TICP – Episode 61 – Embracing the messiness of being human

(Season 7 Episode 6)

[Katie 00:03]
This episode of The Internal Comms Podcast is brought to you by my very own Friday Update. Would you like to get a short email from me never more than five bullet points long, giving you my take on the week's news from across the world of communication. This might be the latest reports, books, podcasts, conferences, campaigns that have caught my eye during the week. I always limit myself to just five nuggets of news, so you can read it in record time, but still feel hopefully a little bit more informed, maybe even a little bit more uplifted as you end your week. Now, this is a subscriber only email, which was initially intended just for colleagues and clients. I don't post this content anywhere else. So, you do need to sign up, but that's super easy. Simply go to abcomm.co.uk/friday and just pop in your email address. It's equally easy to unsubscribe at any time. So, give it a try! That sign up page again, abcomm.co.uk/friday. And thank you very much if you do choose to be a subscriber.

Hello, and welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. Every fortnight I sit down with leading lights from the world of communication, business and academia to tease out the smart thinking, fresh ideas and new tactics for improving the way we communicate at work. My guest today is a Victoria Dew. The founder and CEO of Dewpoint Communications, a firm focused on helping people-powered businesses from high growth startups to Fortune 50 companies communicate better with their employees every day. I first met Victoria through her work as the global past chair of the International Association of Business Communicators, the IABC. I immediately had a hunch that she might make a great guest on the show. And I'm so glad I listened to that hunch, this conversation turned out to be fantastic. Victoria is really thought-provoking, inspiring and insightful. She started her career in Hollywood, in TV and films. But today, has more than 15 years' experience in the world of employee comms and engagement. She's a leading voice in our field, particularly in the context of the future of work. We talk here about the wonderful messiness of employing human beings in the workplace and viewing them not as merely extensions of the machinery. But as whole beings. The past broke, says Victoria, but we now have an opportunity to build back better listen out for a really powerful argument that Victoria makes for the business imperative of ensuring people are seen, heard, and given the opportunity to thrive. I genuinely loved everything about this conversation. And I hope you do too.

[Katie 04:00]
Victoria, I am so delighted to invite you on The Internal Comms Podcast.

[Victoria 04:04]
Katie, it is such an honour to be here. I'm so pleased. So, thank you for having me.

[Katie 04:10]

Let's dive straight in. You are talking to us today from Los Angeles. But I know that for more than a decade you worked in New Zealand. I'm just wondering, was there a sort of culture shock when you came back to the States after that? And perhaps more importantly, did that experience for working for a decade in New Zealand? Did that shape your approach and thinking to communication?

[Victoria 04:34]

So yes to both questions, it was absolutely a very, very tough culture shock when I came back and absolutely shaped the approach. You know, my first career actually here in Los Angeles was in film and television and ended up in New Zealand really because of the film industry there and etc. which took me there. When I got there, I was wanting to not be in the entertainment industry and restarted my career and Wellington was a very wonderful place to build a communications career, the city is full of very smart, talented strategic people. So, I was very fortunate things I learned. And I can hear my Kiwi colleagues rolling their eyes at me. But the way I would summarise some of the differences are, you know, New Zealand has always had to fight the talent war, because it competes against currencies as well as other companies. So, for example, when the pound gets strong, we have brain drain, when the Aussie dollar gets strong, we have brain drain. So, because of the mobility of New Zealanders, companies have to fight very hard for talent. So, they're used to that. So very much what we're seeing in this economy now, has always been that way there.

The other thing is that the employment laws favour the employee, right? Whereas here in the US, you can just sort of, you know, fire someone on a Tuesday because you decide you don't like them anymore. And that's not the case there. So, to greatly oversimplify, what I would the way I would characterise it is great people are hard to get, and then you've got to love the ones you're with. Right? So the approach to internal communications is much more strategic, because it's very clear, the business priority and the business case for helping the people that work in your organisation, to be certainly well informed, but engaged and powered, activated, and able to do their best work. So, I think it's a shift in mentality of not treating people and employees as semi disposable. And that was very, very, that was a great culture shock for me when I came back here, this idea that you that people are just sort of semi disposable.

And I was sort of, I think another culture shock coming to this country was America is actually sort of ironically, very Dickensian. And that is a real sort of Stark test, you know, when you fall you fall far we don't have the safety net here, have a New Zealand have in the UK, it's very different. I personally sometimes questioned the idea of job security, you know, people are very focused on having a security of paycheck. But when someone can decide that they can take away your ability to take your kid to the doctor, because they take away your job. And that whole connection to employment and health care is very sort of concerning to me for a number of reasons. I think the other thing is the approach to internal communications is much more tactical, when I came back much more about sort of newsletters and emails and uploading things to the internet, and very sort of very difficult to shift people into more

strategic approach to internal communications. I've seen that change a lot. But it certainly was a certainly was something I struggled with.

[Katie 07:53]
There was so much in that answer, Victoria, that I feel like we already need part two as a conversation with you just to do justice to dig in to what you've given us this insight already to that! Before we move on from New Zealand, I just have to mention Jacinda Ardern, I hope I pronounced that correctly. New Zealand's Prime Minister has been mentioned a few times by my guests for her authentic empathetic style of leadership, particularly during the pandemic, being close to that nation. I'm just wondering, do you have any observations of her impact and her communication style?

[Victoria 08:31]
There's a lot to unpack in that question as well. One of the things I think I would highlight, though, to answer it, and most simply, is, we're going to talk a lot about the future of work. And we're in this time where we're looking really looking at how are we going to be living and working in the next phase of whatever this is. And I really recall that in 2018, when Jacinda Ardern, brought her daughter, her baby daughter to the floor of the UN when she addressed the UN. And actually, as I say it, I'm kind of getting goosebumps. And there's this really iconic photo of her holding her baby or being with her baby sitting on the floor. And you have this image of this working mother right there with her kid. And I look back at that photo. And at the time it was if you think about it, right 2018, you know, different lifetime ago, and at the time, it was quite radical. And that was the moment where I think the future of work started in America. We've seen this play out through the pandemic, this merging and this normalising of parenthood in the workplace, because of course, in the old days, we talked about, you know, only perhaps half meaning it - bringing your whole self to work. And then your whole work moved into your house, like a houseguest that wouldn't leave and save her two years. You know, I think that image of her and how when we think about it now, how appreciated it was is and how much it in some sense forecast where we are today?

[Katie 10:04]
Yeah, absolutely. I had one guest that said to me, it's not a work life balance anymore, Katie, it's a work life collision. But it is that merging of two worlds, isn't it?

[Victoria 10:16]
But it's exciting too. We have permission to do things now. And especially as we start to figure out what is this next phase, we have permission and this kind of almost mandate, I would say, to really explore what that collision is, and what's possible because of it.

[Katie 10:36]

Now, I do like to do quite a bit of research on my guests before I interview them. And it was pretty clear to me very early on, in researching you and your work, that there's a golden thread, I think that runs through your approach to communication. And it's possibly best summed up by phrase you've used, which is human-centric businesses do better. And I just wonder if you can elaborate on this thought, and particularly what's driving the trend towards organisations becoming more human-centric?

[Victoria 11:09]
You know, this is certainly a part of my work in my ethos, and what my company's about, which comes from my work in New Zealand, you know, a very egalitarian culture and, and very focused on people.

I would say that part of my mission is proving that human-centric businesses do better. I was the pre-pandemic that was quite radical. Which is weird and annoying to say, but it was a lot, much bolder statement than it is today. I think the pandemic has really accelerated this trend that we would call looking at human centric workplaces, for some of the reasons I mentioned about you know, that I mentioned like that collision, of work and life. So, I believe that if you are relying on actual human beings to run your business, right, which is to say, you have a business that is not 100% run by machines, or robots, or AI or non-human things, right? If you have actual human beings, messy, human beings with lives and feelings, and dreams and goals, if you're counting on those creatures to run your business, which I believe, I don't know a lot of businesses that are not, maybe you've come across them, but I haven't, then it behoves you to enable and be able to access all of their humaneness, right? That what we call whole human, all of that messy human because the best and smartest people. And what I hear a lot of is companies that want to hire the best and smartest people. So let's just assume that that is the kind of human that one is the king to have run the organisation. The best and smartest people don't just innovate, create, collaborate, lead nine to five, and then go back into their little boxes, like a robot until you go get them the next day, says me.

So creating a world of work where people can be their, you know, authentic, "selves", because that word is sort of overused, but not inaccurate. And creating a world where people can be those cells bring and bring out the best in people. And that is simply better for business than having a company full of people who are trying to behave themselves and look good all the time. So like, so you know, when you're staying at someone's house in your house, you know, speaking of house guests, and you're paranoid about breaking something, right? Like you're paranoid, you're going to like break a glass or something, and you're going to be a bad house guest. And because you're nervous, you of course, you drop a glass or you spilled nail polish remover on the dresser or, you know, you break a chair or something happens, right? And I think about that a lot, because haven't we actually essentially been living in a world of work that was kind of like that? Where we're always uncomfortable like in this country, you know, that you can get fired on a Tuesday, right, that precariousness, I think a lot about women teetering around offices and high heels like literally very precarious, you know, and you think about like, how on earth like, what a stupid idea, you know, what a bad way to get the best out of people! And then suddenly, we ended up in

this world where we kind of got comfortable in our yoga pants and we could finally breathe. And we discovered we could do really good work and actually breathe and not have our feet hurt all the time and not constantly feel like we were about to spill nail polish remover on the dresser.

So, you know, AI and machine learning and robots are getting very, very sophisticated. But the moment we the roles we really need people to do humans involves some of these traits and attributes that are reassociate being very human and not, which is not to say that robots and AI won't get very good at these at some point, but for the time being, and things like creativity, synthesis, empathy, imagination, intuition, strategy, communication, critical thinking. So, the jobs of the future are very likely to be about how humans enable technology, and how we work alongside it, at least for sort of the next 10 to 15 years. And I don't know about you, I really don't dare think longer than 10 to 15 years, it seems very long time with my one of my favourite futurists, Bob Johansen would say, the next 10 years is going to be a love story about humans and machines, and how we work alongside.

So, by 2025, machine learning AI machines will have eliminated about 85 million jobs around the world. But it will have created 97 million new jobs. And those jobs are not about people behaving themselves, and they're not about people being cogs in a machine, they're not about pressing a button or punching a time clock. Those jobs are the ones that are going away. So, if you love those jobs, you're going to be in for a rude awakening. These new jobs and what we really need people to do is about analysing, sympathising and connecting the dots. It's things like you know, data analysts and scientists and, digital marketing and strategy and process automation, how we become specialists, right, and how we connect the dots and put take all these kinds of very human attributes together and make sense of the world and enable technology. So, if that's the world that you're building, and that's the world of work that we're creating, then, really creating a human centric workplace where those people can, can thrive is, I believe, mandatory. And then when we come back to internal communication, you see how creating what I think of as 'surround sound', a mesh of touchpoints, and employee experience and communication is critical to that. That helps people to do their best work.

[Katie 17:10]
That answer just completely typifies why I love doing this show. The passion, the insight, the way that you express yourself, that's everything you've said, just chimes with me so deeply and I believe what you're saying very, very sincerely, myself. And I think you've painted a picture of the future, which is enormously, not only exciting, but somehow better for humanity, I think, as well. And a future of work that out of the awfulness of the pandemic, which I think is fast forwarded all of this, that we might be entering a more humane world of work, potentially. So, thank you so much for that.

[Victoria 17:53]
Well, I think it's imperative, because there is a lot of darkness in the world, and certainly right now, and certainly, we're in the middle of quite a lot of darkness. And it's scary, right? A lot of things are scary, and

they have been scary, and they think they will continue to be. So, one of the things that what you look at humanity is you know, and I say this again, like what can we do? Right? What can we do? And optimism is a radical act. It's active, we have to choose to find this hope and this optimism and move forward and look at what are the levers we have, I believe that business can be a force for good. And a lot of our work and work we do you know, our company is about proving that I believe that we can, in the midst of all of this chaos, create small little pockets of the world, in our businesses and our organisations that are a testament to humanity and what we can create.

[Katie 18:52]
And the Edelman Trust Barometer certainly would bear that out. Actually, that trust is shifting to employers, the media that employers put out to their employees rather than other forms of sources of information. For example, I'm just wondering what a human-centric approach to communication actually looks like, when the rubber hits the road, you know, in practice, and I'm guessing, really, really knowing your audience and you've described the messiness of, of the audience, which I love that phrase, can you talk a little bit about how you get under the skin of an audience and really identify who you've got there and how you maybe even segment that audience?

[Victoria 19:32]
You know, audience segmentation is key and internal communications professionals have always been good at audience segmentation. But to create really great employee experience, we have to go beyond that. And I think this is an area where we can learn a lot from our marketing colleagues. I talk a lot about your EX has to equal your CX that you can't deliver really great customer experience unless you're delivering really great employee experience because eventually you know you are what we eat, potentially what's going on inside your company is going to show on the outside? We see that in 1000 ways every day, certainly, we ask and so looking more and more this trend of how we mirror the same level of care, specificity, attention to detail and segmentation, and touchpoints and customer journey the same way that we mirror that, internally. Our profession hasn't traditionally been sophisticated in the approach, because we've never really been asked, sometimes we have been, the more we can use some of the same approaches to customer experience internally, things like design thinking principles, how we can understand and leverage the complete employee lifecycle, how we can do more employee journey mapping more personas all the way through an employees journey with us, the better we can understand finally segment those avatars, those personas, demographics, psychographics their pain points, desires, drivers, the better we can help connect them and deliver that employee experience that meets them exactly where they are, helps them to perform, encourages them to stay and even advocate for the organization, the better off we'll be.

Now, the reasons why we haven't done this traditionally is because if you think about it, and that legacy approach to employees have to do what we tell them. So, we give them a pay check, we just will tell them what to do. And then they'll do it, versus the way we approach customers, which is building that

relationship with them, and really meeting them where they are in the moment in terms of looking at purchase decisions, right? Building that know, like, and trust influencing behaviours, and look, how we how we can help them and get close to them, so that they purchase and then purchase again, remain loyal. Because it's permission based, they don't have to buy from us they could buy from someone else. Versus internally, we've never done that, we've never asked for permission. We've always just assumed that go back to the EVP that given that get that what we get is compliance based on this exchange for this paycheck. And that approach is obviously not working anymore, it probably never really did. But if you want to get the best people and sometimes, I always bristle when people talk about it as internal marketing or internal PR, because really, we're asking people to run our businesses, we're trusting these people is not a customer is not a transaction. We're trusting these humans, to run our businesses to act on our behalf to lead others to lead themselves and others and to stay and do all these things. It's a lot more complicated and important in a relationship. And then even that of our customers.

[Katie 22:52]
I completely agree with you that I am seeing more clients become much more interested in more finely tuned segmentation, properly thought through personas, not just based on, you know, fine, fairly rudimentary demographics. But as you say, psychographics, something a bit deeper. But also, I've always thought in a way, the difference between an employee and a customer is that employees see under the hood, you know, they see behind the curtain. So, when you target them, there is a degree of honesty and authenticity that you just have to have, because they know what's really going on. And now you can argue I guess that the walls of all organisations are becoming more transparent, so therefore, you can't really fall customers either. But you definitely can't fall employees. So meeting them where they are, I guess, becomes even more important, when looked through that lens.

[Victoria 23:48]
We're counting on these people to do quite a lot. Right. And that comes back to what I mentioned about you know, these messy humans and these, you know, exquisite humans, the more that we can draw out the very best in them and enable and empower them and activate them. The better our businesses, the better and stronger our businesses are going to be.

[Katie 24:11]
You recently contributed to an article on LinkedIn about internal communications predictions for this year, 2022. And you wrote: (links in the shownotes, of course, listeners) listening is the new talking. And I've also heard you use the phrase 'analogue listening'. What does this look like in practice? So when you say 'analogue listening', what do you mean? What does it look like in practice?

[Victoria 24:38]
So one of the other huge aspects of human-centric internal communication is obviously as you say, listening, and communication professionals obviously know what I mean when we talk about

symmetrical two way communication. When you stop to think about it, though, it's actually pretty radical and rare for an organisation to work that way. So two ways the metric of communication that like messages or people are sitting down, messages are coming down and going up, and that it is balanced, right? Sometimes I recommend for clients what I call a two-way 'Ask Me Anything', employees can ask a leader the question a question and then the leader can ask the employees a question. So that you have this, what is actually called a dialogue or a conversation, which is like, quite radical, I realized. Part of this is this idea of communicating with, and not just to employees. And we certainly saw this during the pandemic, you know, when we first did this research in 2020. And I asked about voice of the employee, people would say, "Yeah, we're doing a lot of surveys, pulse surveys we're doing, we're doing surveys". And we also know there's some really cool HR tech there that says talks about listening and being a listening platform, and some really cool ways that we can do more and kind of analyse more data and get more employee sentiment and that's really wonderful, right? Because it is this idea of listening is becoming more sophisticated.

However, what I mean by analogue listening, is, again, I hope people are sitting down, actually having conversations with people. So we do a lot, a lot of listening work. And it's one of those things, you know, with our clients, one of the things honestly, it's often easier to do from the outside, because it's easier to sometimes have these conversations with an objective third party.

So, for example, examples of analogue listening would be certainly focus groups, but personally, I love employee roundtables, because where focus groups often give people the opportunity to tell you what's wrong, or what they don't like, roundtables are a very constructive way to bring a cross functional group together for a facilitated conversation around solving a specific problem or co-creating solutions, which is very helpful in terms of activating people and moving them out of this complaining aspect or telling you what's not working, and actually asking them to help come up with what are the levers that we have, what can I do? What can we do? What do we have available? We can't change everything, but what in our sweetheart, personally, can we contribute to improve the situation in our teams as managers? Right? So, and that is where we're acting people, you know, shifting people out of being disempowered and this disempowered cog in the machine to an empowered professional with agency. And that is better for everyone. Because of course, the more agency you feel that you have in your in your role, your substantive role at work, of course, that extends to how you are in your personal life, right? And so, becomes this virtuous circle. So, when issues are surfaced through listening, that also means that organisations truly are beholden to make good on the promise of listening of the listen, right?

So don't waste people's time, listening and asking them a bunch of questions and pulling them away from their jobs and acting like you care enough to have that conversation with them. If you're not actually going to follow through, you know, back to EVP. This is one of the things of that action plan because when you go to find out and do that consultation, you'll find out a lot of things that are not ideal in your organisation. Part of the promise there is to look at "alright, well, these are some things we have

to you know, after we had CVP part of making good on that social contract" is looking at some of those issues that have have come up. We see very clearly these days. What happens when organisations fall down on this promise. We see it and quit rates, we see in this trend of, you know, quick talk, I don't know if you've ever gone down the rabbit hole of watching quit tock tick tock videos about people quitting. And they'll tell you exactly why they quit that employer in quite a lot of detail. So, when people quit, they're not quiet about it. Well, we've certainly see, I don't know if you've watched on LinkedIn, former formeremployeesofbetter.com. Right, who will tell you very clearly what their experience of that was. We see it in walkout strikes, employee activism, whistleblowing. So, this idea that we can patch things under the under the covers what's happening inside.

If we fall down on that promise that we need to people, it will become an external issue. And so, it's important listening is the new talking. And action is the new listing.

[Katie 29:50]
So much in that answer's got me thinking.

It sort of threads back to what you said earlier about "the whole human". And if you go to the workforce and say: you've identified problem, we're also going to ask you to help us solve it. Because we want your whole brain, not the brain that just, we employ for this task that you do day to day. But we think you've got ideas, perspectives, opinions beyond that, and we want to access all of your brain to help solve other problems. That's a compliment. And I think a lot of employees would jump, we know that they jump at the chance. The only reason as you say they tend to hold back after a while is when they keep saying, well, I've told you, but you're not listening and you're not doing anything as a result, I guess.

And as you say, that's why what happens next has to be so important. And I do wonder sometimes whether it's simply enough sometimes to say, these are the issues, and we're working through a response on these, but we want you to know that we've listened. I mean, is that, is that good enough? What have you seen, I suppose, I guess that would be a better question of how organisations can go back to people to just reassure them that their input has been properly listened to and appreciated?

[Victoria 31:04]
I think so much of it comes down to goodwill, right? And trust. And which also speaks to psychological safety, right? And trust in the workplace. You know, you can buy yourself some time by acknowledging that you've listened. But if people don't see action, then you are on borrowed time.

And one of the things I think, though, for internal communications professionals is sometimes I think we miss a trick, because very often we're doing things. We're doing a lot of things that are action, we do sometimes forget to tell the humans that we forget to connect the dots for them to say, 'Hey, you said this over here, and we heard this, and this thing is happening over here this other way, which may seem

disconnected.' If we don't tell them, like you mentioned that, that some of the issues like for example, don't get me started on open enrolment benefits, or open enrolment in this country, because open enrolment is huge missed opportunity for telling culture story, right? So you told us that this was an issue over here, your childcare or the way your health insurance is structured, or something like that? Well, open enrolment period is, is coming up.

And so, we've made some changes to the way packages, you know, benefits are, we're going to sit down with you, we're not just going to send out a bunch of things or do a quick webinar, right. But we want to talk to you about why you said this, 'you said we did, you said we did' right? And always making that connection of joining those dots. So, we've made some really important changes that are in response to what you said was important to you. So that they see that action. But very often there's things that are going on where we can draw that, you know, thread through, and we miss it. Because we're not because we're not thinking strategically because we're not looking at all the opportunities.

Maybe it's my background in Hollywood, we often talk about studios talk about tentpole events or tentpole features, right, which is that this idea that you have some very key like big marquee movies, right, throughout the year, that aren't your whole brand. And your whole kind of narrative in your revenue target is a whole sort of structure a strategic structure of the way films are released in the old days. They call them tentpole events, because they hold everything up and everything else is connected to them. I think sometimes we miss the opportunity to look strategically at that whole year, and look at all the pieces that we have of the story that we want to tell them that we want people to understand and the experience we want to create for them. We don't link them up for people and everything feels disjointed.

[Katie 33:54]
Such a good point. And I think that's why I certainly noticed a lot more interest in in message frameworks. So, a one page message framework that says, 'This is the vision, you know, this is the purpose', however, organisations want to articulate that. And essentially, there are four or five supporting messages that underpin that. And underneath that there might be a series of initiatives, as you say, all over the organisations are different stages in different departments. But that enables you to identify those, make the link up the chain directly to the purpose of the vision, but you can't get there unless you start with a clear message framework.

[Victoria 34:36]
I agree with you and same with EVP, what I interpret it as is this desire to sort of this, this desire to manage chaos. You know, we hear we need a way to wrap our arms around this complexity. And that's another I think, really critical role for the internal communications professional is we can hold the complexity, we are naturally good at connecting the dots at being boundary spanners that working across the organisation and making different holding all of the sort of logistic complexity, but the

rapidly evolving contexts, right? In a way that is not natural for many other functions where they excel as being more linear, and we are more lateral, right? But you're exactly right. It's like how do we help organisations to connect those dots and manage that complexity and feel like we have consistency in a very chaotic environment. And you're right, messaging frameworks, EVP, those are some really great tools to help them.

[Katie 35:37]
You're also making me think, though, if the future of work is going to be human-centric, and all about the benefit of the messiness of the real human, then internal communications pros generally are quite well, they're people people, aren't they, in general, I think. And so actually, that could be a secret weapon, when it comes to adding value inside our businesses, because we embrace and love and identify with the messiness of humanity, perhaps more than other departments. So actually, what we sometimes beat ourselves up about for not being seen as a business strength, after all, in the brave new world might be something that's incredibly powerful.

[Victoria 36:22]
I often talk about 'We the People, People', right, and, you know, we certainly simulate seeing some of the best contemporary functions, I don't really see this breakdown of silos, we have, you know, communications professionals, we have HR professionals, which you know, more and more people in talent or you know, have other names, because HR sometimes doesn't fully express a lot of the sort of strategic ability of a truly contemporary function, IT, Ops, DEI, all these people, people looking at how we can weave together and create a really comprehensive, holistic, human centric employee experience.

[Katie 36:57]
I like it. Now you recently published an Insights report. Again, we'll make sure the link is in the show notes. And you interviewed a really diverse range of businesses, business leaders, I should say, from different sectors, they were at different stages of development in different parts of the world. We've already touched on quite a few things from that report. But one of the things you mentioned is 'ruthless prioritization' and I often think that strategy is about deciding what you're not going to do. You know, that's the harder part of strategy, isn't it? So, what does 'ruthless prioritisation' actually look like in practice?

[Victoria 37:34]
This is sort of the paradox of this age, isn't it? There's so much to do, you know, someone in the report said, we have to look at balancing need versus speed. And being very clear about what we're going to do and what we're going to ask of people, pre pandemic, we'd really gotten used to looking at how we could get the most out of people, right, how we could pull as much juice energy out of our employees as possible. And there was this pace that had really turned our workers into sort of 'fast fashion'. We've almost been artificially productive for a long time, because we never truly reflected the actual cost of

human workers. And some of these non-cash costs, like their sanity, their family's well-being, their physical and emotional health, their quality of life, you know, we started treated employees like that sweater that we buy, you know, looks pretty good but it won't last that long, but it's also not that expensive. And it's actually made not under terribly humane circumstances. And making it and getting it to us overnight takes a significant toll on the environment. And so, it's not actually sustainable. We have an artificially low cost of this, you know, sweater, but it actually is quite expensive in other ways that are not visible to us.

I think we've sort of basically been living in that world of fast fashion, you know, when I think about these employees and talking about being semi disposable, you know, sort of like ocean plastics, right? We have been taking them, using them up, and dumping them, you know, in a very unsustainable way.

We're seeing it we're seeing the quit rates, we're seeing it in this, you know, and people just not just not putting up with it anymore. And you can say you know, it's market cyclicality. And you can say that it has to do with, you know, the economy and the strength of the job market, etc. I think there are some things that have fundamentally shifted in one way or another. We have to stop treating our employees like single use water bottles, I think the jig is up.

So to the question about ruthless prioritisation and managing burnout, one leader that we spoke to you talked about this as a critical imperative. And they said that if they had five strategic priorities, her job, she really viewed her job was to help her team to focus on the top two must do what was most important, what needed to be done now, and the ones that would have the biggest impact that would help them win in the market, the ones that were going to have the biggest ROI. And to focus on those, and the next three were next, or not yet. And I remember asking her said, 'Can you please make the business case for me for doing less?' She said, 'Yes, we prioritise the ones, we're that are going to move the needle, we do the things that are going that are most urgent and important, and are going to have that biggest impact in the business. And we have, and we have to go through it, because if we don't, I won't have any people to do this work at all.'

So I think that extends back to the way we communicate and back to audience segmentation, our approach to how we talk to people, how we help them to understand priorities, how we engage them, and activate them and help them understand where to focus on what's most important, why it's most important, and how they can contribute has to become much more sophisticated. It's not one size fits all, it was never one size fits, right? But we've got to get better and better at working in finer and finer brushstrokes, much more like we would with customers. And that takes time. And it takes resource and it's not fast. And this kind of greater care of the way we connect and communicate with people is going to be more resource intensive. You're going to have to make greater investments and really helping people to thrive. I often think back to like the beginning, I remember the first organization, I don't know if you recall this, when the first social media manager that came into a team. And you think, I remember

thinking, 'This is crazy, a whole person, just to do social media, what are they going to do all day?' and then suddenly, they were building out their team. And there were many people doing social media. And I thought, well hang on a sec, is every company in the world going to have to just add all these new jobs? And it seems like, it seems radical right to suddenly just expand on all these new people when we didn't have this a year ago, why do we suddenly need it now? And I think we're kind of in that same moment here, where we have under and this came through in the resource, right? We have many orders to say we've under resourced internal communications, we've under resource employee experience, we haven't given this what it really needs to be successful and sustainable. And I think we'll see this shift towards actually properly resourcing the function in a way that is meaningful.

[Katie 42:57]
And you've just made such a fantastic argument for us not taking every business priority we're given from our leadership team or our senior stakeholders at face value, but actually trying to get under the skin of all of those 17 priorities, weigh them up, ask questions about them, is there an order of priority, all of that stuff is such a, from what you're saying, is such a valuable task that we can undertake.

[Victoria 43:24]
And I don't know about you, I find, you know, when you're in house, these are very challenging conversations to have. It makes you quite unpopular at times. And I find that it is one of the kind of best parts about being a third party coming in and being consultant because very often we can be a true ally to those in house and help them to have some of these, you know, braver conversations and help set them up for success in a way that is very hard when you're when you're in, you know, in the trenches. And then also, of course, goes back to psychological safety. But it does require bravery. And I think we're in the moment for that.

[Katie 44:08]
I think your report suggests that start-ups and those kind of pre-IPO just before they become Public Listed Enterprises, but they're kind of reimagining the employee experience in a slightly different way. They're slightly braver, maybe more agile about how they're looking at their employee experience, and I don't know if I'm reading a report, right, and whether that's a true observation. Is there anything that these younger, more nimble organisations are doing that more established organisations can learn from?

[Victoria 44:38]
It's very interesting. Yeah, I would say I would call them mature start-up. So maybe just pre-IPO, maybe post IPO, you know, a few 1000 employees, so they're not little, but they're growing, they've got scale, they've got complexity. But what is different about them is that especially in the SAS space, software as a service and in tech spaces, they knew - there's really smart ones, not all of them, but smart ones - knew from the beginning how hard they were going to have to fight for tech talent, and hot markets, they

knew that their success was always going to be linked to them being able to get products, you know, software engineers, product managers, right? They knew that there was always they were always going to be dependent on white hot talent that was always going to be in demand, right? So they built themselves and they built their people functions differently. They built them cross functionally. So that you'd have you know, and I almost don't, I almost don't care what you call people, but you'd have someone ahead of Employee Experience and Communications and Operations and DEI and NIT and HR and all those functions work together, because as I said, like creating this seamless mesh, all those roles to play in the touchpoints, to an employee experiences every day, right all the way through the second, they often would bring in a lot of that marketing expertise, much more input for some, you know, developing personas, journey mapping, more roadmaps, they just do a more strategic cross functional approach. Because they were never under the illusion that talent wasn't going to be something they were going to have to fight for it to attract, and retain.

And we see this all the time of person we see it certainly, unfortunately, often with DEI initiatives, a lot of focus on bringing in diverse talent, but then they get in and the experience is nothing like what they were sold. And they turn right around. And that's a very expensive problem to have. So, we understand it, often they see with these legacy companies and legacies, I guess, any company that you know, didn't exist more than five years ago. It's hard for them to set themselves up this way. Because the mindsets different, they were built differently. The silos are already there. It's very hard to you know, break them down. And you know, sometimes I see - and I personally love working with - more mature organisations that have never had an internal communication dysfunction. Because they can they come and they sometimes they're like, 'Oh, God, we should have done this, we know we've under invested, we know we should have done this before.' And to be honest, if you had we'd have to redo it now. Right? Same as EVPs. Maybe had an EVP before, it's actually time to redo it anyway. So, but now, we can actually build a contemporary function that's future-focused, that's all these things that we're talking about. We don't have to undo right, we don't have to turn the oil tanker around, we can actually build something that's fit for purpose and appropriate for where we are now and is actually going to set you up for success. But the other thing I see a lot with this with some of those mature start-ups and in SAS companies, they understand storytelling, the importance of organisational storytelling, they understand creating sticky, relevant content for people, they understand the importance of culture in connection, and especially in a remote indoor hybrid world. They understand that all that is table stakes.

[Katie 48:14]
Let's switch tack very slightly, because I want to touch on the role of managers in this new, slightly more messy but more humane world of work. We've still got line managers, I'm sure you've talked about them as culture carriers. You've also used the phrase listening posts, which I absolutely love. What role can and should managers play in this new emerging world of work? And how I suppose can we as IC managers, IC teams, better support managers?

[Victoria 48:47]

It's a really exciting area, I think it's one of the biggest levers to pull that we have. You know, if you think about it, managers, you know, I sometimes I say small as the new big, right? So, if you think about it, a manager leads a small cohort, a small team of people that they know quite well that they are able to connect with, they understand what they're working on, right? They're very close to this cohort, and then is replicated all over an organisation, right?

If we take a sort of traditional, you know, structure and hierarchy, and we sort of put matrix models aside for a moment. Managers have the ability to, certainly in terms of big picture, org wide strategy information, localise and contextualise that for their teams. So help them understand "What's in this for me, what are you asking me to do, what behaviours, and what does this mean in our context for our work, for our team, for our division, for our business unit?' So that's one thing where we especially in rapidly very dynamic and rapidly changing contexts, is very important. If you think about it also men managers are in a position to communicate that information back up, and to senior leaders. And they have quite a good across the organisation, they have quite good intelligence and an understand sentiment and they can help signal, right, where issues may be emerging, so that they can be addressed earlier in the piece.

Because of that, and sort of unique position in the organisation, when we think about - and I talk a lot about values as behaviours - so when we're talking about culture, what do we want to create, and the connection between culture and employee experience, as managers are really well positioned to help their teams, individual contributors, or individuals. And, again, back to those behaviours, 'How is what I do every day? How does that align with our values? And how does that help me contribute to the big picture in my understanding of it?' So it's interesting, because it's like, in some sense, you know, we have this traditional idea of one size fits all, and it's very sort of top heavy communications model. But in some sense, managers are representative of what we're talking about in terms of much greater segmentation. Because across this layer, you have it, but it has to be every information and programmes and everything we do, has to be really much more specific for different groups so that managers can activate their employees.

In that way, we're creating culture, sometimes I get the question about like having different cultures across business units, and you know, in regions, etc. If everything is laddering, back up to your values, purpose, strategy, and it is a local - whatever that means - embodiment of that, or representation of that as we interpret it in our context. So, it might look different business units did business unit region to region, team to team. But if everything is aligned to those values, here's what we said was important, and is an expression of that. And then, of course, you can have different cultures across the organisation that may have different characteristics but are all actually very much in alignment.

[Katie 52:14]

That's really, really thought-provoking. That actually what you can do with managers is set up the guardrails or sort of paint the picture of the kind of outside of the football pitch. But within that, of course, what's local to you, your geography, the type of work you do, the type of people you employ, whether you're - I don't making this up now - but whether a shift worker, for example, or the kinds of customer or client you might be serving, but I can imagine listeners going goodness me that's, that's actually quite a lot more work. It is quite a lot more work, isn't it?

[Victoria 52:48]
Is and sitting mean about our role as internal communications professionals, certainly holding the complexity, the nuance, and that's the back to those finer brushstrokes, right? It is more work and requires a more sophisticated approach. That, you know, if you're like me, it's very exciting.

[Katie 53:07]
Yes, yes. Because you're getting into the detail. I'm trying not to say the word granular here, but it is interesting, when you get into the detail will becomes much more interesting soon as you dive into the detail, which is

[Victoria 53:20]
Its craft, isn't it? Because where we really get to express our craft, you know, I talk a lot about the importance of being a 'strategic creative', or a 'creative strategic person', this blend of you know, and certainly talked about when I think about my first career in Hollywood, I think that a lot of that being able in story is a great place to practice this. You have this architecture of a story and structure, and you know, can be movie scripts, it certainly can be formulaic. But it holds, right, as a skeleton, and then you put the meat on the bones and you put in, you flesh it out, and you create something that's individual and unique and new. But you always have that the bones or strategy there that you then get to apply your craft, your creativity to, well, so then if you extend that back into an organisation, using managers as an example, right, and culture, that will all be there, or they may all look like kind of different animals. But if the bones are the same, and they're all connected to the same thing, then what you have is sort of like a really beautiful, cool zoo, you know?

[Katie 54:28]
You've stolen my next question, because I was going to ask you about your film background and what you've taken from that, that still influences you today in your work. And of course, the craft of storytelling as you so rightly say, that's going to be a huge part of that. You've also written about how we need to create content that doesn't, I think you've sent demand attention, but more so invites it. And I think I've also often also thought, you know, the same thought in the sense that employees do not owe us their attend shouldn't just because we give them a pay check, but with something we have to earn, I guess? Any other reflections on how your background in that craft of filmmaking, how it influences your ability to sort of capture and hold the attention of an audience?

[Victoria 55:17]
When we think about that permission, or that relationship, or the respect, I guess, is one word of not demanding an employee's attention that it has to be earned in the same way we would earn it from a customer. And, you know, I think sometimes about that value that we put on employees. If you think about teachers or day-care workers, these are people that were interesting to educate and care for our children. And I often think like, I don't even have children, but I often think these people should be making a million dollars a year, right? Like, what wouldn't you pay these people who are developing our future leaders, like what could be more important, right? And yet, they do not make a million dollars a year. And similarly, with employees, you know, we are asking these people to run our business and to show up every day, and play nicely, to collaborate, and innovate and be creative, and not quit, and develop themselves professionally, and develop a growth mindset, to have empathy, and to balance their personal and professional lives seamlessly. And apparently, we want them to come to the office sometimes. And beyond that, we're also asking them to actually be quite self-actualised, and contribute to the big picture, going right back climbing up Maslow's hierarchy of needs, right? We're actually asking them to operate all the way up and down that hierarchy of needs. I think sometimes about DEI, or, you know, the level of self-awareness and self-management, that is really required of non BIPOC employees, to not only make a positive contribution to others, employee experience, but to help dismantle systemic racism. And at a bare minimum, right to manage their own unconscious biases, and being very acutely aware of microaggressions and where they might be diminishing others experience.

Think about that, this ask that we're asking people to build new muscles, right, and be vigilant and how they do this every single day. And that is becoming table stakes, right? This is not a relationship or a dynamic that we can treat casually, or that we can just demand of people, right? This is actually a very sophisticated and mature relationship we want with our people. Because we really need our workers of the world to be quite evolved human beings. These are the people who are running on to count our business. So when you think about that, and bring it back to how we communicate and connect with them, it does, it requires that same level of care and attention that we would use externally. And again, that's where it gets fun because how would we do that? And it's not the same for everyone and it requires, again, finer brushstrokes, and really like, cool creative ways of bringing people on this journey. And I often talk about a change journey with no end in sight. And I think remembering, you know, we need these people a lot more than they need us. And it's not just because of this talent market is because of what we're asking them to be. So, I'm not sure why you wouldn't invest heavily in creating a very powerful connection with them every day.

[Katie 58:53]
As you're saying that I'm thinking of the absolute futility, disrespect and uselessness of the all colleague, email, you know, the dear colleague email that goes to everybody. You know, as you're describing what we want, what we need, what we're demanding from people sending them something like that. Just, it is

just so wrong. In the brave new world, again, switching tack, I'd love to ask you a quick reflection on something I've been reading a lot about lately, which is Generation Z. I'm guessing those aged around 10 to 25, I know the age bracket tends to vary depending on how people categorise it. But I have a kind of innate weariness, I guess, of generalising people purely based on their age. So, this whole conversation has to be caveat it with that if that's okay, because I just just have that natural aversion to labels but do you have any reflections on this new cohort of employees that has just entered the workplace?

[Victoria 1:00:04]
I also share your weariness, and I'm fascinated by them. And I love kind of studying them. And I love studying generational trends and thing is very interesting to kind of understand what people are thinking and how they're different than the, you know, we have, you know, lots of generations in the workforce. And we think about how we're wanting people to interact and how they are and how we can leverage that best, you know, and I've seen, you know, really great examples of, of boomers and millennials partnering on a project, because they bring very different perspectives. And they are not at all in competition, because they're just generationally, there's, you know, they're so far removed, and it actually can be quite complimentary, but I share that weariness.

And so, even though I love studying it, here's what I think one of the biggest ways kind of to both embrace and honour the specificity and that there are lots of nuances in generations, which is really what might be more helpful is to come back and focus more on psychographics than demographics. And so going back to personas, it's looking at, you know, the what are the sort of more nuanced values, drivers pain points, desires, dreams, goals? Role type actually, is interesting, because, you know, very often sometimes the way of different professions will interpret information differently. So, for example, engineers communicate very differently and have very different communication needs to marketers, right? Tenure, how long has been an accompany our career phase or stage certainly, you know, life stage, right? Communication styles preferences. So I think there's a whole lot in there that can cross a lot of generations. And that gives you more wiggle room, in terms of in terms of do it so that when we go and we kind of are studying Gen Z and reading about, you know, they, they're like this and they're purpose driven, or this, it asks, what it does is calls like, 'Okay, well, here's this new, here's this cohort, that it says they're very purpose driven, and very tech savvy. Okay, so we know that purpose driven tech savvy are some qualities or some attributes or some psychographics that we need to really be mindful of in our communication.' But it doesn't necessarily all have to be attributed to that generation. Right? I as you can tell, I'm also very purpose driven and I'm not Gen Z. So, I think that can be a helpful way around to both be interested in curious about how people are behaving and responding without painting ourselves into a corner.

[Katie 1:02:57]
Can I just ask you a quick question that sometimes worries me slightly when we're developing personas for clients and that is that they might end up with you know, and I think it's often sort of five, six, I think

maximum seven personas, I don't think I don't know whether you've got sort of an idol number, but then I worry that they potentially haven't yet got the channels or the sophistication within their channel mix, to then target these personas effectively? Does that make sense? And can you see that sometimes as being a little bit of a gap?

[Victoria 1:03:31]
I agree six, seven personas, you know, we prioritise them based on sort of balancing urgent and important because you can't, you know, you can't cover everyone, right? You get into quite a lot of- you can do quite a disservice by trying to actually represent everyone. So it is that is the tricky needle to thread. But you're right, one of the things that it reveals, is where we don't have the channels or the tactics, or the ways to communicate with them effectively, that then comes back to the manager. Right? Because sometimes the way in that is actually back to analogue right, is actually more direct connection with those manager groups.

I also believe in sort of managers or people too, we can of course, treat them as a communications channel in some sense, and they are a very good one. At the same time, they are humans who are trying to figure a lot of stuff out themselves. And so, we always have to check them both. As a sort of, we always have to be mindful of balancing and making sure that we are supporting them and doing their roles and not just kind of, you know, doing the fast fashion kind of nothing. So it's an interesting balance of really embracing them in a lot of different ways.

[Katie 1:04:52]
Yeah, don't ask them to make their team really excited about the future of the company and inspired if you haven't you It inspired them in the future as a company. So, make them a priority audience for sure. I think you're absolutely right. Do you have any advice - this is my final question you, you've been so wonderful in the way that you've talked about the future of our profession so I can't not ask you this question - do you have any advice for an internal comms practitioner who's maybe at that midpoint in their career, or at a certain place where they're really keen to step up sort of take it to the next level? What experience should they be seeking? What skills should they be looking at developing further or honing?

[Victoria 1:05:41]
Certainly, the future is about is for people who can think really laterally who understand the business, who understand economics, who understand a lot of different aspects of the business, and can connect the dots and see where things are related and can create can create a world, right? Where things make sense to people. And so because let's face it, not a lot makes sense, right? We have to create meaning and help people to, to make the world a safe, okay place where we can actually get stuff done. Because the world is can be very scary sometimes. So, the more we understand, the more curious we are as a curiosity is such a huge imperative. And building contexts, you know, and I do see not to attribute it to

generations, you know, but I do see younger generations, millennials and Gen Z, they build context very quickly, I sometimes I think of them, like human iPhones, right? Because, like one of the things that I learned is like, you can find out how to do anything if you google it three times, and watch a YouTube video. And it fills me with confidence. And I sure do tell my 88-year-old father that when he asks me how to do things, I'm like, 'You have Google. Don't ask me, you've got Google. I don't know. I'm just going to Google it.'

But I think that curiosity and willingness to find things out, to figure out how to do things is really vital. I think the flip side of that is, this is not a time for half measures. We need to move quickly, we have a lot of really urgent problems in the world that we need to solve. We are in this moment. And especially you know, at the moment, at this moment, companies are starting to emerge and starting to think about returning to the office and what that looks like, and it's what makes me nervous is there is this default, I guess, for lack of a better word, to go back to the things the way things were before because it's what we know, right? It is what we can see. And we will always try to match what we do next with what has worked in the past, right? That is wrongheaded. And it will not work, we are not the same. And more importantly, we have an opportunity now, to really reimagine, you know, the past broke, right? We really have a chance to reimagine, reset, reinvent, and to make a significant seismic shift and a big leap forward in this world of work. The role the internal communications professional is to create context to help make this world real and to connect and communicate with people so that they can thrive. So I would really encourage people to keep thinking big and keep looking for how we can make radical shifts forward in our organisation that that will be better for everyone, but it requires bravery.

[Katie 1:08:56]
Thank you for that really inspiring. It was incredibly inspiring, and a picture of the future that we can help create. I hope you've got time for our quick-fire questions. What would you do tomorrow if you knew for certain you could not fail?

[Victoria 1:09:14]
I would go to all those mature startups, those really smart mature startups that understand employee experience, comms, and I would hire all of those people to come work for me. I would hire them all away. Those people are not cheap and they're extremely talented and I really do believe they're the future. Some of the work they're doing is truly innovative. And yeah, I would hire them all and have them come work for me.

[Katie M 1:09:44]
Sounds great. Any you don't want, send them my way.

[Victoria 1:09:48]
Will do, there won't be any less though because if I can't fail, I'm grabbing them all.

Katie 1:09:55]

If you could go back in time, what careers advice would you give your younger self?

[Victoria 1:10:00]

Stop trying to fit in and behave. Stop asking for permission and get busy changing the world because we're running out of time. But again, that bravery of you know, that we do see sometimes in younger generations and Gen Z, Millennials, like, you know, I saw this was it a I think it was a Wall Street Journal podcast last week, just that said that 'workers are just not as afraid anymore of their employers, they're not as afraid to tell them that they don't want or what they don't like.' And that was very inspiring to me. And so I would, I would want my younger self to be bolder, and not waste time.

[Katie 1:10:44]

Such good advice. How would you complete this sentence world class internal communication is ___?

[Victoria 1:10:53]

A vital contributor in creating a brilliant world of work, in which people can thrive, and businesses can be a force for good.

[Katie 1:11:05]

Perfect. Cut and paste that listeners! What book, it doesn't have to be a book, it could be a website, film, report, should we all be reading to better understand the world of work leadership business strategy?

[Victoria 1:11:22]

100% the book is called [The New Leadership Literacies](#) by my favourite futurist Bob Johansen. And he wrote it in 2017 and it talks about really a lot of aspects. But he actually, in so many ways predicted so much of what happened, I've used it as a Bible again, and again, in trying to understand make sense of the world. He talks about in the future, everything that can be distributed, will be distributed. And there's 1000 gems in there. But one of the things he talks a lot about is what will be required of leaders in the future. And this real, real emphasis on whole human that leaders will need to be very, certainly smart, but you know, physically strong and mentally strong and psychically strong because of emphasis on, you will really need to be able to manage yourself beautifully before you can lead other people. And everything that includes, and also what it means to be able to what will be required in to thriving in a VUCA world. So VUCA being Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. And who we need to be as leaders, and this really is relevant everywhere, in order to be able to manage this complexity, and uncertainty, ambiguity, volatility, that that requires a real study core as an individual. And so I recommend that book to everyone.

[Katie 1:12:53]

So interesting, what you've just said, because I had William, Professor William Cullen on the show, who basically came up with a concept of personal engagement at work in 1990. We talked about the future of leaders and the perfect leader being exactly what you've described. And I went through my list, you know, happy with complexity, ambiguity, emotion. And he said, 'You've almost got it right, Katie, forgot one key thing. They've got to be happy with that, first of all, within themselves,' and I said, 'Ah, it's exactly as you said' yeah, really fascinating. So at the end, we give you a billboard for millions to see, and you can put on that billboard, anything you like, what is your message on your billboard going to be?

[Victoria 1:13:42]
I struggle with this question I'll be honest, most of all, you know, what comes to mind is something they say all the time, which is going to sound like contradictory, which is 'talk to the humans', right, which really should be 'talk with the humans.' But what I mean by that is very often when people are doing things or saying things I'm like, Okay, well, did you talk to any humans about that? Like, did you talk to the humans before you decided to do that? Did you ask any humans if this was a good idea, but really, we understand it to be talk with the humans.

[Katie 1:14:11]
I love it so much, Victoria, this has been a delightful conversation. You talked earlier about our role being creating meaning, but you've created so much meaning and insight for me. Thank you so much for a wonderful conversation.

[Victoria 1:14:27]
It is such a privilege to be with you. Thank you for having me.

[Katie 1:14:33]
My thanks to Victoria for a great episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. For all the shownotes and the full transcript, head over to abcomm.co.uk/podcast. You can find this episode there, plus all our previous ones too.

If you did enjoy the show, I would be immensely grateful if you could give us a review on Apple Podcasts. It just helps other IC pros out there, find our show.

We still have some great guests lined up this season an interesting mix of in-house practitioners, advisors and consultants. So, you may want to hit that subscribe button today. All that remains, is to say thank you to you for choosing The Internal Comms Podcast. And to everyone who has reached out to me recently on Twitter and LinkedIn, in commemoration of us reaching over 100,000 downloads. Your feedback means the world to me, and I do try to respond to every comment. Thank you also to our lovely producer, John Phillips, our wonderful sound engineers, Stu Rolls, and the brilliant gang back at AB that

make this show possible. So finally lovely listeners until we meet again, do stay safe and well. And remember, it's what's inside that counts.