



TICP – Episode 55 – Mission Impossible (Season 6, episode 07)

Katie [00:10]

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 – A B C O double-M – .co.uk forward slash health (<https://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, AB comm – A B C O double-M – .co.uk forward slash health (<https://abcomm.co.uk/health/>). Hello, and welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. This is the show to inspire, inform, and generally energise those of you responsible for communicating with your organization's internal audience. This is the last show in season six. And it's a rather special one. I've been working in communications now for, well, more than 30 years, and I've been lucky enough to meet some exceptional comms professionals and business leaders. But very few have had the wisdom, the warmth, and the truly extraordinary experience of my guest this week. Sally Susman is Executive Vice President and Chief Corporate Affairs Officer at Pfizer. She oversees global policy, communications, government relations, corporate responsibility, investor relations, and also patient communications. Sally was appointed to Pfizer's vaccine development task force by her boss, the company's chief executive, Albert Bourla. During our conversation, she talks about Pfizer's Mission Impossible, the race to design, manufacture and distribute a vaccine in record breaking time. She talks about what it was like to be actually in the room. When the FDA, the Food and Drug Administration, approved the vaccine for emergency use. We talk about how Sally communicated vital messages to the world through her internal audience, and her thoughtful approach to communicating with those who are vaccine hesitant. But we go deeper too, and talk about the importance of truth and honesty and the danger of labels. Sally explains why she believes being a gay woman in communications has helped, rather than hindered, her career. She shares her approach to building great relationships with CEOs and explains how she supports and develops her team of 150 people around the world. So,



without further ado, it is my great delight to bring you this masterclass in communications from the very perceptive, warm and wise and incredibly gracious Sally Susman.

So, Sally, welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast. It is a real privilege and honour to have you here. Thank you so much for your time.

Sally [04:58]

Oh, it's my pleasure. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

Katie [05:02]

The way that I thought we might play this Sally, is, I thought what I might do is take you back to a few pivotal moments of the last two – well, it's almost two, isn't it – momentous years, so that listeners can get a sense of your organization's journey over that time, but also your personal journey too. But, to set the scene for listeners, can you tell us a little bit about your team, the size of your team, and your collective areas of responsibility?

Sally [05:34]

Sure, and thank you again, I look forward to telling you all of this. So, I am the Chief Corporate Affairs Officer at Pfizer. And as such, my job is to connect the company with all of our key stakeholders. So that communications, you know, media, online communications, internet, intranet, all the ways in which we talk to our colleagues. It's also government and public policy, public affairs. So, we are talking to leaders and government officials around the world on a regular basis. I also lead our patient advocacy group. For a company like Pfizer, a biopharmaceutical company, engagement with patients is incredibly important. I also lead investor relations. And that's the dialogue that we have with our owners, our investors, about the kind of performance that we have on a regular basis. And then lastly, I also have a team that engages with NGOs and multilateral, important organisations, whether that's the World Health Organization, or the Gates Foundation, those kind of, the thought leader type places.

Katie [06:50]

That is a massive range of responsibilities and audiences and stakeholders. What's the size of your team? And I'm guessing it's global.

Sally [07:01]

It is global. And I'm very, very pleased and proud that it's a global team. Having worked myself in Europe earlier in my career, I know how important it is for these functions to be knitted together across the globe. My team is about 150 people, approximately.

Katie [07:18]

You're going to need all of those people I'm sure!



Sally [07:21]

I need every single one of them.

Katie [07:25]

Absolutely. Let's take you back, then. I thought we could start in spring 2020. You just mentioned the World Health Organization then. But it was around that time, that the WHO declares the emergence of a global pandemic. Just out of curiosity, do you remember that moment? Do you remember where you were when you first heard that?

Sally [07:49]

I do. I do. I think we all do, really. I live in New York City. I'm speaking to you from, from New York City. And I remember in that early period in March, a few things. I remember walking home one evening from dinner with a friend and feeling that the streets were too quiet, that it was eerie. I went into a small store to purchase a few things. And already, you know, things were, the shelves were a bit bare. And it was a very strange and uncomfortable feeling in a city that I love. And then also in March, Pfizer closed its world headquarters. We decided that we would take a pause from coming together into our, our facility, which is right in Grand Central Station in New York City, to a very busy condensed crowded area. I remember packing up a few things in my office and thinking, Wow, I could be gone for two weeks, you know, what do I want to take with me? You know, we haven't really gone back to the office fully, still now a year and a half later. So those were my early memories. It really was a very anxious time for a lot of people.

Katie [09:04]

Did you have a premonition immediately that you were going to sort of get sucked into something that was so momentous and challenging?

Sally [09:13]

I don't know that, if I had a premonition, but I believe my CEO, my boss, Albert Bourla, had a premonition because in that early March period, he gathered the Executive Committee, which is about 10 or 11 of us who, you know, are reporting to him. And he, he gathered us and he had a small piece of paper in his hand. He had a handwritten note. And he said, we need to do three things now. Right now. One was to take care of our more than 80,000 colleagues around the world, you know, to attend to their needs. Some of them were in lockdown already, colleagues working out of China. You know, as we were shifting to a home office situation, we, we offered some support in people setting up their workstations. Other kinds of health and wellness benefits, we immediately started to put in place for our colleagues. So that was number one. Number two, is we needed to ensure the steady supply of medicine to people around the world. You know, we've all been hearing a lot lately about the problems in the supply chain. I think Albert anticipated that some of that could happen. And no, I don't think there's any more



important supply than perhaps food and medicine. And I'm – we're – really proud of the fact that we were able to do that, even during these difficult times when people couldn't travel and work was done remotely. Because cancer, you know, surgeries, all these other serious issues and conditions, did not go on holiday during COVID. So the second thing that we did was make sure our medicines reach the hospitals and doctors that needed them. And then the third thing that Albert did was declare this incredibly bold ambition to find a vaccine within the year. Which, you know, when he said that, we all shook our heads and couldn't believe it, because this is a process that usually takes eight to 12 years. And we were going to attempt to do it in eight months. So, clearly, and we can speak more about that later. But clearly, to your question, and the person who had the premonition I believe was my boss, Albert Bourla.

Katie [11:33]

So Sally, I think it might be worth putting Albert's very – well, I was going to call it a big, hairy audacious goal, to borrow a phrase from Jim Collins. But to put that goal into context for people, how long would it normally take Pfizer to develop a vaccine?

Sally [11:51]

Great point. And thanks for giving me the chance to offer some context. Because it was beyond the big hairy, audacious goal, or the famous B hag that we hear so much about. It was really, almost unspeakably bold. You know, typically, to develop a vaccine takes between eight to 12 years. So, we weren't taking 10% off that 20% off that, 50% off that. We were taking 90% off that. And I'll share with you that when he said it, I think several of us thought he had misspoken. Or maybe he had lost his mind, because it was just so outrageous. And we've talked about that, he and I. And he makes a great point, which is if you ask people to do something, again, 10%, 20%, 30% better. They amend the existing process. They tailor it, they tweak it. But if you ask people to do something that is truly game changing, a never-before breakthrough, they have to completely rethink the process. And that's, that's what we did you know, in the past, we would have proceeded in a linear way. First, you consider the plan, then you begin to build out your test models, then you test multiple times, then you take a decision whether or not to put into clinical trials, which are expensive and time consuming. You go through the clinical trials. And if you get regulatory approval, you then start to buy raw material and reconfigure your life. We did all of that at the very beginning, and began to produce this vaccine even before we knew if it would work.

Katie [13:47]

It's incredible. And the film, I have to say, Mission Impossible, which people can see on YouTube, National Geographic film is incredible, very moving and also very informative. Albert Bourla speaks with great passion, he's he comes across as a very charismatic individual. I know throughout your career, you'll have worked for many different kinds of leaders, how does he compare to other people in those kinds of positions you've worked for?



Sally [14:12]

Great question about Albert. If you don't mind, I'd like to first make a point about the Nat Geo film that you mentioned. Thank you for watching it. Thank you for bringing it to your listeners. As a communicator, it was something I did for the 80,000 people of Pfizer. When you are Chief Communications Officer, your most important audience is your colleagues. And I felt that this would be the story that they would want to tell for the rest of their lives. To their children, their grandchildren, their friends, their neighbours, anyone who would listen to them, they will tell this story. And so, if you're a communicator, you also, often in your company, become the chief documentarian. The archivist in charge, the traditional historical memory.

And so, I did, I made that film at great risk, because we started to film it before we knew that the vaccine worked. So, I was filming in the spring, the summer, the fall, in advance of the November date, when we found out how effective it was. And I had so many sleepless nights, wondering, Am I televising a debacle? Am I filming a disaster? It was a big risk, but a risk worth taking. Because you can't go back and create that tension in those moments of uncertainty after the fact. So, thank you for mentioning the film. And I hope everyone will see it, as you said on YouTube.

Now, Albert, he's extraordinary. He is incredibly authentic, humble, funny, driven, intense, inspiring. You know, I, I've had the honour to work with, directly with nine CEOs over the time of my career, reporting directly to six. So I know how important the CEO is in terms of shaping everything: the tone, the pace, the culture. And I have, again, been honoured to work with many wonderful CEOs, but Albert's extraordinary, I mean, he's really, really extraordinary. And I like to think about the world through the reporting of the media, because that's our, our business. And we also embedded the Wall Street Journal with us through this process. So, on the day that the vaccine was declared, so highly effective. The next day, the Journal had a full, you know, soup to nuts story about how it came together. Their headline? Crazy Deadlines, and a Pushy CEO. And I love that because it's true. I mean, those crazy deadlines were set by Albert. And yes, they call him pushy. I like to call him driven, hardworking, demanding. But it was because he led the effort, he was the project manager, that we were able to get this done in record time.

Katie [17:24]

Just one supplementary question, I have to ask you, as you have said that you reported directly to, I think you've said six different CEOs. Is there one single piece of advice you'd give someone who's stepping up into that position? For when you've got to walk into the room, maybe for the first time and really cement that relationship? Is there something that goes through your mind when you step into the room for the first time to meet your new CEO?

Sally [17:50]

Oh, wow, that is a great question. And one I've never been asked. You know, I think the most important thing that a CEO needs to know about his or her Chief Communications Officer, is that they will always, always tell them the truth. And candidly, privately, that you won't be afraid to say what they need to hear. You won't be intimidated by them. You have their back. You have their best interests at heart. And you are competent, and unafraid. I mean, always respectful. And, you know, in the end deferential because you can say, Please do A, and they may do B. But the way you can sleep at night is to know that you've given it your very best and that they know you're going to give it your very best.

Katie [18:47]

Thank you very much for that. Very wise advice. So, you get appointed to the vaccine development task force. I'm just curious about how that came about. Did you put your hand up and say I'd very much like to get involved? Was it taken for granted that you would be part of that task force? How did that come about?

Sally [19:04]

You know, I wish I had had the foresight to have raised my hand. But I, again, I don't want to sound sycophantic, but I have to give the credit to Albert, who had a gut sense that the public discussion, the engagement with governments, the debate in the public square, would be as essential to the acceptance and the embrace of this vaccine as any other piece of it. And kudos again to him. Not every CEO would have thought of that. You know, the old school CEOs would say, Well, when we finish we'll call Sally, and she'll, you know, put out a press release or mop up or, you know, make outreach calls or write a stakeholder plan. But we were in the middle of a pandemic. It was very scary. People were frightened. Governments were calling. We had put ourselves in a very public position as not only the backer of the vaccine, but the proponent of a new, novel, never used before technology. And there was going to be a huge, huge communications, public affairs element to this. And he saw that, and I quickly came to realise how true that would be.

Katie [20:32]

You're absolutely right. We're so used to being called at the end like, Oh, we probably need a comms plan about that. All that work that you did before, during, lay the way. Absolutely, yeah, amazing story. I've heard you say that you set yourself a kind of secret goal, well, a sort of guiding intention during this period of development. What was that intention? What were you hoping to achieve?

Sally [20:59]

Thank you. My driving intention – and I do believe intentionality is an important and under discussed, element within communications – but my guiding intentionality was to transform the reputation of the company alongside the development of the vaccine. It came to me early in this sort of April, May period, when – this was 2020 – when I was producing the regular kinds of plans that people like us produce. You



know, the key messages, the reactive statements. And I just had this feeling that something was missing. And what was missing was an opportunity to make the most of the moment, and to not only create a vaccine with such impact, but to also get that rare chance to have people rethink who you are and what you're doing. And, for an industry like the biopharmaceutical industry, you know, that's hard. People think they know us and their, their thoughts, and feelings are set deep. And so, you know, the kinds of things we did to achieve that intention, which we have achieved, because we've gone from being a laggard on the reputation front, to a top 10 brand, were things like documenting the journey, working across the industry, in belief that the only enemy was the virus, not one another. Our chief rallying cry, science will win. Not Pfizer will win, science will win. And doing all these things differently, posting our clinical trials on our website, radical transparency. These were the elements that really went to the deeper intentionality to change the reputation alongside developing the vaccine.

Katie [23:00]

I'm just curious, you've used that word intentionality a few times now and I'm hearing it a lot in other conversations I'm having. I'm just curious what that looks like, in a practical sense on the ground day to day. Does it look like pausing for a moment to reflect on a higher overarching objective or goal to sort of question, why? Is that what it actually looks like? I'm just I'm just curious to unpick that slightly.

Sally [23:25]

That is exactly what it looks like. It's the pausing and preparation that we often don't have in our roles, because we often are so reactive, and incoming takes the lead in terms of what we have to deal with. And I think each person has to find the pause in their own way. For me, during this period, it's often come during long walks that I like to take. It's usually trying to start the morning with a long walk, and reflect and really give yourself a chance to think ahead. So, so right now, you know, you and I are talking in early November. I'm starting to think about, What are the big opportunities for Pfizer next year? How do you build on this success to the next success? And, taking a moment, six weeks out to the new year to really think about that. I mean, I guess you could say, well, that's just long-range planning. But I think it's actually something deeper. It's asking the questions, What do I want to be remembered for? What mark do I want to make on this company? How do I want to lead my team? These are the questions, and this is intentionality in action. To interrogate yourself in this way.

Katie [24:51]

There must be a part of you thinking, We have gained this amazing reputation. We have done this humanity saving, incredible, you know. We set ourselves this mission and actually hit the bullseye. Where could we take this next in terms of the public respect and admiration, the sense of purpose we now have as an organization?

Sally [25:13]

It is something that we, as a leadership team in Pfizer talk about a lot, because having made this journey, and travelled quickly from, to sort of a mountaintop, as it come, as it is for reputation. There's only two places to go. Because you don't get to sit where you are. We're either going to tumble back down, and just, you know, go back to the way it used to be. Or we have to achieve greater heights. You know, we always say, reputation is earned in drops and lost in buckets. And in any moment, you can suffer a bucket loss and something terrible can happen, and you go back down to, to where you were. So, we have to climb higher. Which means more achievement of our purpose. Our purpose at Pfizer is breakthroughs that change patients' lives. That's what the world wants from us. They don't want an incremental advancement, or a "me too" drug in the market. The thing, the reason that the vaccine broke through is it was a breakthrough, for sure. And it affected and changed a lot of people's lives.

You know, sometimes when we're dealing in a rare disease area, you know, you might have something really groundbreaking, but there's only a few people who are able to experience it. We learned here we need to provide cures, treatments, preventions for large numbers of people. And so, we will apply those new ways of working that I mentioned earlier, the more aggressive, the boulder, the more risk taking, across all therapy areas. So that hopefully we could bring forward an equally bold achievement, in cancers, in leukaemia, in pain. You know, I'm not in a position with you today to announce what that is, because we're, we're working on it, but with that same kind of urgency that we brought to the vaccine.

Katie [27:19]

Fantastic. We can't wait to hear more about that, as the public, but also your employees must find that so motivating, as well. Talk about giving work, meaning. Wow. I'm going to take you back to Tuesday, the 29th of September. Now that is the day I think of the first presidential debate. So going back to the journey, I think Pfizer's mentioned in the first 10 minutes, something like that. Were you watching? I'm guessing you were because I think you enjoy politics.

Sally [27:51]

I do. I love politics. And of course, this moment I'll never forget. I was sitting on my sofa, I had turned on the television, gathered round to watch the debate. I had a glass of wine and a bowl of popcorn. And I was really settling in for what I thought would be a fascinating discussion. When I think it was in the first two minutes that President Trump said that he had talked to the CEO of Pfizer, and that he knew that, or he believed that, the vaccine would come before that special day in November, which of course he was referring to the election. And I remember I jumped up, the popcorn went everywhere. And I started texting with Albert, about this, because we work very hard to not be political. We are interested in policies. We're interested in policies that are pro patient, pro innovation, but we do not get engaged in presidential politics.



I was offended because I didn't want to be drawn in in this way. So, I spent most of the rest of that night together with Albert drafting an opinion piece, a personal letter from Albert, that I wanted to place in a prominent news publication, like the Wall Street Journal or the Financial Times. We wrote a couple of key points that we were moving at the speed of science, and that we wouldn't be dragged into politics. That we had a, we had to honour our 170 year legacy to the company and not any given election cycle, etc. And I was trying to downplay the politics, and I could not get that letter published anywhere. Nobody was interested. Well, they were interested. But only if we were willing to swing back at the President or, you know, engage, engage in more mudslinging.

And we were trying to do the opposite. We were trying to de-politicise, de-escalate this and remind people that we were on a scientific journey, not a political campaign. So nobody wanted to publish it, and I felt terrible. I mean, I'm the Head of Corporate Affairs at Pfizer, and I can't get something placed and I was embarrassed. But we decided to rewrite the letter, change it slightly to be in the form of a letter to our colleagues. Since they, again, are our most important shareholder, they too, had seen this on television and watched it. And we also placed it on our website. At which point, it went massively viral. And all of those publications that had snubbed us, covered it. More as a news item, and less as an opinion piece. And so, from that point forward, we used our, our pfizer.com, almost like a media outlet. And it was thrilling to me because not only have we created a vaccine, I think we had created a content machine as well, because people were looking to us for our expertise, our knowledge. But it was really because of that crazy debate, that we travelled that journey and found our way to finding our own voice and how to amplify our own voice, which is so important.

Katie [31:15]

So the next momentous, truly momentous day, I'm going to take you back to is Sunday, the eighth of November 2020. And for people who I'm sure are going to watch Mission Impossible, you get to see what happens in the room. But as comms professionals, we often are in the room at a sort of a momentous moment when something's decided or something suddenly happens. Can you just talk us through what that... What it was like being in the room on that day when you got the news about the vaccine?

Sally [31:47]

Of course, I said that debate is a day I'll never forget. But in truth, this is the day that beats all others in my professional life. We were aware that the FDA, the Federal Drug Administration, in the United States was meeting with their advisory committee to determine and look at the unblinding of the data from our clinical trials. So they would see, for the first time, what kind of protection did the vaccine offer to people who, you know, were in risk of being exposed to the virus. So, we have a small office in Connecticut. I'm talking to you from our headquarters in New York City, but we have a small office in Connecticut. And we gathered there, there were five of us in the room: Albert; our Chief Scientist, Mikael Dolsten; our General Counsel, Doug Lankler; Albert's Chief of Staff, Yolanda Lyle; and myself. And we



were waiting for the call that the committee has met and went and made their determination. And we were trying to kill time, you know, we're watching the news on TV, we're making phone calls, I think I was binge eating out of stress. And, and all of a sudden that – it took a long time, which made us nervous, the notice came a little later than we thought – to gather in the conference room to hear the results, which we did. And we turned on the video camera. And there was a moment of kind of like a fuzzy silence as we waited for our colleagues to come on the line, they just stepped out of the meeting with the FDA.

And it felt like a lunar landing, where you're waiting to hear whether the capsule made it safely back to Earth. And there's this pregnant pause, and you believe, everybody in the room is holding their breath. And our colleague comes on the line, Bill Gruber, a vaccine researcher, who's been in this deeply detailed and highly technical meeting. And he says, We have good news. And it was like, you know, we've landed this, baby. And he proceeds to tell us that the FDA is shutting down the clinical trial. Because it's so effective, that they want us to move directly to application for the emergency use authorisation. This is what happens. They either tell you from the, they only say three things. Either keep going we need to know more. Stop for futility. Or stop for incredible efficacy, that it's no longer ethical to keep trialling this, we've got to get this to the people. And that's essentially what they said to us. And when we heard that it was over 90% effective, our chief scientist roared and he said, This is the biggest medical advance in a century. And I'm just so grateful and honoured to have been able to be there and be a part of it.

Katie [34:54]

But it didn't end there. You ended up in June the following year. At the G7 summit in Cornwall. What was that like? That must have been incredible.

Sally [35:06]

Well, as you said before, I am a little bit of a political junkie. So for me, that was a dream come true to be able to make that journey with Albert. We, at this point, we're producing vaccines and our manufacturing is going very well. I mean, a lot of people think about the, the genius and the, the miracle of the science, but it was equally an achievement of manufacturing. You know, before the COVID-19 vaccine, Pfizer, at its height, had made 200 million vaccines a year. We were now producing over 3 billion vaccines. So, you know, these, these wheels are rolling, and these manufacturing plants are going 24/7. And the incredible leaders in these functions are growing and going from strength to strength to make more. And we were in discussions with the Fed US government about giving them vaccines at cost. So, on a non-commercial basis, no profit to Pfizer, giving them at cost to the US government so that they could then share them with the low and middle income countries and the people in need. President Biden was very keen to do this. He was wanting to, early in his tenure as President, to show that America was interested in re-engaging in a humanitarian capacity. And he wanted to make this announcement at the G7. So literally, in the few minutes – sorry, in the few days – before that summit, we were invited to come, we finalise this 500 million dose agreement. Albert and I hopped on the plane and went to the G7. It was very funny because, because we were so late in organizing, there were no hotel rooms in Cornwall.



Okay. So, we ended up staying in like a surfer dude motel. Along the coast. They had no business centre. I mean, I was, really, you could get a surfboard. But you couldn't get a copy of something. It was so fun and so funny and so special. And we went the next day, and Albert stood alongside the president and spoke after he spoke. It was a beautiful setting and a beautiful moment, for me personally, as someone who loves to see the intersection of business and government. I couldn't have had a better opportunity.

Katie [37:40]

It's probably worth pausing to reflect on the fact that you'd achieved so much in developing a successful vaccine. But then the manufacturing challenge, I mean, unbelievable. But that's not enough, is it? It's actually getting it into people's arms at the end of the day that really counts. And I've heard you talk about this before. Obviously, there is a lot of either misinformation, downright propaganda and conspiracy, but also, and I think your film makes this clear. You know, sometimes people historically have a right to be wary actually, because of past misdemeanours. How do you look on all of that challenge in terms of reassuring people, correcting misinformation? How do you tackle that challenge?

Sally [38:28]

I try to approach that challenge with a combination of empathy, humility and determination. So, I start with empathy and humility, because, as you say, I mean, people are fearful. And in some cases, they're fearful for legitimate reasons. You know, there have been examples in the past, particularly among communities of colour in the United States, when people weren't treated with the highest integrity that they deserve. I think people were fearful. And as you mentioned earlier, the vaccine became a somewhat of a political thing. But I, I knew from the beginning that it would be tragic, if we develop this incredible breakthrough vaccine that people were afraid to take. I thought that would be just a devastating outcome to all of this.

So you know, we engaged with a broader set of stakeholders. For example, I was talking to The Teachers Union, about how to get the teachers vaccinated. Typically, in my near 15 years at Pfizer, I hadn't been talking to The Teachers Union in a rollout plan, or the restaurant workers, what did they need to know? And trying to begin these with questions, providing answers in a quick and legitimate and respectful and, you know, really, with a lot of authority in these answers never calling people anti-vaxxers. I don't use that phrase in discussion. Because I think it's a hostile way of talking. And it's oppositional. And I don't think we are oppositional. I believe as, as people, we want the same outcome. We want our kids and our parents and our loved ones to be safe. I tried to approach it with the, with the understanding and work through the channels that people trust. Our research shows us that the messages are important, but still too are the messengers. And in this case, you know, it's often the teacher, the preacher, the barber, the neighbour, the cousin. Not necessarily the politician, the celebrity, the sports hero. And so, you know, it's going to be a, it's going to be an ongoing process, and we're continuing to work on it.



Katie [40:54]

I've heard you say that you've made your frontline employees the heroes of your story. And I think many listeners, because this is The Internal Comms Podcast, would love to hear a little bit about how you did this. How you made the heroes part of your story, and maybe even the challenge of working with scientists as well. Are they as challenging as they sound?

Sally [41:15]

Well, let me first leap to the defence of my scientists. Okay. I've heard this before for many people, that scientists can't relate to the average person. They don't speak in sound bites. You know, they're wonderful. And they're, the more I've gotten to know them in my years here, the more respect I have for them. Just this morning, I was reading in Barron's Magazine, which is a financial magazine here in the US, a story about the future of medicine that interviewed Mikael Dolsten, who I, who I referenced earlier. And, you know, of course, he's not slick. He's not, you know, maybe the punchiest with the soundbite, but is that what we really want as a society? Or do we want a more thorough, considered educated, thoughtful response?

So, you know, to me, these people are celebrities, and they deserve to be treated like rock stars. Many of them, their names, you will never know. Kathrin Jansen is our lead vaccine researcher, she's a hero to me, and to us, but not known in the larger world. So, I will continue to be their, their advocate, and their, their humble servant, and try to have them speak on behalf of Pfizer.

In terms of the frontline workers more generally, it was terrific to dive into the details of how all this came together, and employ those frontline workers in telling those stories. Like, for example, I know people had heard that in the earlier stages, the vaccine required a very cold storage temperature. That's, we've improved on that. But, you know, we took people to meet the guy we called the iceman, in the company, who was in charge of keeping the vaccine cold. In something we called the freezer farm. We had like a warehouse full of freezers. And so, you know, that the, the media was so hungry over the course of this, the year and a half, that this all happened, for detail, that we could parse the story into small bite sized pieces, feature the women and men on the line who were doing it and let them tell the story. How do we get it from the factory to the aeroplanes that we would transport it? You know, how did we purchase these raw materials? Each one of these was its own story.

Katie [43:53]

One of the things that's going through my mind is that you have this amazing story, you have this incredible purpose. And when you described it not as an incremental improvement on drugs and medicine in general, but actually you're going for these moonshots in the future. What would you say to someone listening, who doesn't appear to have such a compelling purpose or mission? Is it possible that all organisations can find that compelling purpose, if they look hard enough for it, would you say? You've worked in lots of different sectors in different industries. So I'm curious to hear your thoughts on that.

Sally [44:33]

It's a wonderful question. And, you can find purpose in all kinds of places. And these moments capture us sometimes when we least expect them. You know, to be very, very candid, you know, I had thought sort of, I was feeling I was in a been there done that phase of my career, you know, was even potentially contemplating what the next chapter might look like. Didn't think there was much for me to learn, particularly in the kind of role that I was in. And then this happened. And you never know when it's going to happen to you. So, part of it is remaining engaged and present and open to the possibility of where a moonshot might find you. You know, moonshots are really they cut across every field. And because I know people will be asking this question, I'd like to tell your listeners that there's a book coming out on March 9 of 2022. So just four or five months away, called Moonshot: Inside the Race to Make the Impossible Possible. And it's Albert Bourla's memoir of, of the nine months. It's a compression story, it's just nine months behind the scenes. And I think – we hope – that it will be inspiring to people to be ready for their moonshot. You know, Albert says, luck never comes to the unprepared you know, so the book is a series of, of ideas like that to help people ready themselves for the next moonshot.

Katie [46:13]

Yeah, wow, we look forward to that. Thank you for the, for the heads up. You've talked previously about, and this is going off on a slight tangent, but I think it might be interesting to go here next. About how destructive labels can be. I just wonder if you could talk to us a little bit about labels, maybe your own experience of labels, I'm opening up the conversation here. Is it true that you said that first of all, am I reading things right on the internet?

Sally [46:45]

I'm sure I said it because I believe it. I think that labels are limiting. You know, when I came out in the mid-1980s, as a gay woman, you know, my family worried that having that label would limit my chances to have a more successful career or long-term partnership or children. And I began to work against that. And those three things. A family, and I have a wonderful wife, and she and I have been together for 33 years. I have a daughter, 27. And I have a career I'm really proud of.

And it wasn't always a given that – it's hard to remember what it was like, you know, 40 years ago, in the LGBTQ world. It wasn't as accepted, it wasn't as common for, for gay people to be out and to be in prominent positions. But I just decided that this label couldn't be all that I am. It is part of who I am. It's, it's a meaningful part. But I'm also you know, I'm a woman. I'm a businesswoman in my, in my heart, I'm a New Yorker, I'm a writer. I'm many things, we're all many things. And it's sad to me, when labels of gender, race, nationality, income level, ability. And when, when, if they become limiting. I'm not suggesting people shouldn't take pride, and express who they are in whatever way they want to express who they are. But I don't want to see the labels that I often see that limit people's possibilities, to say a certain type of person can't do something. So that's why I continue to rail against labels.

Katie [48:50]

I'm just so curious to go back to that, that young woman that came out in the 1980s at a time when, as you say, most people were doing precisely the opposite. It's not quite the same now and people who maybe weren't even born then, I'm sure they've read the stories. What was it that made you do that? Was it, was it your personality? Was it something you that you just felt you had to do? Did you just take a deep breath and do it? I'm just conscious, or curious, I suppose of how were you able to do that.

Sally [49:26]

Well, it was really hard. But it felt to me required. My parents, who are wonderful parents, they raised me to be an honest, truth telling person, and I was fairly close with my parents. And I knew that this was going to be devastating to them. And it was. They, you know, I was living in Washington, DC. I was one year out of college. I was in my first job working in the mailroom of the United States Senator and I flew home to St. Louis to tell my parents and, you know, they took it very hard. And for many years, it was strain between us, and tension in the family. And it took a long time to work through it.

But thank god we did, because I can't imagine the pain of living one's life in the closet. And as you say, there were many people living their lives in the closet. It never felt like anything other than a prison, to me, the thought to live in a closet. It was also concurrent in the mid-80s, with the height of the AIDS epidemic. And there were lots of young men, friends of mine, who were dying of AIDS, and the whole way in which the illness was treated and discussed, became part of the gay civil rights movement. And so, for young people, like myself, and I was living in Washington, which is course a hotbed of politics, you either had to step in or step out, you know, step up, or back off, because it was a crisis. It was a life and death crisis. And even though it was more for men than for women, you know, if you were identifying as gay or lesbian at the time, you know, it was a moment and ended up being very catalytic, for the gay civil rights movement, that when I think about it, you know, that what has changed in Western society from the mid-80s to today, is extraordinary. You know, right to adopt, right to marry, freedom from persecution, job protection. These things have happened in relatively short time. And I'm just so grateful to have lived in this time in this place, to have been able to participate in and witness what must be the most rapid civil rights change in history.

Katie [52:12]

This is just an observation, Sally. But there's something of a golden thread running through this conversation, which is about truth, I think. It's interesting to me that you said when you walk into the room for a chief executive for the first time, one of the things you're going to bear in mind all the time is to tell the truth, even if it's uncomfortable, but in a deferential and respectful way. And being truthful to yourself, I guess, what's what I'm pondering is that truthfulness, I guess, has potentially has to start at home. Would that, would that be fair?

Sally [52:41]

Oh, I think, I think it's, it's more than fair, it's absolutely essential. And, you know, of course, I did worry when I was young, whether being gay might impact my career. I've actually come to believe it accelerated my career. Because of the authenticity and the comfort with difficult conversations, the nonstop need to introduce and tell the truth became, I think, a way in which I tried to be in the world.

You know, I've had an experience where on a job interview, I was asked, What does your husband do? I wear a small gold ring on my finger. And you have to think in that moment, am I going to go there, you know, you sort of imagine, you will reveal these personal details over time. But in that moment, I pause, to your earlier point, and I gathered my intention. And I said to this individual, a quite prominent person and was holding the keys to a job I wanted very badly. I thanked him for asking about my personal life. I shared with him how fortunate I am to have a wonderful partner, and that she has been a support to my career. And that we, she and I, are raising a wonderful daughter. And that I really, you know, wanted him to know who I was. And it ended up resulting in a quiet moment where I really didn't know what was gonna happen next. But he essentially offered me the job on the spot and said, you know, you're gracious, and you're, you know, you're modern. And you're, I don't remember the words, I remember the outcome of enormous relief. Relief and happiness. But I had to tell him the story in a way that was non-confrontational, positive and inclusive, to bring him along.

And of course, like all gay people, I, I've had some version of the story happen all the time. You know, your kid's school teacher, the new neighbour in the apartment building, the new coworker, and with each turn you have a decision. Do you speak the truth? I love your phrase, the golden thread, you know, are we going to sew with the golden thread? Or are you going to, you know, be vague or unclear in ways that breeds distrust and distance? And that's not what we, as communicators, want to do.

Katie [55:22]

One of the other things that I read that you said recently is about the impact of remote working on today's world, on us as comms professionals, and you said that there's a possibility that we might lose the opportunity for apprenticeship. And that really piqued my interest. I wonder how you're approaching the challenge of hybrid working as I'm guessing now, some people are in the office, some people are not about, especially around learning and support across, a comms team? And obviously, you have a global team. So you have that added problem of time differences. How do you approach that challenge?

Sally [55:57]

I, candidly, I struggle. I was never a big fan of working from home. And, you know, I know it's very popular and at Pfizer in the summers, people could work from home on Fridays. And I never really embraced it, I always thought that our job as communicators was to be at the right hand of our commercial partners, our scientific partners, or whoever you work with in your business. But I've learned some things and I've



changed my views. So, the fact that we could create this vaccine, while working remotely as a leadership team, you know, is a proof point you can't you can't ignore. I mean, I'm grateful to the scientists in the laboratory, and the manufacturing colleagues in the plants who had to go in every day. But many of us have worked remotely and continue to this day, to work remotely and flexibly, coming to the office as needed.

So I had to rethink my bias. I had to rethink, okay, maybe this is the modern way of working and technology helped us a lot. So, you know, Zoom calls, massive rise in popularity of podcasts like yours, where people can listen at their leisure, and lots of ways in which technology helped us to keep the, the glue in the organisation. But I still maintain that there is something that's a bit lost. And that is the crucial apprenticeship that happens in Corporate Affairs and Communications. You know, when I was young, in the field, my really first role in communications was at the American Express Company. I started in 1990. And I watched people who were more senior than me, who, how do they, how do they engage? What was the way in which they approached senior management? How did they say no to a difficult question? And throughout my career, I continued to have leaders and mentors, whose example was my guide.

And I'm at a place in my life now, I have a large team, and I have a strong team. And I see my role as to assist, facilitate, apprentice them as they go about their work, which they do very, very well. And sometimes that means just coming into the, my office, close the door, hash through a problem, or brainstorm a new way of doing something. And that's very hard to do remotely, even with the gee-whiz technology that that we have. I don't find it quite the same. And I think something is lost, particularly for people in the early stages of their career.

Katie [58:47]

Yeah, I would agree. We haven't got long, we have a couple of quickfire questions. I'm going to shorten them down a little bit. What would most surprise people about Sally Susman? And the reason I asked this that you seem very open, warm. Generally, as we've talked about truth, is there anything that would surprise people about you?

Sally [59:05]

Oh, I'm sure there's a lot of things that would surprise people about me, but maybe the, the one that is most unexpected is that I'm actually, I'm an introvert. I take energy from quiet pursuits. I like to read, to write, to walk. Being a forward-leaning public person is not actually natural to me.

Katie [59:36]

Do you think though, that people who, where it doesn't come naturally tend to be the ones that actually perform better? Because they don't... A, they don't shoot from the hip. They always come well prepared.



And they listen. Do you think actually, that's a secret weapon to anyone who's thinking gosh, I feel like that I'm a bit of an introvert. Is it actually a secret of success?

Sally [1:00:00]

I have to tell you, I have never heard that argument, but I like it. And I will reflect on that. Certainly, listening skills are the most underappreciated skill in corporate life. You know, people say, Oh, she's a great presenter, or he's a fantastic salesperson. But the secret sauce, the superpower, I think, for most leaders, is those that are able to really listen and hear for meaning and understanding.

Katie [1:00:35]

I totally agree. What do you wish you had known when you first started out in your career?

Sally [1:00:41]

I wish then, that I had worried less. I'm a natural, a natural worrier. I still worry a lot. And it comes with the territory. I'm sort of paid to worry. But I think I, I had a lot of anxiety about am I making the right moves here? Am I presenting myself appropriately? You know, a lot of young people will send me their resume to read and review for them. And they are struggling over a word. You know, should I say it this way, or say it that way? And I just wish I could have told myself and every other young person I speak with, not to worry so much. You know, life happens in the balance of things. And, you know, I know in our cancel culture and our online world where nothing disappears, people really worry about a misstep, and I understand that. But what I'm trying to say is that... Judge yourself over time, not because of one mistake, or one failing. There's lots of opportunities to succeed.

Katie [1:01:57]

Such good advice. Finally, Sally, I'm going to give you a billboard. It's a bit of a metaphorical billboard, for millions to see. And on that you can put any message you like. What would you like to put on your billboard?

Sally [1:02:14]

Wow, what a great question. So, when I was growing up, my mom used to say something to me repeatedly. And it annoyed me a lot. My mom used to say, It's not what happens to you. It's how you handle it. And, I thought she doesn't understand, this bad thing happened to me and she doesn't care. But she was actually, you know, grooming me for a world in which things happen all the time to people that they don't expect, that aren't always positive, that might be difficult to navigate. And really, it's your resiliency, your ability to handle it, to manage it, that matters most. And so, you know, with a great respect for resiliency. I think my billboard would say it's not what happens to you. It's how you handle it.

Katie [1:03:07]



Very good advice. Sally, our time is almost up. But I just want to say, 30-odd years working in comms, this is absolutely one of my highlights. This is, has been, such a wonderful conversation. Thank you so much for your warmth and your, your wisdom and your generosity.

Sally [1:03:26]

Ah, well, I've enjoyed it immensely. And you have done me a great service by asking such probing and, and well-researched questions. It's been an utter delight. Thank you.

Katie [1:03:38]

So that's a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. If you'd like the transcript and the show notes for this episode, head over to our website. That's AB comm – A B C O double-M – .co.uk forward slash podcasts (<https://abcomm.co.uk/podcasts/>). You can read the transcript online or download it as a PDF, and you'll also find all the links you need to the show there. I highly recommend watching that National Geographic film, Mission Impossible. If you're enjoying the show, I would be immensely 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. The more ratings we have, the more discoverable we are for other internal comms pros out there. As season six draws to a close, I am thrilled to say that the show has been downloaded nearly 85,000 times in more than 50 countries worldwide. And what's more, our listenership is growing. Now, for me, that's a testament to the growing importance of internal communication. A growing recognition that having informed motivated and inspired employees is what sets an organisation apart from its competitors, and enables it to really thrive in today's fast paced and challenging world. Thank you to all of those who reach out to me on LinkedIn, Twitter, and who send emails to say how much you're enjoying the show. I received an email just last week from a group internal comms manager who wrote, I listen to your podcast like it's the last piece of oxygen in the room. Wow. Such wonderful feedback really does make this all worthwhile. If you think you have a story to share for season seven, please don't be shy. Get in touch and let's talk it through. All you need to do is send us an email. Our address is ICpodcast@ABComm.co.uk. Thank you to my wonderful producer John Phillips who keeps the show on the road, our sound engineer, Stuart Rolls, and the creative team for all their hard work at AB. So, my lovely listeners, if your holiday season is fast approaching, I hope it's a very merry and bright one. And until we meet again early in 2022, remember. It's what's inside that counts.