice and the music of the others, as opposed to, you know, you know, going at them.

Katie [40:42]: And you would think wouldn't you, but this is just what you would think. Not necessarily what's happening. That because of the rate of technological change, because what technology can do that the, that the differentiation that you might have within your product could be replicated tomorrow by a competitor. So, all you really have is the knowledge that exists inside the heads of your people.

So, you'd think that would be the thing that you would be most treasured and prized and want to elicit from them. Um, I'm not sure that that is actually happening everywhere, but that's certainly the lens through which if I was the CEO, I'd I I'd be looking at this. I think.

William [41:20]: I agree. I think that's very well said.

Katie [41:22]: So, if we've got time, I think we might just have time. I wouldn't mind asking you these quick-fire questions.

How do you find a degree of personal engagement at work? What gives you that feeling of high personal engagement at work? What are you doing normally when you've got that feeling?

William [41:42]: So, I would say there are two ways, two sort of moments where I feel very engaged.

One is. When I am in a room, a classroom, or a board room, and I'm working with people and I am very like, there's this very, um, sort of engaging dialogue. I am sort of helping people have insights. I'm pushing them. I'm going at them. I'm using Schumer. I'm drawing them out. There's something that happens in that moment that I always really appreciated.

Like, I'd say that's one. And that's the more extroverted side of myself, but then also the introvert side myself, and I'm more introvert than extrovert is writing. I, I really love to write. It's something that matters to me. I feel capable and smart sometimes when I do it in ways that I don't at other points in my life.

So, I just, I, you know, people do some people don't like writing. And I happen to love it. I really do. I don't always love the act of writing. I love having written it. Like, you know, if I put together a beautiful sentence, I, um, I'm happy for the whole day.

Katie [42:50]: That's such a lovely feeling. Isn't it? There's that wonderful quote isn't there about how do you write?

Well, you just have to sit there until the beads of blood start appearing on your forehead or something like that. But the act of doing it can be really tough, but then when you look back and you think, nailed it, it's a lovely, lovely feeling.

William [43:08]: Actually, there's a quote I like better, which is a little more forgiving, as opposed to beads the blood, which is there's this Israeli author, Amos Oz.

He once said: "The job of a writer is like a storekeeper. You sit in the store and hope the customers show up." And if they do great, right, that means the characters have shown up and you'll be able to write them and sort of gather them and to create something. And if they don't, you still did your job. So, there's, so there's something lovely there about service or a self-compassion for what, what it means to write, if it happens or it doesn't. But your job is to sit there.

Katie [43:44]: What do you wish you had known when you first started out in your career?

William [43:53]: I'll answer a different question. The question I'll answer is I want to go back to the 20-year-old. That was me when he decided to become a psychologist and an academic and a professor. And I just want to give him a hug and thank him.

Katie [44:12]: There speaks a happy man.

William [44:15]: because I am so pleased with sort of the role and job I've chosen. I love, I love what I do.

Katie [44:23]: Does that mean it was always meant to be Bill? Would that 20-year-old self, was he always going to be where you are now? Or could it there been an alternative career path?

William [44:34]: I don't believe in. One sole major one soul job, right? S O U L. Right. I believe that we could be happy in lost different ways.

Um, and in fact, you know, I've often thought that we're, that we're born, we're born, or we developed very early a particular question or issue we're going to spend our life working on. Right. And so, mine has always been, how do you help people say what cannot be said. And work with what comes up. Right. And so, I could have done that as a, as a, as an academic. I could have done that as a therapist. I could have done that as a stand-up comedian. I could have done that in lots of different venues and lots of different ways. What matters most is I become aware of sort of my own particular issue or question or purpose. And live that out as fully as possible in whatever job or role I have.

Katie [45:33]: Great advice for anyone there. So, what book? It doesn't have to be a book, but let's just say a book. It could be an article, could be all sorts of things, but what should we all read to better understand how people behave at work?

William [45:52]: I read novels all the time. I do. Like I'm always reading fiction and I don't have a particular one in mind right now, but, but, but you know, to inhabit the world and author has created and two and a habit or character and to practice empathy. For a character to find yourself drawn to certain characters and that explore why and what that means for you. That for me, is the best, the best, lesson than I can ever, ever have about what it means to sort of increasingly become aware and sort of have empathy at work.

Katie [46:29]: This is very naughty because it's not quick-fire question, but I, and I'm conscious of the time, but there was a question I had, um, for you reading your work, you clearly do, and it's related to what you've just said.

You clearly do and have done a lot of qualitative research over the years. Okay. And it's, uh, from a, from a very lay person, amateur point of view, I have to say here, it's one of my favourite aspects of the work that I do. How do you remove? And I think I'm, as I'm saying this, I'm realising what an idiot question it is.

William [47:06]: There's no such thing.

Katie [47:08]: How do you remove personal bias from what your you're sensing, you're feeling you're hearing from that person. Yeah. Or from what you've just said, actually, is it more important to notice the personal bias or bias and almost to embrace it?

William [47:27]: I think to, I think to remove it is dangerous.

I think to remove it means, uh, you know, when people say, how do you, how do you remove your bias? What they're really saying is how do you ignore valuable data? And so, I am most aware that when I'm doing my best work, I am in constant supervision with a peer or a mentor or someone where I am working through my own interpretations and someone is how someone is helping me, helping me understand that I am creating a certain frame around it because of my own needs to see it in a certain way, as opposed to what's really emerged from the data.

So, I would say that's one thing. So, I'm always, so, um, with a co-author or a friend or a mentor, I'm always trying to sort of get some help thinking about what am I, why am I seeing it this way and not this way?

That's one thing. The second thing is I pay very close attention. To the words that people use. And so, I'm always interviewing and recording the interviews. And then I get transcriptions of the interviews and I paid very close attention to the words. And I used the text of their, of their language to try to understand what's going on under the surface.

And the more I, the more I, the more I spend time trying to interpret their language, the more it becomes about them and trying to discover and less about me.

Katie [48:53]: Yes. So, you're peeling away the layers from what they're saying? Absolutely fascinating. I promise you, there's only two questions left. What would you do tomorrow if you knew for certain you couldn't fail? So we take failure off the table. What would you do?

William [49:11]: so, embedded in your question as a hypothesis that I'm, that I want to ask you about. Embedded in your questions is the hypothesis that failure prevents us from living out the lives that we want. Is that correct?

Katie [49:29]: Absolutely. That's exactly right.

William [49:32]: And why do you hold that hypothesis?

Katie [49:34]: So, it's the question that I got asked quite a lot when, because I run an organisation that's very, very small, one less than 50 people is a question that I have been asked a few times by my mentor. And I think what she wants me to do is think beyond the boundaries of what I feel safe in.

In if that makes sense. Yeah. Yeah. So, it's about expanding my thinking and the range of possibilities that I might be considering.

William [50:05]: Right. So, here's the deal. I am a tenured white male, and there's not many things that I prevented myself from doing because I feel. I don't feel safe that I, that I feel like I'm going to fail.

It's very hard for me to truly fail as a tenured white, senior white male, right. In this, in this particular social dominant class. Right. So, I don't have a great answer for you. My flippant answer is I would have probably pursued stand-up comedy if I had had, uh, if, if I had the, if I had the courage to do it earlier in my life.

Katie [50:47]: So finally, and this is for the writer in you. We give you a billboard for millions to see, it's really a metaphorical billboard, really, but you can put on that billboard, any message you like, or it could be an image, anything you like, what are you going to put on your billboard?

William [51:10]: That's such a good question.

I would say it's going to sound really weird. We are composed of many parts, inspect and love them all. That's such a, such a psychologist. Oh my God. It's such a psychologist. Right? Because it means there are parts of us that are good, that are bad, that are wanted, that are unwanted, that we're ashamed of, that we're proud of.

And the more we become aware of all those parts and the more we own them, as opposed to disown them. The more present and fulfilled and happy we're going to be in the less damage we're going to do to people in our lives.

Katie [51:48]: Mm mm it's. It's, it's really interesting from everything you've said that it comes back down to that fragility and that not knowing and that vulnerability actually being a huge secret strength.

Um, yeah, it's a fascinating stuff. Yeah. We have come almost to the end of our hour Bill. Thank you so much.

William [52:13]: Absolutely my pleasure.

Katie [52:15]: Is there anything that I should have asked you that I didn't, or you would like me to ask you?

William [52:20]: No, you have asked every question I can imagine and even more and done so beautifully.

Katie [52:26]: I just want to say thank you again. I really, really appreciate it.

William [52:31]: Absolutely. Yeah. It was wonderful meeting you.

Katie [52:35]: So that is a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. If you enjoy the show, please could you show your appreciation by rating it on Apple podcasts? We have more than 60 ratings so far. If we can get that number to 100, it will make the show much more discoverable for other IC pros out there. So, thank you.

For a link to Bill's original 1990 paper, plus many of the other resources that we mentioned head over to the show notes on AB's website that's abcomm.co.uk/podcasts. We are also in the process of adding the transcripts of our most popular shows to this site. And this will certainly be one of them.

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