TICP – Episode 54 – Brain care: Mastering your mind
(Season 6, episode 06)

Katie [0:09]: This episode of the internal comms podcast is brought to you by the AB IC Health Check. This is a brand new, free online tool for evaluating your internal comms activities. Now, you've probably seen, you've probably used, these online diagnostic tools before. Let's be honest, they can be a little lightweight, rather rudimentary, not always worth the effort of completing.

We wanted the AB IC health check to be genuinely useful. So we designed it to be thorough. How does it work? The tool takes you through a series of questions in six categories: insight and understanding; strategy and planning; channels; content; measurement; and professional development. Now my advice is, don't rush through these questions. Make time to sit down with a drink of your choice and work through your answers –you'll need a good 15 minutes. At the end, once you've entered your details, your bespoke report will land automatically in your inbox. This will give you an assessment of where you are today, in terms of your internal comms activities. Plus, the report will be packed with insight, advice, and practical hints and tips for what to do next, whether you're ahead of the game, or just starting out. So, what are you waiting for? Head over to AB comm: abcomm.co.uk/health. Get a free, fresh, expert assessment of your work and take your internal comms to the next level. That website address again: abcomm.co.uk/health.

Welcome to the internal comms podcast with me, Katie McCauley. This is a show to inform, inspire, and generally energise those of us responsible for communicating inside the walls of our organisations. Listeners, as we race towards the end of another busy and demanding year, how are you feeling? If you're feeling a little frazzled, as 2021 draws to a close, then consider this episode, a special seasonal gift.

It is the perfect time, I think, to hear the wise words of my guest today: psychotherapist, coach and facilitator Phil Dobson. Phil turns insights from neuroscience and psychological research into practical skills and techniques to help individuals and teams transform their productivity, enhance their creative thinking and improve their wellbeing. He is the founder of BrainWorkshops, and the author of *The Brain Book*. This episode is packed with practical advice, from how to stop being busy and instead become more effective, how to identify and prioritise your MVTs (most valuable tasks), how to become less distracted, and introduce simple practices into your routine to care for your mind.

Phil helps us deconstruct happiness at work, explaining the key difference between hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing. We touch on mindfulness meditation, mind sweeps. So, close the laptop, take a deep, relaxing breath and bask in the wisdom of Phil Dobson.

So, Phil, welcome to the internal comms podcast. It's a real delight to have you here.

Phil [04:22]: Oh, thank you Kate. It's absolute pleasure to be with you. The delight is all mine.

Katie [04:28]: So, let's start with what sounds like, or might sound like, a rather strange question. How did a handspring change your life?

Phil [04:40]: Ah. So, you've been doing your research I see.

Katie [04:43]: Absolutely.

Phil [04:44]: A handspring did indeed change my life, back in 2007. I did my first and last handspring and badly broke my ankle and it really prompted a probably a long overdue pivot. I was at a party, a friend of mine did a handspring and did it so effortlessly, I thought, well, surely anyone could do that. So, bearing in mind I was no gymnast, I gave it a go. I landed it, but not perfectly. And so yeah I badly broke my ankle, gave myself a spiral fracture. And so that then gave me the next 15 weeks to reflect. So, at the time, I was a musician, aspiring musician. I've been writing guitar music for many, many years, and I was writing a lot of electronic music. I also had a job in sales and business development. And my job primarily was face-to-face business development.

So, suddenly, I found myself in a position where I was signed off work. So I then had longer than I was expecting to ponder my decision to do that handspring. And the first few weeks, of course, were spent in immense pain. And, you know, I wasn't in a good spot. But it didn't take me long, whether consciously or otherwise, to realise what an opportunity I now had, and how rare it is for people to have, you know, three months where you're not expected to do any work. So I, I just started to use it. I mean, I read a lot. I started researching a lot. And by the end of that three month slot, I'd released my first album, I'd set in play what became me buying my first flat. And critically, in terms of my future path, I signed up at the London College of Clinical [Hypnotherapy] to begin my diploma in clinical hypnotherapy. So yeah, that was a pivotal decision. It's funny, isn't it, silver linings? I mean, I can't think of a greater silver lining in my entire life.

Katie [06:41]: That's amazing. What was it like being a hypnotherapist in clinical practice? It sounds fascinating.

Phil [06:49]: It was, I mean, I loved all of it. For me. I mean, my degree had been in psychology. So, I had an ongoing fascination with people, with the human mind, with human behaviour. And clinical practice gave me the opportunity to help people, which is something obviously I was motivated to do. And to do it in a way that gave me an optimal mix, I suppose, of science and creativity, right. Scientific models

behind some of the techniques, but the creative, the necessary creativity that was around solving people's problems with them. So, it was immensely rewarding, and gave me a sense of purpose, the likes of which I hadn't experienced before. So again, my, my previous life, I suppose, was a lot of fun, but I didn't have a lot of meaning. And I wasn't properly fulfilled. This gave me that in abundance.

But I started to notice that there was a growing accompanying frustration. You know, I was helping people with how to sleep. I was helping people manage their stress, I was helping people change their behaviours. And so of course, it was rewarding, but I couldn't help reflect on this question. You know, why are we collectively taught so little about our brains, and indeed, our subjective experience, our nervous system. Because, you know, daily, I was seeing people that were suffering precisely through that lack of knowledge. And I couldn't help compare my own experience, having done my degree in psychology and, quite frankly, it was interesting, but I didn't find it particularly practical. You know, I could condition a dog but not myself. And yet, the toolkit I found myself with, being a psychotherapist, was changing people's lives, sometimes in as little as 60 or 90 minutes.

So that ultimately, that reflective piece, led to everything that's come since because that got me thinking, well, can I deconstruct what I've learned as a psychotherapist, and package it in a way that people will understand, that's out of clinical assumptions, and just a toolkit for understanding better how you work, how your brain works, because ultimately, if people know more about that, life will be better, easier, people will be happier. And so that's really what led me to start teaching this stuff to other people. It led me to want to understand more about neuroscience and understand more about the mechanics of what was going on. And again, ultimately led to what I now do, which is, you know, working with businesses, helping their leaders become more productive and creative and resilient by applying what we know about the brain. But it all started with that question, why are we taught so little?

Katie [09:34]: It's interesting in your book, and I loved reading your book, I've read it, cover to cover but then realised actually, that one reading is not enough because I now need to go back and actually complete the exercises. The value is in the exercises, so we will put a link to it in the show notes. But I would urge people to actually do the exercises because that's where the true value is there. You say in your book that you know we use our brains in everything we do. But yet, we're never given a manual as you say, we just don't know that much about brain care. So where do we start, then? This is a massive subject. Take us through, maybe the sort of first steps of understanding the basics of brain care.

Phil [10:17]: Interesting. Firstly, Katie, thank you for those kind words. I've heard it enough now that I think I should probably read the book myself at some point.

You know, we probably know, roughly the importance of taking care of our physical health and wellbeing, but we tend to overlook the brain. And again, it's not our fault. We're just taught so little about it. So how do we begin? Well, I think the first step is to understand, you know, your brain is part of

your nervous system, if you do take care of your body, it's likely to have a positive impact on your brain. So that ticks off things like sleep – non-negotiable from the brain's perspective, you know, get your eight hours and, and be ruthless with it. Exercise or physical movement, of course, it's good for our waistlines and our cardiovascular health, but it's about as good as it gets for brain care. You know, as you move, you get more blood flow going to your brain, you get more oxygen, you get more glucose, which not only improves your performance from one day to the next, but it helps protect your brain over time. Nutrition, a big one, you know, Mediterranean diets, we've, we tend to correlate it with brain health for a number of years. So in that space, keep doing what you're doing. And in that space, if you have felt like I felt, I think, sometimes not quite sufficient motivation to do those things we know we should simply for the benefits of your physical health, understand that you're doing it for your brain health as well. And again, is there a more important thing to invest in? So that's where I'd begin.

The thing that I wish everyone knew more about and they tend to know not that much, and the stuff that really is missing, I think, from education, is understanding the degree to which we can master our own nervous system. So less about brain care, in terms of doing the, you know, engaging in the behaviours that we know correlate with brain health, but understanding implicitly, how we can use our brain more deliberately. And it's a different thing, isn't it? It's kind of investing in the muscle great, to what degree can you become a master of your brain and indeed, your nervous system? We know that you can get better at regulating your physiology, simply, you know, we know the benefits of things like meditation purely through their impact on physical health and wellbeing. Our emotional life, our emotional state from moment to moment is something that we have so much more control or influence over than most people, perhaps realise. Our mind, our cognitive state, how we think, is something again, we have so much influence over. And there's a lot in that. But I think if only people knew more about that, and were willing to invest the small bits of time in investing in that, the rewards are unparalleled.

It reminds me of William James, who said some words to the effect of you know, the great thing in all education is to make your nervous system your ally instead of your enemy. And I think there's, he said a lot of very wise things. But that to me, right now, perhaps more than ever, you know, the last 18 months of the pandemic, I think have demonstrated how managing self, you know, the mastery of one's own responses, whether that's how we use our time, or our decisions, our behaviour, how we manage our emotions, it's never been more important, and this is going to continue to be a competitive advantage. So yeah, it's a big topic. But that's what I would encourage listeners to do to prioritise your, your physiological recovery, not just in terms of sleep, but you know, relaxation exercises, meditation, again, we can talk more about meditation, but a profound exercise to get good at. Regulate your emotions, invest in your emotional recovery, something that's often overlooked. Prioritise the stuff you love doing, you know, it really does help you sustain your performance and your wellbeing. Even practices like gratitude. We now understand more about the neuroscience and the implications of regularly practiced gratitude, and it's win-win on so many different levels. And then get better at managing how you use your brain, your mind, your thinking. Whether that's through reframing your responses to things, or

simply getting better at managing your tasks and your projects. You know, so much of wellbeing comes through ultimately good workload management. So, yeah, big topic. Take care of your brain and care of how you use it.

Katie [14:41]: We are going to dig in a little bit more to some of those hints and tricks and tips and exercises. Before we do though, I did notice that you were, you've worked with emergency room physicians and I can't imagine a more stressful, pressurised work environment but then how do you convince ER doctors that they need to look after their mental state when they're clearly you know, all their focus is on somebody else's physical and mental wellbeing? What are the some of the sort of arguments you use? How do you convince somebody?

Phil 15:15: Yeah, it's a really good question. I mean, my heart goes out to doctors all over the planet. But yeah, the emergency rooms in particular. How do you convince anyone? Well, understanding the science certainly helps. It's not that they're cynics. But I think all people, this applies to the leaders and the managers I work with as much as the doctors, if you understand the science behind it, whether that's the psychological science or the neuroscientific research, it puts it in a more sort of clear frame. But then I think there are a couple of reframes that are quite important. And this, again, is hyper relevant to doctors, but it's relevant to us all.

The first is this idea of self-care being necessary in order to care for someone else. I mean, we're told to, you know, put your oxygen mask on first, it's often used as a metaphor. And it's so true, that us as a leader, us, as a doctor, us, as a coach us as a parent, a friend, someone who wants to be valuable to other people. Your availability to them, your utility to them depends on adequate self-care, whether you've slept or whether you've taken care of your recovery, psychological or mental. It's how you show up in that moment. So being able to invert it and just understand, look, doctors, for example, whatever care you give to others, just make sure you save enough for yourself, and it needs to come pre- rather than post-. So much of our recovery, we think that it happens at the end. And yet, if we reframe that, and we think in terms of recharging, putting your phone into the wall, you need the power first. So I think this message around just prioritising yourself over others.

But I think there's another reframe that's important here. And this is, I think, relevant to everyone. This historically grounded over-emphasis on time. And maybe this is more relevant to managers and leaders, but I think it's true, I mean, it's true of everyone. When we start out in our career, I think a lot of us are rewarded based on the quantity of work we do. And of course, that's a relevant consideration. The doctors have any number of patients to see, people at work have any number of projects to complete. But the reality is, really, you're paid for the quality of the decisions you make and the quality of your thinking. And they're not the same thing.

So again, doctors in particular, we expect their best brains, their best – we depend, our lives depend, on their decision-making in the moment. But that's also true of, again, your leaders of your businesses, or the managers that you work with. You're hoping, you're expecting, you're depending on high-level cognition. And without that, everything starts to fall apart, if you're in an emergency room that could involved something tragic, if you're in an office environment, that could still end up in something at least non-optimal. So, trying to think less around time and think more about energy, thinking less about the quantity of work you do, and more about the quality of the work and the quality of the decision-making you bring with it.

Katie [18:37]: And we're gonna talk a little bit in a moment about how, well I was gonna say less is more in some ways, but I'll hold that thought. One of the things I read about in your book, and I thought, this is for sure gonna be a weekly exercise of mine going forward, and I can see myself doing it on a Friday afternoon is a mind sweep. Tell us about a mind sweep.

Phil [18:58]: A mind sweep. Well, this is really borrowed, initially from David Allen's book, *Getting Things Done*. But it's an exercise that ever since reading that I've done every single week, and it's something I encourage everyone to do, and it couldn't be simpler. A mind sweep, a brain sweep, a brain dump, call it what you want. Once a week, you get a pen and paper and you simply empty your mind of unattended tasks. So, these could be things that well, they're not in your calendar already. They're not already on some other external list. And what happens reliably when you ask people to do this is the next 5 or 10 minutes is spent filling multiple pages of to-dos, errands, admin, tasks.

Often, it's home or personal oriented things. So, people have pretty good systems for work, but everything else, you know, send your niece the birthday card or pick up the dry cleaning or fix that or buy that or repair that etc. And it's so useful. Because without it, what tends to happen is people, their typical day or week is spent with a brain that is so overloaded internally. You know, our brains are wonderful things, but they are more limited than a lot of us perhaps realise. And so the very act of carrying all these things around in your head with no desire to work on them or even think about them, it's just kind of carrying extra baggage. It's a waste of mental energy, and it actually starts to inhibit our focus.

So, this simple exercise, as I've said, it shouldn't really take more than 5 or 10 minutes a week. And that's all it really takes. See it as a purge, get it all out. And once you've done that, the goal is not to then start at the top of the list and work things down at all. It's simply to clear your mind on a regular basis. And what you'll do if you do that, well, what you'll experience is a greater sense of being on top of things because you will be. There's a greater calmness, a mental calmness that comes with it. And a lot of people realise or notice that their sleep is improved because sleep onset for a lot of people, you know, when your head hits the pillow, it's only then you realise you haven't sent your niece a birthday card. So, it preempts all of that stress and anxiety as well. So, an immensely valuable exercise.

Katie [21:21]: Thank you for that, I'm going to look forward to my mind sweep. In your book, you make a clear distinction between being busy, being productive, and being effective. And in the past, I've only really thought about productivity as a whole. And I think that differentiating into three categories is really useful. For those listeners who haven't heard about the Pareto Principle, I think we have to talk about it here. So, tell us a little bit about the Pareto principle, and how that relates to prioritising our work.

Phil [21:58]: Interesting, right. Few things to unpack there. Busy or productive or effective. Yeah, there are fundamental distinctions here. So, everyone seems to be busy. I mean, it's one of the most reliable questions to which you'll get an affirmative response. Being busy necessarily doesn't correlate with productivity or effectiveness, it's simply just getting tired at the end of each day, feeling kind of burnt out. And sometimes an illusion that you've got anything done at all right, so lots of people just busy, but achieving very little. Now, being productive to me, well, if we just think of the root of productivity, it's just doing a lot of things, right. So, you might be completing a lot of tasks, you might be getting all the way down your to-do list. So, there's some value in that. But being effective, which I really think is the goal, the distinction between working hard and actually working smart, is also working on the right stuff. So, it's not just being productive, and creating the conditions where you get a lot done. It's doing the things that generate the greatest value, the things that are ultimately more outcome oriented. And that's such an important mindset shift, this shift away from being reactive and busy, and relying on simply working ever harder. And instead shifting this mindset towards being more outcome-oriented, being more self-directed, and consequently becoming more effective.

So, Pareto, how does he help? Well, Pareto was an Italian economist. And over 100 years ago, he noticed that in Italy, 80% of the land and the resources was owned by just 20% of the population. Right. So, this observation, the 80:20 rule that is now quite well known, began as an observation about inequal distribution of wealth. Now, why is this relevant to us working smarter and, in particular, prioritising our work? Well, the 80:20 principle also applies to what we do each day. So, 20% of what you do, generates 80% of your results. 20% of your activity tends to generate 80% of your impact, your value, your progress towards your goals. Unfortunately, you know, 80% of everything we do isn't really that important. So, this principle, understanding that not all tasks are equal, and then doing your own 80:20 analysis to indeed identify the 20% of things that you think contribute the greatest value, that can be life-changing. Because again, it shifts you from wanting to get everything done to starting at the top of the list and simply trying to get to the bottom by the end of the day. And it helps you become again, more outcome-oriented, understanding that some things when done well have a disproportionate return. If you can identify them, and spend more time doing them, it's win-win over time.

Katie [25:05]: Crucially, to make that work, and this is something that comes up in your book, is being clear on your overarching goal, you might want to call it purpose. Simon Sinek would say start with why.

Covey, Stephen Covey, has a line about this as well about, you know, being clear on your sort of personal mission. It feels like is a crucial part of this before you even get going. Would that be fair?

Phil [25:32]: Oh, 100%. Katie. Yeah. I mean, I think working smarter, being more effective, managing your workload, all of that really comes down to five steps. And the first step has to be goal orientation, right, getting clarity on what will define success by what point. For me, setting goals well, there are a few steps. I think that there's a necessary part of the year the long term, the vision piece. I also think that year goals are important that most people are most familiar with. And I also think one of the biggest improvements many people could make is just having ongoing clarity on their three goals for this quarter. Three and three, every three months, know your three goals. There's something around the magic of the progress you can make in 13 weeks is phenomenal.

There's this interesting observation with really the subjective nature of time: lots of people get to the end of a busy day and they haven't done everything they wanted so they move things to tomorrow. And lots of people get to the end of a busy week. And all of the incomplete tasks and projects go to week two. So, we tend to live by this observation that we overestimate what we can get done in short timeframes, right, we overestimate what can get done in the typical day, in the typical week. However, I think we tend to underestimate what we can get done over months. So, if you get clarity on your three primary goals for the quarter, it can be amazing how much progress you can actually make, if you have that level of clarity, right. So something about quarter goals is magical. The reason why three I think is important. I think it was Jim Collins who wrote it first, the author of *Good to Great*. He said, if you have more than three priorities, you don't have any. I think that's a useful reminder, especially again, might be particularly relevant now where we're all you know, workload has become, for so many people, insurmountable. We're just trying to get too much stuff done. And the cost of that is a lack of clarity. So that can affect our psychological wellbeing.

But it's just, you know, effective prioritisation is really about effective decision-making. And it's about being clear. Yeah, like you say clear on what you want to get done. And then being smart about how you do it. Now for listeners, I noticed I mentioned the five steps to working smarter, which I only mentioned one, they might want the other four. Step two is what we've just been speaking about: 80:20 prioritisation, right. So step one, know what you want. Step two, identify the things that are going to make the biggest difference. Step three, obviously, then you need to plan them, and it's a simple step but one that's all too often overlooked. Consistent planning of your MVTs – your most valuable tasks.

Once again, apply the rule of three: do three of them each day, you'll guarantee progress every single day. And then step four, and step five, energy management and attention mastery. Those two are really about understanding the nuance of your brain at work. And these two variables – mental energy on the one hand, and your attention, or your ability to focus on the other hand – those are the two variables

which will enable you, should you manage them and master them, to consistently get eight hours work done in six hours every day. You put those things together, you're laughing.

Katie [28:54]: I'm going to come back to you on this, Phil. I'm gonna develop these skills. You've motivated me to do it. As you were talking, I was thinking to myself, this 80:20 rule, the importance of first defining a goal and then working through your priorities to see right what's gonna have the most leverage, if you like, the most traction, could equally apply to a team as well.

If you're, if you're an internal comms team, thinking about 2022 sitting there with all these tasks and activities and all these demands from your stakeholders. If you've got your purpose, you can then sort through all those tasks and asks and demands and think, okay, but what's really going to move us forward as a team. It must be able to apply in that context too?

Phil [29:41]: Absolutely Katie 100%. It's interesting, actually, when I ask people to do their own 80:20 analysis that you'll have individuals doing it, you'll have leaders doing it, you'll have team members doing it together. And what's kind of remarkable is the goals vary, obviously, the roles vary and the responsibilities do so with that. But when people really get down to what their 20% are, the things that as you said, move the needle, there tends to be an awful lot of commonality, again, whether you're a team or you're an individual, because we realise look, do you know what, we might not do it every day but goal setting, strategic thinking, that's a high value task, isn't it? Or a high value activity? Of course it is.

What about well we've mentioned planning, that's high value, whether you're running a business, you're a team, or you're an individual. If you're working together as a team, collaboration, nourishing relationships, but that's true of everyone. For whom is building relationships not really important? It could be internal, it could be external, improving systems and processes, like it doesn't get much more valuable than that – if you find a more effective or efficient way to do something, you remove a bottle neck, you optimise something, you get a return forever. Again, that's true, whether you're an individual, a sole trader, or you're the CEO of a massive organisation.

So, there are these commonalities. For so many of us, it's strategic thinking, it's long-term thinking, it's about optimising, it's about working better together. It's about improving efficiencies. And the interesting thing here, or maybe the frustrating thing is, we can all identify these things that we know are more valuable than anything else. And yet, all too often as we notice them, we realise we're not doing them as much as we should, or as much as we like, because we're too busy.

Katie [31:36]: Yeah

Phil [31:36]: And you've got to think well, busy doing what?

Katie [31:39]: So busy is the trap, in a way.

Phil [31:42]: Yeah, well, busyness, some people like busyness, and there's certainly something to be said, for having things on and feeling a sense of pressure. You know, we can, so it's said, not have enough stress. But I've yet to meet someone who would like more of it. So having workload, having a mission, having some stuff that you care about to do, of course, is good for our wellbeing and our productivity. But yeah busyness can all too often correlate with, well, the more work you feel you have to do, the more you respond by just doing more of what you were doing, working ever harder.

As that happens, you find it ever harder to prioritise because there are more competing demands, as you find it hard to prioritise, you also tend to find as you work even longer, it's hard to sustain your attention. At the end of the day, you find it hard to switch off, you feel your balance is starting to be compromised. And that might affect your sleep or your well-being outside of work. And so suddenly, like ah, is there a better way? And yeah, there is a better way, you follow the five steps.
Katie [32:44]: As you were talking through those common tasks that in those high value categories, right, decision-making, planning, optimising processes and systems, nourishing relationships. I was thinking to myself, I had in my mind that Eisenhower important urgent matrix, and I was thinking a lot of those tasks are in that top right hand box, which is highly important, but tend to be seen as not urgent, they don't have a deadline. And I was wondering is that the problem with a lot of those tasks, because someone's not on my back to get them done?

Phil [33:20]: Yeah, well, your question is maybe more insightful than may first appear. Because there are a few things you've said. Number one: 100%, yes, they are very rarely urgent. And so if your typical relationship with work is such that you're forever putting out fires, there is a bias towards things that might be low value. And the cost is, of course, everything else that we've just identified could be more important than anything else. So the lack of urgency makes it harder. But you also, at the end of your question, stumbled on the fact that people, other people, virtually never demand these things from us either. So they lack urgency, and they lack any environmental pressure.

So for example, specifically, how many times do you get an email that asks you about the systems you've improved? Or the relationships you've developed? Or indeed, the planning, you've just sorted out? How many times is there an urgent anything about your goals or your strategic thinking? Thinking alone? You can think you know, high value tasks, or what about creative problem solving, processing information, getting fresh perspective. You see, another challenge with these MVTs, these high value 20% tasks: they're very intangible. Right. So they also don't really have a beginning or a clear end. Learning, great example, developing skills getting better at what you do. Does it get more valuable than that? Well, I don't know. But it's certainly a high value task. But when does when do you ever tick off your learning?

Right? And so again, if one is challenged with this enormous workload, it would be understandable for them to have this natural bias towards things that are completable.

You know, we like completing tasks. Little spike of dopamine, we have indeed a kind of completion bias. So if you've got all of these things you need to get done by the end of the month, say, and some of them have this character of being demanded by the outside world with an email with lots of exclamation marks, they're very easy to tick off to complete, and there is a assumed deadline, well, of course, you're going to defer to them. The risk, the cost of that, again, is all these things that are more important perhaps, than anything else. But the challenge is, they're never owed, and they're never demanded by the outside world. And they tend never to have a completion.

So you've got to almost manage your emotional responses insofar as the value in doing them comes from the knowledge that its high value. And interestingly, although you get the spikes of dopamine from the completion of the small tasks, real emotional engagement, I think real meaning tends to come from these bigger things, right? Because they're the opportunities for us to use our brains at their best, right critical thinking, problem solving, really improving systems and processes, building relationships, there's something inherently enjoyable about those things, I think, certainly, compared to the next email you're about to send.

Katie [36:30]: And I want to get into that a little bit more, but you have just given me a massive lightbulb moment. As a leader, and a lot of people here will be listening will manage people, even if it's just one or two people, some people will manage a lot more than that. You could become a better leader simply by asking your colleagues about those more intangible tasks that don't have a deadline, but are really high value. So how's collaboration going? How's your relationship with so-and-so? When was the last time you took some time out to learn something new? I'm just thinking as you were speaking. Do I ask those questions enough of the people that I manage? Probably not, but I'd be more effective as a leader if I did.

Phil [37:15]: Yeah, I think it's a really good point. I think a couple of things. Firstly, yeah, leaders, ideally, model the behaviour they would like to see in others. So if the leader is one that regularly takes time out to think or prioritises their own recovery, or, you know, openly makes goals a part of ongoing conversations or, you know, clearly and openly invests in building relationships and all the things we've kind of listed. If they visibly are modelling that then people will realise that's part of being an effective human being, and it's not role dependent.

But then specifically to what you've said, I would encourage leaders and managers to bring 80:20 analysis and MVTs into ongoing performance conversations, you know, what are your well, back to the stuff some of the stuff we've spoken about working towards those three goals for the next quarter? You know, that's helpful because it brings clarity. And then having a conversation around those MVTs. How

are you getting on with those 20% tasks? Because, there's certainly an observation here that we all need to, I think, get better at understanding the reality of opportunity cost.

Katie [38:33]: Yes.

Phil [38:34]: So, everyone knows opportunity costs. The cost of one decision is all other potential decisions, right? So whatever anyone decides to do tomorrow morning, has to be seen and understood as a decision to not do anything and everything else. Now, while that's kind of just psychologically true, I think it deserves dwelling on a bit. Because when you're working with other people, when you want to be a high performing team, or you want to be a high performing leader or just organisation, we need to understand that the cost of one decision to prioritise X has to be time, resources away from Y.

And so that's true of broad level goals. It's why this, coming back to if you have more than three priorities, you don't have any, because you need to deprioritize stuff to demonstrate your clear priorities. And there's some just, you know, give and take here. But also, yeah, when it comes to performance conversations within businesses, as people get greater clarity on their 20%, it just becomes easier, an easier conversation to have to push back on ongoing increase in commitments. Well, I can do that, but the cost will be my progress on this. Does that make sense?

Katie [39:55]: It does. It does.

Phil [39:57]: So yeah, I think the more we can turn this into a conversation, again, a mindset shift, a cultural shift, the more productive we'll all be. And, I feel, the happier as well – there's certainly a psychological wellbeing component to this whole piece.

Katie [40:11]: You're making me think also about the importance of time. As a business leader who sells time, essentially - I don't sell fridges or widgets. So I can't, with fridges and widgets and other things like that I can stack them in a warehouse. And if my clients don't need them, it's fine because in a few months time, I can sort of, you know, hopefully the market picks up and I can get rid of my stock. With time, I'm always telling my people, I'm sorry. But that's what you've got. And I can't make you and you can't make you anymore. There's a book I haven't read yet, but I've bought called *4000 weeks*. Apparently, that's what we have, we have 4000 weeks in our lifespan, that's all we have.

Phil [40:58]: I mean, it's a good reminder, isn't it. I was recently sent an image sent by a friend of what was ultimately a visual representation of the weeks we have in our lifetime. And it's just a sobering image to ponder when you when you realise you're about halfway through. The interesting thing, though, and this is maybe even more depressing. The fact that the image represented each week, as in each unit of time, as the same size. And of course, in some sense, that's accurate, right, every week is seven days long. However, subjectively, we all know that time tends to speed up because time is also perceived in a

kind of relative scale. And consequently, every week, in a sense, should appear smaller and smaller and smaller, because every week in effect, subjectively or experientially, will go quicker and quicker and quicker. So again, a bit depressing. But if we feel we're halfway through our lives, I feel we're actually subjectively considerably more. I don't know if that was helpful.

Katie [41:55]: Well it explains why when you're 8 or 11, a summer lasts forever. And here we are at the end of another year, and a lot of us are thinking, how did we get here? What's happened to 2021?

Phil [42:05]: Time perception is indeed, I mean, it's one of the most reliable things people's memory seems to be affected, but time perception has almost ceased to exist. It has become so distorted, so much so that things even the linear nature of time for a lot of people has become questionable. It's not just people think, oh my god, I can't believe it was that long ago or that recently, but also the order in which they they're remembering things is perhaps wrong. It's fascinating.

I feel, it's because of the unusual reduction in change and movement and things being mixed up that obviously a lockdown will do to you, where everything becomes standardised and monotonous, and novelty disappears. And while that's not great for our wellbeing, time, markers of time subjectively, depend on change of location, change of scene, change of episode, you know, episodic memory is precisely that. So suddenly, there aren't really the environmental cues for us to track these things. And everything goes a little bit all over the shop.

Katie [43:08]: Yeah, that makes perfect sense. I'd love to talk to you a little bit more about wellbeing and to define it. And one of the reasons why is because, and listeners will know I've been on this rant before. But there are there are words like wellbeing like authenticity, for example, where it becomes so commonly used in everyday language that I fear they become catch-alls, and they lose their meaning. I always love a word that I don't know the meaning of because I'll take time to understand where did it come from? What does it mean, etc, etc. We do the opposite of those commonly understood words. So can you explain, and I think within this wellbeing definition, the difference between hedonic and eudemic - am I pronouncing that wrong?

Phil [43:57]: Ah, eudaemonic.

Katie [43:58]: Eudaemonic - yes - happiness, because I think this is critical.

Phil [44:03]: Yeah, you're absolutely right. I mean, firstly, yes, I agree that, I mean, resilience probably has suffered with a similar thing, because it's become such, not a buzzword, but it's becomes so important. And when you really start to examine what it entails, there's so much to it, that the word itself starts to lose its meaning. And wellbeing I would agree it's become, it's, well probably never been more

important. But there is real complexity to it, to do it well. So, great question. The difference between hedonic and eudaemonic.

Hedonic wellbeing comes back to this simple idea of, we want to from moment to moment feel, I suppose, a sense of happiness or joy. We want also to avoid pain. So, it's almost in a sense, there's a kind of a biological underpinning to it. And often, when happiness is measured, as hard as it is, it's done simply through subjective scores. You know, you might get a little beep on your phone and say, right, how are you feeling right now? How would you rate your positive affect? So of course that's part of it, right? How are you feeling from one moment to the next? Are you feeling happy? Are you feeling sad? Eudaemonic wellbeing, by contrast, acknowledges the work of people like Maslow and Seligman - and even back to, you know, Aristotle, I suppose, who was probably one of the pioneers of this different way of thinking about human wellbeing - which is understanding that meaning and progress and well, for Maslow, you know, self-actualization. This principle that human beings are also happier, and experience greater wellbeing, if they feel like they are becoming the best version of themselves.

So that's why we associate things like, you mentioned purpose, like striving for something that you find meaningful, contributes positively to our wellbeing. It's why we like to have an impact on others. You know, why, coming back to me being a hypnotherapist, I loved it, because I knew I was helping people. And it wasn't a result of my happiness in the moment, its because of the impact I was having on other people. So, understanding these two different approaches to wellbeing, I think is really critical now, because, you know, lots of businesses I work with have wellbeing initiatives, and I'm all for them. Some of them even turn them into wellbeing strategies, which is obviously even better. But you can see when we think about eudaemonic, wellbeing that, you know, I'm not against yoga sessions and good nutrition in the workplace, and all those sort of things. In fact, I'm immensely for them. But you can see how that doesn't necessarily correlate with eudaemonic wellbeing, if, by contrast, you can help people nourish both. That you make sure that their physical, emotional and mental, hedonic wellbeing is well catered for, but you also enable them to invest and improve their eudaemonic wellbeing, then you'll have a more I think, sustainable approach or sustainable strategy to building workplace wellbeing.

Katie [47:10]: I'm fascinated by this topic at the moment. So there seems to be, I noticed, across the board, really in the media, what the pundits are calling a kind of existential crisis, with the great resignation. I think in the US, employees between the ages of I think it was 30 and 45, this year, we've had 20% more resignations than last year.

Phil [47:36]: Yeah, wow.

Katie [47:37]: So, has this pandemic created a crisis of meaning? Or is that just something the media wants to write headlines about because they're short on stories?

Phil [47:45]: Well, I think the stats on resignations seem to be sound. I think in the States and in the UK, there is or has been in the last 12 months or more an unusual amount of resignations. I think that seems to be fairly clear. The reasons behind it? Well, I guess they're probably a few things, there have been some people who have just decided to retire, which would perhaps be contribute to those statistics. But I think a lot of people, self-included, you know lockdown one, as hard as it was, provided a bit of a disrupt and a bit of space to get a bit more reflective, gain perspective. And for us all to do a bit of an assessment on our values, and whether our typical days, weeks and months at work corresponded to our values. So, if you do that, and if you come out of that with a sense of do you know what, this is not the dream I had in mind, then, you know, if people are confident enough to make a change, then that will perhaps, you know, result in what we've now experienced.

I think something that's interesting to notice here, if we go back to these distinctions of wellbeing: hedonic and eudaemonic. And by splitting into two, it creates a more complex and more accurate view of wellbeing. What's quite interesting is when you realise there are lots of examples where the different types of wellbeing oppose each other. So, for example, we've all probably been in a position where we've worked tirelessly towards something, right. I mean, writing my book is a fairly recent example for me. I really loved writing it but the year of writing was pretty exhausting. There was lots of editing, it seemed like this ongoing project. So, if I had been tracking my moment-to-moment wellbeing on a hedonic scale, there would have been days or even weeks where it's like, do you know what, I'm pretty knackered and I'm looking forward to this ending. An equivalent for those people who like, you know, walking, I don't know climbing up Everest. That's not a moment-to-moment experience of joy, I'm guessing. I've not done it. But the return on those investments scores highly on the eudaemonic scale of wellbeing.

An observation is quite important here. If one spends their typical days or decision-making purely oriented towards hedonic wellbeing, the reality might be from day to day, you're pretty content. But you feel this underlying dissatisfaction with your life as a whole. And that perhaps is where we're getting now this idea of, is it a crisis of meaning? I don't know. But maybe when people reflect on their life more broadly, they look back over the last decade, they think well yeah from moment to moment, I was happy. But will I look back on my life with a sense of fulfilment? And that's a very, it's a very interesting, very valuable question.

And I think, yeah, like I say, disruption of the scale we've had are useful to prompt that type of reflection. So how do we get the balance? Well, I don't know. But I do feel that you need to be very careful, if our typical short-term decision-making, whether that's days or weeks, we tend to do it for the sake of the hedonic. You know, immediate gratification as a term springs to mind here. And the cost of that is things that over time, we start to appreciate more… I mean, you know, something useful, perhaps just to ponder on: eudaemonic wellbeing, another way to think about it, not in a way that Maslow might have done, but certainly being in the space of learning and development and helping people you know, improve what they do at work and elsewhere. It's about growth.

Katie [51:25]: Yeah.

Phil [51:26]: Right? It's about getting better at stuff. It's about not just developing skills, but growing as a human. And when is that easy? By definition, it's it involves stretch, it involves frustration, it involves hardship. It involves sometimes imposter syndrome and not thinking you're good enough. All of that piece, right? So again, moment to moment that can be painful at points. But if you persist, that's where real, I think, fulfilment comes from. And again, this the science seems to kind of back this up. Of course, we can't live a life that's moment to moment miserable, there is a balance to be found.

But if we are out of balance, now, if we think about these two terms, I would encourage people to nudge the needle towards this eudaemonic approach and to think more about self-development, becoming their best self, being willing to try things that they know they're not quite good at yet. Understanding it's about the growth mindset, I suppose in part, you know, Dr Carol Dweck. It's about going okay, look, discomfort, yeah, moment to moment, you might want to avoid it. And from a biological perspective, that makes sense, from a human and psychological perspective, there is so much to be gained by willing to deal with discomfort, frustration, knowing that it's done in order that you, you know, you get through and you have this sense of fulfilment and purpose and all this magic, you know, the meaning that we've been speaking about.

Katie [52:51]: And this is just an observation, but I wonder whether going forward next year, one of the roles we're going to have as internal communicators is bringing the, the meaning to life for employees, in the sense of the purpose of our organisation and the contribution it makes to society.

I'm guessing there's many ways you could get meaning from work - in your personal interactions with your colleagues, in your task, in your day-to-day job. But above that, an overarching sense of purpose in in the sense that I am contributing to a greater whole that's having a positive impact on society. And I can't always see that myself, I might need that brought to life for me.

Phil [53:31]: Yeah, interesting. Well, I think you're right, I mean, it this sense of meaning, or having an impact, or there being purpose behind what you're doing needs to probably exist at these different levels or hierarchies. You know, the business that you work for? Great, it will be really useful if you align with the mission and that that's clearly communicated, all the way down to what have I done with my time today, my energy and my attention? And has that contributed to that overarching mission? And is there enough alignment here? And yeah, I think we all need to understand the importance of that. Because, as you said, if not done adequately, the risk is, well, you know, continued mass resignation.

Katie [54:10]: Also, I'm reflecting on a little exercise. I haven't done this for years. But I used to do an exercise with big groups of people. You know, when you were sort of presenting on stage. And I'd say,

everyone close your eyes and think back to a time when you felt really really engaged, productive at work, you know, it was all happening for you and be in that moment, just go back to it. It might have been last year it might be a decade ago. IT might be in your current role, it might be a long ago role. And really be in that moment, remembering everything that happened and then open your eyes and tell me what was going on. And to a man and woman. They all said very similar things. So usually there was a really difficult challenge that they were trying to sort out. They were all in it together as a team or department or organisation. There was often clear deadlines. So, they were all working towards the same goal that had the same sort of time span. And politics had been put aside, politics with a small 'p' had been put aside for the greater good, you know, for the greater cause. This idea that happiness is all about, you know, us being hedonists and seeking pleasure is not actually true. Often, it's the struggle when we look back on it, it's all the things you're saying,

Phil [55:34]: That's really interesting. It's funny, you just reminded me of research that's only just come out around the neural correlates of team flow. Because what you've just described there in a sense is what we've known for a while about flow states, right, this idea of being immersed, non-distracted, in this case, you know, by politics, but also lots of other things. Having a sense of, you know, clear purpose, clear role, accountability. I mean, again, there's definitions here that certainly lend themselves across the team dynamic domain. And yeah, researchers in Japan just just a couple of weeks ago published a paper that found that there were neural correlates with teams, when the teams were in a state of collective flow. And specifically, their brains started to show greater synchrony. So they tended to kind of operate on in similar brainwave frequencies.

But the reason I bring it up is because the the ingredients that you just started to share, were pretty much what the authors of this study wanted to share. Which is how do you create a team, or an environment in which teams tend to increase their chances of entering flow? And it's the things that you've, you've said, you know, clear purpose, clear goals, clear roles within that complementary skill sets, get rid of all the distractions, and the distortions of everything else, clear accountability. Obviously, things like, you know, I would include things like trust and psychological safety. But what's really interesting in what you've said there, Katie, is how: a) it's definitely interesting that people tend to share similar themes, but by turning it into kind of thinking more future oriented, right? Well, that, in their descriptions lies the recipe for high performing teams, right?

So how can we therefore try to eliminate the noise and create these conditions where people naturally get into a state of flow, because again, your performance will improve, but so will team wellbeing, meaning and all of the things that, you know, we're ultimately striving for? It's really interesting.

Katie [57:37]: Really, really interesting. And just as an aside, I think you said this earlier about, you know, if you've got more than three priorities, you haven't got any priorities. I think one of the jobs we

can do potentially as internal comms people is push back on the business plan with the 25 goals, you know, the six overarching key themes, the 17 KPIs and go right, okay, but what actually matters?

Phil [57:59]: Yeah, keep the main thing, the main thing.

Katie [58:02]: Keep the main thing the main thing.

Phil [58:03]: It's worth coming back to again and again. And that's not to say that, you know, it's about becoming less ambitious, or, and it's not to say that over the course of any year, you know, a business or a team won't do more than three things. It's just providing the clarity at a time where it's needed most. And I think that right now, you know, given that we are still, I suppose mid pandemic, when workload is, seems only ever to go in one direction. And in particular, the fact that so many of us now are working remotely, or in a hybrid model, you know, autonomous working tends to have increased as well.

And so therefore, people will need greater clarity on their priorities, their primary goals, how performance will be measured, than they would do in some other frame when we're all working together and you can kind of get almost environmental cues about that sort of stuff. People need clarity, because without that, it's very hard to prioritise your work and all of this kind of cascade that can just lead to perpetual busyness, burnout, a lack of balance, not being able to switch off and all of these things that so many people feel are characters of their relationship with work. So yeah, absolutely. Bring it down to three.

Katie [59:15]: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Our brains are kind of basically prediction machines. They abhor a vacuum, don't they?

Phil [59:23]: Yes, absolutely, yes.

Katie [59:24]: That's why clarity is so important.

Phil [59:25]: Yeah, absolutely.

Katie [59:27]: You touched on attention there briefly. And I've heard you say that your attention is all we really have. We must not simply give it away to whoever or whatever is asking for it. I guess the problem is we live in a world of constant distractions here. And it's going to be hard for us to have this conversation without talking about our phones. I guess we're going to need to talk about our phones. Can you explain the price of all this distraction and potentially how we might become less distracted?

Phil [59:57]: Oh, wow. It's it's such a big topic, it's so urgent, I feel. The price of distraction is significant. I mean, when measured in the lab, there tends to be agreement that after a distraction it takes the brain

about 20 to 25 minutes to refocus. So that's worth reflecting on alone. Every time you're distracted, it takes you 20 minutes to get back into this state of flow. Now, that's significant. And, you know, you can understand that from a brain perspective, your frontal lobe or your prefrontal cortex is very much understood to be a kind of a serial processor. It's A then B, then back to A or on to C. You don't multitask, you attention shift.

So, it makes sense there is this cost. I think we just don't understand how great a cost it is. So, with that significant cost of the attention regaining. Some research suggests it takes us three times as long to do the work as it would do if we could create focus. So, it's, it's profound, this distractedness that we all now live in. But I would also argue, it compromises our wellbeing as well, you know, we've spoken about wellbeing. So many of the people I work with, whether it's email or other forms of digital communication, their relationship with it is such that it starts the minute they wake up, and it doesn't really stop until they go straight back to bed. So, of course, they find it hard to switch off. And, of course, they feel their sense of balance is compromised, and over time that will affect their wellbeing.

So yeah, I mean, I think you're right. Your attention, despite us talking about so many other things, your attention really is everything. It's it's all you've got to navigate the world to respond to other people to, of course, be productive and creative and resilient. It's it's everything. It's really the sum total of all cognitive experience. And yet, we live in a world that if someone wants your attention, they get it with a simple email or a text or a WhatsApp. And that, yeah for emergency doctors that might be that the right conditions, the right sort of social contract to operate in. For firefighters, again, we need their attention when we need it, but we don't send them an email. The fact that so many people live their life with notifications on is something I find it almost impossible to get my head round. Because what that ultimately means is, yeah, they are distracted every couple of minutes. And consequently, when you look at the research, it suggests that their brain literally never enters a state of absorbed flow or deep focus. And so the cost there is I mean, it's really profound. And I, if there was one thing we could all do to improve productivity or wellbeing or performance at work, even our creativity, because it inhibits our creativity as well. It would be to try to reclaim our attention, try to get better at managing distractions, the external distractions.

And for most people, the key distraction is digital communication, right? It's your laptop with its pings and its notifications, and its little pop-ups in the top right-hand of the screen. It's your mobile phone, and it's whether it buzzes or beeps, or it does a similar thing and sort of, you know, notifying you of some demand from the outside world. And I think, yeah, if there was ever an opportunity to reexamine this stuff, now is it. And that will certainly be something I'd encourage people to do, to really examine how distracted they are, whether they would design the environment in which they tend to operate, like would you turn your alerts on? I don't think people would, but it's just how things are shipped. So that's what we tend to try and habituate to. And it's I think catastrophic for for one's brain and attention.

Katie [1:03:55]: After reading your book, and it's so simple, you know, you sort of encourage us all to work out when are we most effective in our work, and for a lot of people probably myself included, that's probably earlier in the day than later in the day. But I've got this awful habit of starting the day by opening my inbox. Now my inbox is somebody else's To Do List. None of my work or very little of my work is in my inbox. Certainly, none of my high value tasks are in that inbox. So that simple act of actually closing the inbox down, turning off the notifications, I'm thinking, in future we're going to get a lot more headers and footers on emails from people that say, 'I am sending you this out of office hours, but I do not expect a response then'. Or-- I'm just wondering whether we might be hopefully entering an era where we're being a bit more mindful around how we send emails because that's going to help the receiver if that makes more sense.

Phil [1:04:57]: Yeah, no, it does make a lot of sense. I certainly hope so. I, I think that, you know, a more mindful approach to digital communication is, as I've said, like long overdue, and some of that needs to come from the senders of emails. So, people that send an email at, you know, 11pm on a Sunday, maybe they could shift that and start to understand that, you know, while they might not intend for it to be answered, they need to manage the expectations of their team and say, 'Look, that's the only time I can send emails, but please don't look at it, I'm not expecting a response until the next day'. So, there's, there's something around there about the responsibility.

But I think the the recipients of emails, you know, all of us, basically, we do need to, to implement some small changes. And just coming back to what you said, I think most people, certainly most people I ask - most people I asked, if I asked them 'Did you check your phone before you got out of bed this morning?', give a fairly sheepish, yes.

Katie [1:05:57]: Yep.

Phil [1:05:58]: And then how do you spend the first hour of your day at work? Whether that's in an office or at home? Most people say, yeah, it's their inbox. And it doesn't take much examination to realise there may be some alternatives to those two behaviours. Checking your phone first thing, you know, all you need to do is buy an alarm clock to remove the 'ah well my alarm goes off, and then suddenly, I find myself dot, dot, dot'. And this idea of checking your email, first thing, you know, I appreciate I work with lots of people who work internationally. So there are time differences to consider. There are some people who work in certain roles that, you know, reactive or responsive, uh, responsiveness is key. But for most of us, and I'm talking 90 or 95% of us, I think most of us could not check email, first thing, maybe check it at, I don't know, 10am, just as an example, after a good hour of work. And what that would do is allow for perhaps the first time in a long time, for many of us, 60 minutes when your brain, as you said, for most people, their brain is at their best in the morning. For, you know, the circadian rhythms research we have what's called our cortisol awakening response. So for most people, between the hours of, let's say, 9 to 12, your brain is hot, but only for those three hours.

So, we need to get better at protecting that time for ultimately, our most valuable work. And so what you don't want, really, if you can influence these things, is to absentmindedly spend your morning, getting to Inbox Zero, having some catch up meetings and then hoping that the afternoon is when you'll do your best work. I mean it's just not going to happen. It's not the way biorhythms tend to operate.

So yeah, I mean, in terms of practical strategies, what I would encourage everyone to do is just experiment with: don't check your phone first thing, I mean, get it out of your bedroom, that's an easy win there. And when you start work, whatever time that is for you, spend the first 60 minutes in a nonreactive state. A nonreactive state, so that's no emails, it's hopefully no meetings, it obviously depends on your role. And just going, right of all those MVTs, of which there are three, which is my most most valuable task, nail it, 60 minutes. And then you can pretty much do what you want for the rest of the day, you've probably done more meaningful work than you would have done on many previous days.

Katie [1:08:24]: That's such great advice. Earlier on, I think we were talking about firefighters and the need to react and I was thinking, okay, there's gonna be some listeners who work maybe potentially in a role where a 'fire' could spread pretty quickly. It's nothing to do with them. But they've got to react to something that's happened in the external media world, maybe internally, and they've got to sort of get on the front foot of something. So they have to be pretty reactive and in the moment and on.

But I think one of the things that this is making me think more about is, what are the mechanisms and the process systems we can put in place to stop those eruptions? And those moments of, you know, oh my goodness, goodness me, there's another fire. So what are the systems, what are the processes that prevent some of those fires from sparking into life? And maybe spend a little bit more time on those.

Phil [1:09:19]: Interesting. So I think there are two ways to approach this question. That's a really good question. One is to think about how do we reduce the distractedness of any given individual. So, using your examples that there are some people who are going well, look, Phil, this is great, but you know, I, I operate in a role that needs reactivity. So how can I not check my email first thing, or how can I turn my notifications off? And there's a second question embedded in that, which is how do we improve the way we work that means less fires happen anyway? Right. So how do we respond better to the fires when they do come up? And how do we reduce the fire?

So, to answer the first question. Most people, as I've said, I feel, don't operate in a role that demands immediate responsiveness or reactiveness. However, let's say all of us sometimes do. You mentioned that, again, the emergency physicians. Emergency physicians tend to have beepers, for good reason. What they don't have is a digital technological setup, that if someone sends them an email, or WhatsApp, or a teams or a beep, they all go to the same device, and they all beep the same way. That would be, well, that wouldn't work.

Where for many of us, if something is urgent, people don't know, well, shall I send you an email? Or should I, an email with lots of exclamation marks?

Katie [1:10:52]: A red flag?

Phil [1:10:53]: Or an email-- Right, but then I'll send you a text message and a WhatsApp just to check you've seen the email. That also is equally ludicrous. So, to answer this first first question, if you as an individual or a team, or indeed a business, sometimes, or often, need to have people respond immediately. Be very clear when that is and how you will communicate that need to react.

Katie [1:11:18]: Yes.

Phil [1:11:19]: And everything else doesn't go through that channel. So, for some people, it's okay, let's have a Slack channel that, you know, notifies, you know, sets alarm bells off. Maybe there's a WhatsApp channel that for that, this is all hands on deck, we need you right now this is an emergency. And everything else goes through alternative channels on this understanding that, do you know what everything else, if you just check in, what if you check every 60 minutes or every 90 minutes or every three hours, you can figure that out, then we can start to manage this environment better. Just that upgrade. Let's bring into a conversation, let's have a dialogue. How are we going to use which channels for what, and if things are urgent what do we do? Do we pick up the phone, etc?

I mean I read the other day that on average, people now have at least four channels of digital communication. I mean, that alone isn't a bad thing. If you use each one based on its different functionality. And you've pre-decided what we use what for and you set it up so everyone is on the same page. There's an operations manual for how you communicate. Great.

Katie [1:12:24]: Yeah.

Phil [1:12:25]: To answer your second question, how do you have less fires? Well, I think it's coming back to this 80:20 conversation. We mentioned earlier that one of the activities or tasks that people tend to identify as high value when they do their 80:20 analysis is improving systems and processes, removing bottlenecks. Getting reflective and thinking about how can we work better together as a team or an organisation? Well, most people agree that's high value, but how much is that booked in and planned? How much time, actually, is spent analysing better ways to work? So, the solution to that is, invest more time in improving the way that you work. And it's kind of simple, but it's difficult because again, it's back to the challenges we spoke before. No one's demanding that it happens. It's very rarely urgent until it's too late. And so, this idea of being more future oriented, more strategic understanding that look, the way we work, should be an iterative process.

We should understand that as an individual team or business, we should be optimising things over time. There's a great book called *Black Box Thinking*--

Katie [1:13:41]: Oh, I love it.

Phil [1:13:41]: By Matthew Syed, right. This understanding that the goal is the aggregation of marginal gains. All businesses, you know, they, I mean, there's lots of sporting examples of you know, British Cycling Team is often cited, how you know, the 1% here, 1% here, changes everything. *If* you do it consistently. And within a business, if you just have reflection as a more ongoing piece. And if you think about optimization, and iteration, as an ongoing piece, and regularly, you're asking teams, okay, how could we have done that better? That fire that happened last month, what do we need to do next time, so it happens 5% less frequently, or 5% less severely when it does happen?

People are amazing problem solvers. But they need to be given the space to solve the problems, maybe the freedom to implement and to iterate and to try things. And maybe it doesn't work the first time. But we have to, yeah, acknowledge the importance of iteration and optimization. And once again, this, you know, the pandemic and hybrid working and all that sort of stuff, as hard as it's been, I think it provides a greater opportunity than ever, for us to reexamine how we work, how we want to work, what defines productivity, how could we work better together? And this is some of the work I've actually been doing recently, working with the *Financial Times* in particular. Like, helping managers see this as an opportunity to improve how we all work together.

And this should actually be something that you do every month or every quarter or just it should be this ongoing thing. So yeah, that would be my, my approach. Get rid of all your notifications and alerts, decide how urgent things will be communicated, and what the expectations are for that and everything else. And then also, yeah, have improving systems and processing systems thinking optimization, iteration, embed that into your culture, it can only go one way, which is better.

Katie [1:15:36]: It's something we need to do at AB because we've seen our digital channels grow, I wouldn't say exponentially, but they have grown as we've been working more remotely. And honestly, not every channel has a core clear, differentiated purpose. And we can't measure - and I say this to my clients so I should be saying it to myself as well - I can't measure the effectiveness of your channel if I'm not clear what its purpose is. I could measure satisfaction with it. But satisfaction is not effectiveness. So everyone's happy with it. Happiness isn't necessarily what you want, you want it to be really good at doing this thing. But until I know what this thing is, I can't measure how well it's doing against that.

One other thing that sprung to mind: I did have a client who had that urgent, this is only ever going to be used for urgent, really important, must be seen now, messages to a frontline workforce that didn't have

a lot of digital capability. So they knew this one thing. This one channel worked. But what happened? It worked, so they used it for lots of different messaging.

Phil [1:16:42]: Oh, no!

Katie [1:16:43]: So I think the importance of protecting the purpose of the channel, and looking at the content that goes that is proposed to go on to it and saying that does not meet the standards, or the, you know, the KPIs for want of a better word of this channel, I think is really important as well.

Phil [1:17:00]: That's so interesting. I'm kind of not surprised, but I'm kind of saddened by that as well. The fact that it worked. And then because it worked, it stopped working. It's just kind of strange irony.

Katie [1:17:09]: Yes it became a victim of its own success.

Phil [1:17:11]: Yeah, its own effectiveness. Exactly. Well, I think maybe back to this idea of you know, trialling it and succeeding with it. Had they also have ensured that, you know, once a month or whatever it was - at some regular intervals - they had an open honest conversation around, is this still working? What do we need to do to improve it?

Katie [1:17:28]: Yes.

Phil [1:17:29]: Maybe one of them would have been willing to say, look, I noticed we're now sending, you know, in this one channel that's protected we're now sharing personal updates about you know, being stuck in traffic. Let's, let's please can we stop that for the sake of everyone's sanity?

Katie [1:17:43]: Before we head over to those quickfire questions, it would be remiss of me out of pure curiosity, to ask what your meditation practice looks like. Do you just want to share that with us?

Phil [1:17:56]: Oh interesting, okay. Well I, I vary in the types of meditation that I do. So I'm not someone who, you know, 8am every day I do my 20 minutes of x, y, or z. My relationship with meditation has been changed very naturally and organically over the years. My first access point to it was understanding, hypnosis, self-hypnosis, because that is, you know, being a hypnotherapist way back when, that was my access point to deliberately entering states that had massive utility, right? So, self-hypnosis was very familiar to me. I was then introduced to things like meditation and mindfulness, and an understood the similarities. And so I started to kind of make my own versions of what people now call meditation and mindfulness. And then since then, and more recently, I've certainly gone deeper into particular practices. So, what does it look like now?

Well, there are three types of meditation, I suppose exercises, practices I do regularly. One is a focus meditation, simply the act of closing your eyes and counting your breath. Those people that have used Headspace will be familiar with that as a principle, I don't tend to count to 10. I count to 21, just because of something I read a long time ago. And I find that very useful, should I be finding it hard to fall asleep. It's the equivalent of going to the attention gym. So, the idea of sustaining your attention on one thing to the exclusion of all else, and simply counting the breath can be a phenomenally useful way to do that. So that's one thing that I do.

The second version, I suppose, is what generally is called mindfulness. Mindfulness is more about, rather than focusing on one thing, by contrast, what you do is you typically with eyes closed, you simply become more aware of sensations and thoughts and feelings. So you if you expand your peripheral awareness to include everything from your environment. To the sounds to the thoughts and images that appear seemingly from nowhere. And I love doing that. I love doing it on the tube more than anywhere. Because the London Underground, its character is not one that you know, is environmentally beautiful. But as an environment full of stimuli, it is rich and fascinating. So being able to close your eyes and just go deep into that state of heightened awareness, certainly changes your normal journey from Bow to Victoria into something really quite, quite magical. And that just as someone who's interested in sound as well, from my experience, as a musician, that's enormously rewarding. So that's my second one.

Now, my third one. And without wanting to go too technical, is what I would describe now as more non-dual practice. So, this is the one I do now more than any other. And it's the one that I feel like requires practice in the first two for it to even make sense at all. And I use in particular Sam Harris's meditation app called Waking Up, which I recommend highly. There are lots of good meditation apps out there - Headspace is is popular, Calm is popular. This, for me, is another level entirely. A non dual meditation is similar to mindfulness, but rather than, rather than using your attention, to notice and become more aware of thoughts and feelings, and images, and sounds, and sensations, you start to bring that attention on to itself. And by doing that, as paradoxical as it sounds, you start to understand more about the very nature of subjective awareness, the very nature of consciousness, and that is fascinating for me. Because historically, I mean, I've taught people meditation, it often comes up. And I've always been one to give them the science, what's going on in your body, what's going on in your brain. And then given them the techniques. And I always try to explain it in a language that makes sense to people, you know, physiologically speaking, this is what's happening. Neurologically speaking, this is what's happening. This is how it feels like. But these are the benefits, you know, you're going to improve your immune function, you're going to reduce stress, you're going to improve your sleep, you're going to learn how to regulate your emotions, you're going to learn how to improve your focus and sustain your attention. Who wouldn't want that?

And I agree with all that. However, this more recent relationship for me with these practices, all of those benefits seem to fade into almost insignificance. Because actually, what it becomes, is this exploration

of the nature of your own mind, which, although it sounds far less specific, and maybe a bit more, woo, I don't know, it's the most interesting and rewarding learning pursuit that there can possibly be. And so now, I think less about the benefits of meditation per se, the less about the, you know, what it's doing to my brain. And instead, I just see it as this necessary line of inquiry towards getting a greater understanding of what it is like to have a brain at all.

Katie [1:23:16]: I'm a massive fan of Sam Harris, and the Waking up app and also his podcast actually *Making Sense*.

Phil [1:23:23]: Ah it's brilliant.

Katie [1:23:24]: It really, really interesting. Is it Douglas Harding, the man with no head? This idea that you, so Sam Harris will click his fingers and say, look for the person who's looking, look for the seer. And for the life of me, I try it every time and I and he says, where are you? And I'm still behind my head. I'm so sorry, I can't, I can't lose my head. I'm still stuck behind my face. But it's a lovely exercise to try. And I think one day I'm going to get there one day, I'm gonna understand the more nature the the broader nature of consciousness and be lost in my own consciousness. But at the moment, I'm still stuck behind my face.

Phil [1:24:02]: Well, I love everything you just said. It's funny. I wonder if the listeners know, have any sense of what we're talking about where I know, I know exactly what you're what you're talking about Katie. And I, I relate entirely. Because there are only ever seemingly glimpses of kind of what you know to be true, and yet find it very hard to genuinely kind of sit with and perceive. The, the nature of reality. One can notice sounds in one's environment. I mean, that's quite easy. They start and they end, you have no control over, you can't hold on to the dog bark any more than you can hold on to the siren that just drove past. They are simply, you know, phenomenon, they're sensory blips. And when you realise that they are only ever experienced in your mind, it's just an appearance in your attention. And then you introduce how, well that of course is true similarly of thoughts and emotions. And mindfulness is good at being able to understand that all of these things, whether they're sounds, or people outside, and thoughts, images and feelings inside, all of them simply appear in this thing called consciousness or conscious awareness. The challenges of this non dual thing is when you realise, well, that sense of yourself that's noticing this, that's in there too!

Katie [1:25:24]: Yes.

Phil [1:25:25]: And that's when it does it again, you know, look for the looker, or it starts to becomes an inversion of itself. And it starts to become a hugely paradoxical but endlessly fascinating. And ultimately, it's, you know, when you really try and break it down, it does tend to make sense. It's just very hard to unlearn the ways that we've been ultimately conditioned to learn - this idea that there is there's

this me and there's this kind of another me inside my brain. And that's the me that's looking at the images on my visual cortex. And it's the one that's hearing the sounds coming from my auditory cortex, and it starts to just almost fall apart. But it's, it's not for the faint hearted.

Katie [1:26:03]: No, but I would say just before we lose people completely at this point, and they, they start to say these guys have really gone off on one here. I didn't expect this of the internal comms podcast! Katie, get a grip of yourself. I would just say that what I have found through through I would say, years of trying to meditate - I'm still very much in the practice mode of this I definitely haven't mastered it - is, first of all, you can have mindful moments throughout a day. And it makes you more able to spot a thought, or an emotion arising, and to not be completely at the mercy of it. So that it almost like creates an air pocket, where you can say that is making me feel like this.

And I'm not saying whether you can choose or not to react to it because sometimes you can't. I mean, if someone annoys, you get annoyed, it's very hard to, but to to have that slight moment, even if it's just half a second beat to say, Okay, I'm going to react to this, this is how it's making me feel. So, I think that's quite useful, is that meditation can be a practice that we sit down, and we do it for 10 minutes, 15 minutes, half an hour. But we can also just take one deep breath every few hours, and just sort of recenter ourselves. And I think that alone is quite helpful in calming the mind throughout a very busy day. Would that be fair?

Phil [1:27:27]: Oh totally. I mean, I agree with everything you've said, profoundly. I think it's Viktor Frankl who said, between stimulus and response, there is a gap. And in that gap lies our you know, our freedom and our power and etc. And, yes, you're absolutely right. And things happen outside of you, things happen in the outside world, whether that's people or, you know, the economy or politics or the pandemic. And your response is always ultimately within your influence or control. And so there is a gap between that thing that happened, and how you choose to engage with it. And it's, again, this distinction between reacting and responding. And as small as that gap is - often imperceptible - I agree that mindfulness, one of its utilities, is it kind of extends that gap, it makes you more aware of it in the first place. And ultimately extends it to a point where you can notice how you know your initial responses, and then choose your responses. And in that lies your effectiveness as an individual as a leader, it helps you be more resilient.

And I definitely also agree that while there's practicing mindfulness, whether that's involves closing your eyes or not, the real goal is to become more aware and to become more mindful, to become more deliberate. And it's back to this idea of that we've kind of, I suppose, have been a thread through much of our conversation, this shift away from being reactive, whether that's in terms of your busyness and your relationship to work, or that's your relationship to things that upset you. And instead becoming a bit more deliberate, a bit more self-directed, a bit more purposeful, a bit more mindful. And if that in, in

that shift, lies all of the things I think we've spoken about, because it's the fundamental shift that needs to happen to work smarter and become more productive.

It's the shift that enables you to prioritise the work that matters most. It's the shift that enables you to spend time with your team and improving the team dynamics. And it's also the shift that enable you to maintain your wellbeing. It's the shift that enables you to increase your eudaemonic wellbeing. All of the things we've mentioned about it or spoken about. It's this shift away from reactive to deliberate, responsive, self-determined, self-directed activity. Yeah, I love it.

Katie [1:29:45]: Fantastic. Do you have time for those quick-fire questions?

Phil [1:29:48]: Yeah, of course, I've got all the time in the world for you.

Katie [1:29:51]: What would most surprised people about Phil Dobson?

Phil [1:29:55]: Because of what I do, right - I help people master their workload, improve their productivity, improve their creativity, their resilience and everything else - people assume that I've got it all sorted, and I've figured it all out. I definitely haven't. I think I think one of the things that surprises people is actually and there may be different words to describe this. I fundamentally, I'm really undisciplined. I have a massive bias towards inaction as opposed to action. Now, that doesn't mean that I'm a procrastinator.

But, yeah, I mean, I mean like just an example. I've noticed In the last week that many of my emails replies begin, sorry for the delayed response. It's just something about this ongoing bias towards inaction rather than right, let's do it, let's SWAT team this. Or, you know, let's hustle this, that's not my vibe. Now, fortunately, I figured out a system to working smarter, so I can I can do that. And I also feel, to kind of give myself the forgiveness perhaps I need. A lot of my role, ultimately, is around solving problems for people, right, whether it's emergency physicians, or business leaders, and I know from the science that creative problem-solving benefits with time to think and reflect so I it's not something I'm trying to solve. But I think that it often surprises people because they assume that I must be rigorous and disciplined, and, and all this stuff. And I'm, I'm no, no far from it. I'm about as laid back as it comes.

Katie [1:31:24]: That's good to hear. So, what do you wish you had known when you first started out in your career?

Phil [1:31:34]: Ooh that's an interesting question. Do you know what I I'm grateful to have known as little as I did.

Katie [1:31:41]: Oh, my goodness me. No, has ever said that before.

Phil [1:31:44]: And well, it's interesting when I started again, you know, my my story, right? I was, I was a musician. I broke my ankle, I became a Hypnotherapist. And just through asking questions, and wanting to help people, and wanting to know more about the brain, I found myself with this toolkit of things that I'm like, if everyone knew this, they'd be happier, they'd be better off. And then I started working with businesses, I got invited to work with a business and I got recommended to work elsewhere. And so it was a very natural organic progression based on this enthusiasm I had at the beginning.

I now realise, had I have known the, you know, the work that's actually that goes involved in setting up a business - I knew nothing about learning and development. I hadn't been on any real, like, corporate training events at all. I didn't know any of this stuff existed. And while, in one sense, it would have been useful to know, I might have responded by going well, that's so much stuff that I don't know, maybe I don't have the experience. So in a weird kind of paradoxical way, my complete lack of experience, but my abundance of enthusiasm and wanting to share this stuff. Everything just became, I suppose kind of easy. So I'm, yeah, it sounds kind of maybe yeah an unusual response.

I'm grateful that I knew so little, because everything was has been a learning experience. Everything has been great fun. And I, I wasn't too committed to any one outcome. Despite us talking about goals. I was just very lucky. And I continue to be enormously feel very fortunate, and very lucky that I get to do the work that I do, that people continue to refer me on and on and on. And, you know, I get to do to improve people's lives in the way I do. But I wouldn't have guessed 10 years ago that you and I would be having a conversation about the sort of things that we have done.

Katie [1:33:37]: I love that answer. I love that answer. Because also it suggests that the joy that you find in learning something new, and you know, the importance of staying curious, you're absolutely right. If we if we knew all this, we would, a) we'd nervous because we'd be thinking or that yes, there's 10 components to that, and seven different ways of doing it and 16 seminal books I should be reading. Well, not knowing…

Phil [1:34:02]: Yeah, well, there's no way you can do it wrong if you don't know what you're supposed to be doing. I mean, mistakes aren't really possible. It's just growth. It's just learning and just getting better at stuff and, and wide eyed noticing the opportunities that are out there, not knowing that like I said, I didn't really know the industry that I'm now in really existed. But that wasn't going to stop me. I just had I was on a bit of a mission. I wanted people to know this stuff that I had just learned.

Katie [1:34:26]: What books should we all read to better understand our brains?

Phil [1:34:31]: Off the back of the conversation, we've had - consciousness, Anil Seth, he has recently released a book *Being You.* I think it's Being You or On Being You. Anil Seth, he is phenomenal. His you

know, like the world authority I think in consciousness research, its fascinating. So that's a book about, again, the nature of consciousness, around consciousness as levels, consciousness content and manipulations and consciousness, fascinating.

Neuroplasticity - a lot of people are interested in that, how the brain changes over time, this idea that your brain is like a muscle and, you know, it, we no longer think of the brain as something that just deteriorates kind of as a matter of course, but instead you, you can train it over time. And and Norman Doidge's book, *The Brain That Changes Itself,* is something that I think is well worth a read.

And then in terms of taking care of your brain, oh let's think. *Brain Rules* by John Medina is a pretty good source. There's also, *Think Smart* is a good book as well, by John Rystack [Richard Restak] I think is his name. Explore consciousness, explore the nature of the changing brain and have some insights about how to take care of your brain as well.

Katie [1:35:42]: Thank you, Phil. All the links will be in the show notes, listeners, as I, as you know. So, here's here's one for you: what would you do tomorrow? If you knew for certain you could not fail?

Phil [1:35:56]: Well I love that, I mean, it's it's quite a popular kind of coaching question, isn't it? And I, generally, I, I feel I have a pretty healthy relationship with kind of learning stuff and just kind of cracking on so I suppose my real answer to that would be and it's slightly sad. My dad has dementia, and it's progressed pretty rapidly. If tomorrow, anything I put my mind to, I would succeed at? I would, I'd go and visit him. And my goal would be to reverse his dementia. I mean, I know that's, you know, we're not, it's unlikely to happen. But that would be my goal. Yeah. It's rapidly progressed. It's it's a sad state of affairs. I mean, he's had a great life. And I'm certainly very grateful for all of that. But if there was one thing I could do that was guaranteed to work. Yeah, that would be it, I'd rock up in a few hours later he'd be back to his old self and we'd go back and see mum.

Katie [1:36:45]: So finally, Phil, I'm going to give you a billboard for millions to see. And you can put any message you like on that billboard. What's your message going to be?

Phil [1:36:56]: Haha, it's going to be, oh, this is maybe ludicrous. Turn, I don't know, if I'm allowed to swear, I won't. 'Turn your notifications off'. Turn your notifications off, and maybe bracketed underneath and smaller font, your attention is all you have.

If though honestly, I mean, it's it's such a small thing. But you know, if one turns their notifications off, I can almost guarantee their anxiety would would reduce. Their sleep would improve, their stress would reduce, and consequently their mental health would improve. Their physiological health would likely improve because they'd be lower, lower stress, they'd have less cortisol and adrenaline pumping around their body. They'd be more productive because they'd be less distracted. They're... be more effective,

because they'd be working probably on high value tasks. They'd be better company, their relationships would improve, they'd be a better leader. They'd improve their learning, because their focus would improve as well. Their brain health over time would either, not necessarily improve but be less compromised. I mean, some of our relationships with our mobile phone are shrinking very important parts of our brain.

So it sounds like a maybe trivial thing to put on something that could reach the millions. But if there was one thing I'd want loads of people to do, it would be that simple. Turn your notifications off all of your devices and come back to me when you realise how nice it is.

Katie [1:38:23]: Phil, this has been an absolutely amazing conversation. Thank you so much for your time and your wisdom.

Phil [1:38:31]: Oh, Katie, thank you so much for having me on. It's been an absolute joy. And it's been I've really enjoyed the conversation. It's been awesome. So thank you so much for having me on.

Katie [1:38:37]: It's a pleasure.

So that's a wrap for this episode of the internal comms podcast. Listeners, you have been telling me for some time, how much you'd like the transcripts to our shows. So I'm delighted to say these are now available, head over to our website, abcomm.co.uk/podcasts. And you can either read the transcripts online there or download them as a PDF.

If you're enjoying the show, I would be very, very grateful if you could show your appreciation by leaving us a review on Apple podcasts. This isn't just vanity metrics on my part, I promise you, it's the way the algorithms work. More ratings means we become a little bit more discoverable for other IC pros out there.

Stay tuned for a special episode with Sally Sussman, Executive Vice President and Chief Corporate Affairs Officer at Pfizer. Sally is going to tell us what it was like being part of Pfizer's vaccine development taskforce, and crafting the company's message at such an historic time - for the company and for the world in general.

All that remains is to say thank you, for those of you who reach out to me on LinkedIn and Twitter to say how much you're enjoying the show, your feedback means the world to me. And I'd also like to thank the show's producer, John Phillips, our sound engineer, Stuart Rolls, and my many other talented colleagues that AB who make this show possible. Until we meet again, lovely listeners, do stay safe and well, and remember, it's what's inside that counts.