TICP – Leading Lights – Highlights From Season 6

(Season 7, trailer)

Katie [00:09]
Welcome to *The Internal Comms Podcast* with me, Katie Macaulay.

For more than 30 years now, I've been helping organisations improve the way they communicate with their people. From everything I have seen over the years, I am left in no doubt that exceptional organisational performance is rooted in exceptional internal communication. In short, great organisations are built from the inside out.

In this show, I sit down with the leading lights from the world of business, communication, and academia to explore how organisations can improve the way they inform, motivate and involve their people.

The curtain is about to go up on Season seven of the show, with another amazing array of guests. But before it does – to whet your appetite – here are some of my favourite moments of our last season.

Katie [1:19]
In 1990, the organisational psychologist Professor William Khan was studying for his doctorate at Yale University.

He published a paper in the *Academy of Management Journal* entitled "Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work".

And, very unexpectedly, the concept of engagement took hold.

I was absolutely thrilled when Professor Kahn agreed to come on the show. Bill, as he insisted I call him, was incredibly warm and generous with his insight and thinking.

In this clip from episode 49, I ask about that seminal article, which 32 years ago, launched the concept of engagement on the world.

So there are obviously, many scholars and academics that have studied sort of human endeavour, if you want to say that, in the workplace before, what was your kind of new take, your new angle, what was unusual about your thinking and approach at that time with that work?

Bill [02:31]
I would say I took very seriously the idea of personal agency and choice. I think a lot of scholars before me had assumed that people either worked hard, or they didn't. Sort of like an on off switch. And I actually considered people much more sophisticated and nuanced. And I think that people have the capacity to make real choices, by the way, not just consciously but unconsciously, about how much of their real selves, their selves, they want to access, and use and employ and bring into the work they do.

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

Katie [03:53]
I heard you say on another podcast that the industry, and we have to call it that, that sprung up to measure and track engagement violated the original concept of personal engagement. And I did again, a little exercise, I checked your article again, there is you do not use the words 'employee engagement' once, I couldn't see that -

Bill [04:14]
Ever

Katie [04:15]
Ever, no.

Bill [04:16]
Ever.

Katie [4:19]
Something got lost, something got misinterpreted in the shift from personal to employee engagement. That's, it seems like that's what happened. Could you could you talk us through that?

Bill [04:31]
I think that's exactly what happened, you know, when you think about it, and that even though it's just a word shift, it's an incredibly important shift that the whole frame shifts, right. I love the use of the word frame because when you go into an art gallery, and there's and there's pictures on the wall, right, there's art and there's frames around the art. What the frames do is they draw your eye into what you're supposed to look at and what you're supposed to safely ignore. Right? The personal engagement frame

is, what does it mean for the person to be as engaged as possible? To sort of bring their self into inhabit a character as a way of enlivening that character. Right? They get to live more deeply and become more present and the organisation and the group benefits absolutely, right. That that's the frame that I was working on.

What the shift was, the shift from personal to employee was actually a huge frame shift as well. The shift for employee is from the organization's perspective, not from the person's perspective. But we're now looking from the work like it's all shift a point of view, from the organization's perspective, how can we get our workers, our employees to be as engaged that is as absorbed and hard working as possible? Right. And so that shift of point of view is really a shift of intention. Right? It's the organization's intention, of course, to get as much work and ideas and impact and investment of time and energy out of out of any individual employee in order to benefit the organisation, and its goals, its missions and its profits, right.

And so the shift became, how do we measure how hard people are working? And how much they're working? And how do we try to change the organisation to get them to work as hard as possible? That was the shift. And, and I totally understand it. And my interpretation is, what I was offering in the spirit of personal engagement is way too hard to measure. It's just too hard. In fact, I never even tried, right, I did this qualitative in-depth, discovery of what engagement was, and the psychological conditions. And I did it by interviews, and observations and more interviews and more observations, writing and talking. I never once tried to create a paper and pencil test that would measure safety, meaningfulness, availability and engagement. I didn't do it, mostly because I just I'm not good at it. I don't think that way. I don't much care about it, right.

But the people who would then want to exploit it and not for not for bad reasons, they want to exploit it because they thought there was value in it. They're the ones who therefore reduce this very nuanced, sophisticated idea of inhabiting a role. They instead they created something that they can measure. Right, which is why Gallup and all these others created these employee engagement scales. And that's why the shift happened, because because you could measure it.

Katie [07:38]
I also heard you say on another podcast, that actually real engagement and one of the reasons that leaders might, deep down shy away from true engagement as you defined it, is that real engagement's messy. I don't know if you remember saying that.

Bill [07.54]
I don't.

Katie [07:55]

Can you explain what you mean by that? What does it look like through engagement inside an organisation?

Bill [08:00]
So true engagement means we are licencing people to use their voice write, their own voice. Which means we cannot control what they're going to say? Or how they're going to say it, or how loudly they say it, or how quietly they say it, or with what kind of emotion they say it. All of that is messy. Right? It cannot be easily controlled. I think. I think, you know, organisations are steeped in the illusion that people can disconnect from their emotions when they walk into the building, like taking their hat off and put it on a hat rack. And they walk in and they do their work. And then they leave and they put their hats back on. And then they leave. And those hats, for me represent emotions, and relationships and messiness, and the real stuff of who we are as people, right?

None of that is easily digestible, in normal organisational discourse, right? For me to be in a meeting, and for me to find myself frustrated with my boss and say it. And that frustration is a really important piece of data, right. For me to be really present engaged means I slam my hand down, I say, I can't believe we're doing this again. Isn't anyone else frustrated? That's that that's a piece of data, right? That's engagement. We don't want that in organisations because it's messy, and it might trigger emotions and it might trigger real relationships and people talking about what's really going on inside that relationship. That's messy and people don't want it.

Katie [09:32]
We can imagine then the leader that is open to engagement is someone who does a lot of a lot of listening, is quite comfortable with a with tension, with disagreement, almost looks for the outlier that's not speaking. It's an interesting set of leadership behaviours, I guess then that would we'd be looking for.

Bill [09:52]
Yes, in terms of competencies and what the only thing you left off that list was the most mature leaders are the ones who are comfortable with their *own* emotional messiness. They're able, right and because so if I'm gonna, if I'm going to acknowledge my frustration, or my pain or my sadness, or my loss or my joy, I need leaders who understand those experiences and are able to contain their own reactions as opposed to push them and therefore push me away.

Katie [10:22]
Right. Okay. Fascinating. Fascinating.

Bill [10:25]
See, I told you I was a psychologist.

Katie [10:26]
Yeah, yes.

Katie [10.30]
Podcasting is by every measure the fastest growing publishing medium. Brian Landau is an authority on the subject. He's spent an entire career in all things audio, from content creation, to distribution. Today, he is the Co-Founder and CEO of Vennly – the audio platform that enables businesses to share their content seamlessly and securely to their existing internal and external channels.

And Brian also walks the talk by hosting his own brilliant show called The Drip – about how to caffeinate your campaigns.

In this clip from episode 50, I ask Brian to explain what's driving the growth of podcasting for an internal audience.

Brian [11:24]
The first is that podcasts are the consumer behaviour that enterprise can actually mirror. Like, I've never met a regular person say, you know, I really hope I got another cryptic memo from HR today. Or yeah, the weekend is great, and all but I won't have any Zooms to sit in on. You know, you mentioned this just before but you know, in the question 40% of adults in the US and the UK have listened to a podcast in the last month. But there's research shows that 83% of corporate workers want to hear from their companies via podcast,

Katie [11:53]
Wow.

Brian [11.54]
Professionals over index against the general population with respect to podcast listening.

And guess what? The data suggests that peak podcast listening is during working hours. So your colleagues and employees are already listening to audio during work. You combine this with the fact that so many companies are trying to convey empathy to their employees.

They're increasingly thoughtful of Zoom fatigue, are seeing low engagement on emails and are trying to communicate with distributed and workable workforces. Audio, because of the authenticity, because of its scalability and who can participate from a creation perspective, is checking an awful lot of boxes for businesses that are looking for new and meaningful ways to engage with their first audience.

Katie [12:32]

So for listeners who are thinking about taking their first kind of baby steps into creating audio content for the first time, what' your advice? You've seen a lot over your many, many years? What are the common challenges or stumbling blocks? How maybe we can help people pre-empt those? What advice could you give? And of course, there's so many different formats out there. So you know, are some more successful than others? How do you pick a format?

Brian [13:00]
The consider consideration, I think is whether or not this is for internal or external audiences. So externally, let's start there. Even though this show is about internal communications. Externally, I think companies often start with the creative concept, and never really developed a business case. How are you defining success for the project? What are the outcomes that you're trying to drive? How are you going to measure these outcomes? Like if you create a beautiful podcast that no one listened to? And you couldn't measure ROI? Did a beautiful podcast actually got created?

Katie [13:28]
Good question. It's about the tree falling in the woods, isn't it?

Brian [13:32]
100%. And it's really exciting to you know, workshop and storyboard and do all these things. But if you're not set up to measure the success, and you don't understand the outcomes, you've wasted a lot of time and energy. For internal use, I think the biggest challenge from what I'm observing is around who is actually hosting the podcast. This is where a lot of enthusiasm tends to stall out. And I think there's two tricks to this. The first is, let's say that it's an executive that's going to be the voice or the host.

And I think there's two tricks. The first is, let's say that it's an executive. That's going to be the voice or the host. Don't call it audio. Call it a podcast, call it a show, give it a special name, identify a music bed, create original cover art. Do all of these things for an internal podcast. If you create original IP and you call it a show, you'll get the executive to buy in because they'll have ownership over the execution. It will feel real and not just another communications motion that they're being nagged about. And please, please, please, please, please. Publish this podcast at a repeatable cadence. It's okay of it's only once a month, but commit to the first Wednesday of the month, for example. Let your audience know the who, what, where, why of that podcast.

The second consideration for an internal podcast is that you, the head of internal communications at your firm, you don't need to be the content creator.

I think this is a really unique opportunity to elevate voices from within your company to contribute content. 'Did you know that the manager of the supply chain already hosts her own podcast, and would

love to talk about sustainability at the company?', 'Did you know that the associate in enablement has an undergraduate degree in audio engineering and misses being at the controls?'

I think this is an opportunity for internal communicators to be the moderators of the content. You're at the controls of what gets published. It takes the pressure off of you to write all the copy. This is a really cool and potentially powerful way to elevate the voices across your company. And then with respect to what type of formats, once you've empowered your colleagues, your managers, your employees to be at the, at the wheel, they will determine the format for themselves.

Your job then in internal communications is to make sure that they're putting out the right type of content, but allow them to say this is going to be an interview show where I interview colleagues of mine about their special talent that no one knows about because no one ever asked them. That's a really successful show. That's an interview style show.

Katie [15:49]
Such good advice listeners right there. Two things I want to pick up on. So right about the fact that you don't just have some audio content, you have a show, and why not develop that into a kind of news brand, you know, give it a name, give it an identity. And I think so often when I'm doing research on which channels are effective, which pieces of content are effective, which campaigns, frequency comes up time and time again, because once there is no cadence, and they don't know when they saw the last one, and they don't know when they're going to see the next one, you really have lost loyalty there with your reader, your listener. So I think frequency and committing to that is, is so important. So thank you for that advice.

Brian [16:34]
The most successful podcasts that any of our partners are creating – and success being defined by listens and then also actions taken on that piece of content – is an interview with the Head of Communications. It's a once-a-month interview, the Head of Communications interviews the head of engineering, it's a technology company. And the show is called Talk Nerdy to Me.

Katie [16:54]
I love it.

Brian [16:57]
And the entire concept. It's a 10-minute podcast, it's once a month, and the head of engineering will talk about product updates, engineering updates, what's in the pipeline, from a technical roadmap perspective. And the whole point is to demystify, because even though this is a technology company, not everyone in the company, in fact, most people in the company are not technical. And they need to have

an understanding. And so yes, they will do the all hands, they will do the memos, they'll do the trainings, they'll do all of that stuff.

But what they found is that this is a format to speak in a very human way about the work. And that because the Head of Communications is not technical. She's asking questions in a lay type of fashion. And it's just been very, very popular amongst amongst the employees at this company. And they see incredible engagement on that piece of content that's like a way to elevate a subject matter expert, internally, I think in a very meaningful and important way.

Katie [17:53]
Jane Mitchell started her comms career in live TV at the BBC. And for some of us of a certain age, her shows will bring back fond memories of our youth – Blue Peter, Tomorrow's World, Grange Hill.

She set up her consultancy in 2005, helping organisations embed ethics and value-based cultures.

Jane is often called in when things go wrong – working closely with clients who, she says, "have the courage to tackle difficult issues".

So, are there common causes of an ethical failure? In episode 51, I ask Jane whether there is a certain mindset or behavioural traits that could signal our organisation might be heading for a fall?

Katie [18.51]
So, you spend a lot of time in boardrooms, working with executive teams, leaders, managers to help them, as you say, sort of help them define and live up to their values and their ethics. And I always think this, I always think 'no one wakes up in the morning, or very few people would wake up in the morning deliberately wanting to act in a way that wasn't in accordance with an organisation's values or ethics or even indeed their own'. But, clearly, organisations do come unstuck. And there's been many famous and many, you know, less famous examples over the years. When you look back on those failures, are there any common reasons why organisations falter ethically, or fail to act in accordance with their values?

Jane [19:40]
Yes. Okay, another of those questions. 'Katie questions' I'm going to call them now. So, and partially this is right. Organisations all think they're different. So in, in engaging with the client and their conversation, after an ethical failure, you may have … and it is all about conversation and trust because you are put in a really … it's a very tight relationship, because they need to be able to trust that you will give them advice and guidance about what the issues, inherent issues are, the root causes are and how they can go about tackling them. So, clearly, you have to listen a lot. And in the listening, what I realise is that all organisations are different, but the reasons for failure are quite common. And trying to tell them that they're not different to anybody else, well actually you don't do that.

Katie [20:44]
Never do that. 'You've got such a unique set of challenges.'

Jane [20:51]
And they're very pleased about that.

Katie [20:52]
Oh, we're special.

Jane [20:53]
Phew! Yes, we thought we were special, that's good to have it confirmed. But, fundamentally, what I believe – it goes back to some of what we've been talking about, for quite a lot of what we've been talking about. There is a lack of a sense of purpose. There is an organisation driven by misguided, misguidedly driven singularly by numbers and targets.

There is a … by-and-large a group of leaders who absolutely, as you say, go to work to do the right thing, as we talk about a lot. But somehow, and ever since I was working, the very first client I had in this world, there's something that happens when they walk over the threshold.

So, you've got really high functioning, interdependent people, if you will. Great family lives, big social circles. They walk over the threshold – so they know how to operate in society, there's no question about that. And once they get into that work environment, something clicks. And something clicks that is about relinquishing responsibility to those higher up the chain that say, 'Okay, well, if X says, that's what I should be doing, that's, of course, what me and my team we're going to be focusing on'.

Unless you have an organisation whereby that instruction might be delivered and a group of people have the confidence and the trust and the psychological safety to be able to say, 'Okay, can we talk about that? Because we're on the ground doing this stuff, this instruction it doesn't make any sense.'

So, I think there's a lack of communication. I think there is a misguided view that the view of the short-term is what will drive sustained success. I fundamentally believe, in my humble opinion, it will not. Unless we have a real sense of purpose as to why we're here, doing what we're doing, which is based on long-term success, then you will forever be on that kind of hamster wheel, whereby people are just trying to catch up with themselves all the time. And it's only when they stand back and say, 'Oh, did we really do that?' 'Yes, that is what you did.' So I think that's another characteristic.

I think that also organisations get very caught up in their own hype and hyperbole.

Katie [23:35]
Right.

Jane [23:36]
So, I think that if the words are there very often (and we've all heard the words, the greenwashing around corporate social responsibility), if you look at values, for instance, the number of times you might walk into a client, when we did walk into client's offices, and behind the reception desk, very grandly and proudly sit the values.

And, in fact, I was talking to somebody about this last week, and they walked into this new client, and there are all the values. He said, 'I was so optimistic.' He said, 'I walked in. There they were and I said to the receptionist-' (because if ever you want to know what the culture is like in an organisation, just see how they are in reception)…

Katie [24:18]
Absolutely.

Jane [24:19]
Really good hint. So, he said to the receptionist, 'Oh,' he said, 'it must be really great to be working with an organisation that feels so strongly about its values.' And he said her face just said it all.

Katie [24:32]
Oh really?

Jane [24:32]
She said, 'Yeah, the words are good, *but*'. And I think that we know – I think the fundamental thing is that we as consumers, actually (I'm not getting on my consumer soapbox, I promise Katie!) but we as consumers or we as people who have interaction with these organisations, you can tell.

Katie [24:55]
You can tell.

Jane [24:56]
Because if there is something- so for instance, we all spend hours at the moment on calls with call centres. And you know instantly what the culture of the organisation is by the way the person on the end of the phone is dealing with your complaint, worry, question, whatever it might be. And you can tell instantly, because we feel these things. It's how we create and develop relationships. It's instinct. So, trust it.

And therefore, in organisations, very often when there is an ethical failure, you talk to people in a variety of contexts and you say, 'if it felt wrong, it probably was wrong'. And they say, 'Well, yeah, well, we knew it wasn't quite right. And we knew that we were being asked to do things that, you know, were a bit daft or…' The usual. But the fact is, they didn't feel safe or confident enough to be able to just raise a hand and say, 'There's a problem.'

Katie [25:56]
It's incredible, isn't it? The knowledge was there. And yet it just wasn't unearthed…

Katie [26:03]
Maliha Aqeel is a truly global comms professional. She's worked in the Middle East and North America and managed comms programmes for the UK, European and Asia-Pacific markets.

When I spoke to Maliha she was the Director of Global Communications & Digital Channels for a company with 2,000 sites around the world. I was also aware she had been the Assistant Director for Brand, Marketing and Communications at EY.

Given her very varied background, I was curious to ask whether she thought internal comms had unique characteristics compared to the other comms disciplines, like media relations and marketing, that she'd worked in.

Now, you've worked across comms disciplines, I know. And I'm just interested in how much crossover you see between, say, media, customer, employee, investor relations? I mean, there are some people saying 'We're all just going to be called communicators at the end of the day.' Is that your view? Or do you think there are some unique characteristics of the internal audience that we should always be bearing in mind?

Maliha [27:18]
There are characteristics and I think it's more goes back to their motivations. I definitely do see crossover. To me, I've always approached my career as audience-first. If I know who my audience is, all the core principles about, you know, the right message, the right place at the right time, they all come together. The message – I think the single core message doesn't change. It's the way you communicate that message that becomes relevant to that audience.

But I think you always have to be mindful of the motivations. For employees, they have chosen your company as a place for them to work. And, nowadays, I think on average people stay with their company three to four years, maybe five at the most. But if you think about the fact that even if they leave after five years, if they had a really great experience, they're going to be your advocates for life, right? And they're going to want to keep coming back. And maybe someday, they might want to come

back to work for your company, again, because they realise that they did all the other stuff they wanted to do and now they want to come back here to do things that maybe are different from what they did before.

And, so, with employees, I find that while your single core message doesn't change – it's there because that is your key message – the way you communicate it has to be tied to the motivations, but you always have to remember that your employees have choices. And I think especially now, they have even more choices of where they want to work, but more importantly, how they want to work. And if you don't recognise that they are in the driver's seat of making the decisions about their careers, they have a lot more choices in terms of the kinds of companies that can better align to their values, maybe better align to the kind of lifestyle they want to live while also being able to earn an income, I think if you don't recognise that, then you are being tone deaf to what you need to do to be a great employer/brand.

And I think it's the same for different stakeholders, particularly for public companies. If you don't understand why your investors have chosen to invest in you versus all the other millions of companies out there that they could have chosen to invest in, if you don't understand that, and if you don't meet their needs, and if you're not communicating the things that are important to them, you will lose those investment dollars. And, so, I think for me, that is what it comes down to, is understanding the motivations of the different audience.

And I think there is a difference between audiences that have a vested interest in your organisation versus ones that don't. I don't think media has a vested interest in your individual organisation. Their vested interest is in the story itself and being able to be accountable to the readership, to make sure that they have done their job to tell as accurate a story as they can with what they know. I think, though employees, investors, your end customers, particularly for B2C companies, all of those stakeholders have a vested interest in your company, they have a vested interest that maybe is a little bit self-centred in terms of what their motivations are, and how your company can align to the values that you hold. But, at the end of the day, they have that vested interest, they have chosen either to give you their time, their money, all of their effort, they have chosen to give you something. And, so, I think as a company, you have to think about 'What are you giving back to them that is important to what they're looking for?' And I think that's where often communication professionals can sometimes get things wrong, where they fail to recognise the stakeholders' motivations and what inspires them, what will be relevant for them. They focus on the message they want to tell or the story they want to tell. And they just focus on that. And I always feel that it's a disservice to your stakeholders who are giving you so much, to not think about what they want.

So, one of the things that I often tell my team is, you know, 'If you were the one searching on Google, or something, like, what would make *you* want to click on our website versus somebody else's, right?' And I always tell them, like, 'We are stakeholders, as well.' Like, we forget, as communication professionals,

that when a communication goes out, we as the employee also get it. And sometimes because we've worked on it we kind of ignore it. But if I did not work on it, and I am part of the communication team and I receive it, I have to ask myself, 'How do I feel about this as an employee?'

Forget about the fact that I may have worked on it, but if I was to just have received it, 'Do I feel good about it? Do I feel like I have more questions than I have answers? Do I feel like this is a company that's invested in me the way that I'm investing in them?' And you know that… I'm always baffled by the fact that we forget that we're also employees.

Katie [32:29]
Yes, that's a good point.

Maliha [32:30]
We are so focused on doing our job that we just forget that and it's the same as customers. We forget that we are also customers of our own business. We may be not the complete business. And certainly, I wouldn't be, you know, a customer of the accounting function. But maybe I'm a customer of one of their customers or something like that, right? So, I think if you start to ask yourself, 'If I'm going to put on my consumer hat, and I'm going to be the one consuming those messages, and I'm going to be the one that clicks on something, what will motivate *me* to do it?'

And if it motivates me, I'm sure it motivates another 10 people, and then another 10 after that, and I think you keep building it from there. But if you remember that you are also an end stakeholder it makes your job easier, because you start to… you know exactly what messages will work. And you know exactly what will not work. And then you just do it really well.

Katie [33:29]
In episode 54, I sit down with the psychotherapist, coach and facilitator, Phil Dobson.
I love this conversation. 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 well-being.

Now, at this point in the interview, we are talking about the Paetro Principle, named after the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto. Back in the 1800s, Pareto observed that 80% of Italy's land was owned by just 20% of its population. He carried out surveys on a variety of other countries and found a similar pattern.

The 80/20 rule, as it is often called, specifies that 80% of your output or your impact comes from just 20 per cent of your input or effort.

So, the challenge for us is to identify those activities that make up that 20 per cent – which is exactly what Phil has done. Take a listen…

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 it 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 [35:33]
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 bottleneck, 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 [37:28]
As you were talking through those common tasks that are 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, if someone's not on my back to get them done?

Phil [38:02]
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 that 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 [Most Valuable Tasks], 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 [41:15]
Sally Susman is Executive Vice President and Chief Corporate Affairs Officer at Pfizer. I was absolutely delighted that she came on the show. This is episode 55, and Sally and I do cover a lot of ground in this amazing conversation.

Sally sat on Pfizer's vaccine development taskforce. She was in the room when the Federation Drug Authority in the US approved Pfizer's c]Covid vaccine. And she was also responsible for that incredible documentary – I do urge you to see it if you haven't– it's called Mission Possible and it was made in collaboration with the National Geographic.

Now, over the years – well, over 30 years now – I've had the privilege, and mainly the pleasure, of speaking with senior comms professionals and business leaders around the world for more. But when I look back over those years, few – if any – of those conversations can rival this one.

Not only is Sally incredibly smart and insightful and considered – her warmth, well her humanity, just took this conversation to a different level.

Sally reports directly to Albert Bourla, Pfizer's CEO – who is widely recognised as the driving force behind the company's extraordinary achievement with the Covid vaccine. This prompted me to seek out her advice on building strong, successful relationships with chief executives.

Katie [42:51]
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 [43:16]
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.

Katie [43:36]
Wow.

Sally [43:37]
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 [44:13]
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 [44:28]
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. You know, it came to me early in the 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 [46:28]
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 [46:49]
I do. I love politics. And of course, it's 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. Okay. 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 [50:13]
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 [50:34]
Well, let me first leap to the defence of my scientists. Okay. I've heard this before from 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, 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 would transport it? You know, how did we purchase these raw materials? Each one of these was its own story.

Katie [53:11]
So that concludes our retrospective of the last season of the show. You can find every episode, the transcripts of each episode, plus all the show notes on ab's website. That's abcomm.co.uk/podcasts.

Season seven of the internal comms podcast kicks off next week, Wednesday 16 February with fortnightly episodes running until the end of 2022.

If you are already a fan of the show, I'd be really grateful if you could leave us a review on Apple podcasts. We have more than 60 reviews so far; if we can get this number to 100 it will help us become more discoverable for other IC professionals out there.

So, my lovely listeners, until we meet again for season seven, stay safe and well, and remember – it's what's inside that counts.