TICP – episode 63 – Lessons in leadership

(Season 7 Episode 8)

[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 www.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: www.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 McCaulay. This is a show devoted to exploring how organisations can communicate better with their people. Every fortnight I invite a guest to sit in my hot seat. They might be an internal comms practitioner, consultant or academic. In this episode, though, we get a view from the top. My guest is Mike Roe. And I must thank my AB colleague Laura for recommending him. As soon as I started looking into Mike's background, I was intrigued. He has spent a 28-year career in the police force, serving as a senior detective and rising to the rank of commander.

One of his many challenges was leading a high-profile merger of three police districts into one city-wide organisation, a restructuring programme that involved over 1,000 employees and a budget of £35m. Today, Mike is the CEO of Tensense, which again sparked my curiosity. Tensense has built a diagnostic tool that generates business insights for leadership teams, based on asking their employees a few carefully crafted questions throughout the year. Now, this gives leaders a picture, not just of customer experience or employee experience, what gets called CX and EX. But of something more holistic, what Mike calls OX – organisational experience. Now, to me, this sounds pretty exciting. It is a sophisticated approach to gathering and using, well, the collective wisdom, the collective intelligence of employees, to help leadership teams steer their organisations in the right direction.

I should also mention that Mike coaches other chief executives, and in many ways this entire conversation is about leadership: how we lead our own teams, our own networks, and how we help others lead effectively. Another chief executive has said of Mike, "he is quite simply one of the most effective CEOs I have ever had the pleasure to work with. He has that rare combination of humility, great emotional intelligence, and the resilience to make great leadership and business decisions".

Listeners, please enjoy this very special conversation with Mike Roe.

So, Mike, welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast. It's a real pleasure to have you here.

[Mike 04:35]
I'm very pleased to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

[Katie 04:38]
I'd like to start if I may, by taking you back to your 28 years in the police force. And I'm just curious to know if there are any, I guess foundational communication skills that you learned through that time – and I was thinking particularly when interviewing suspects, but that might not be where you want to take this bit of the conversation – that you still draw on today?

[Mike 05:05]
Well, I think I'd probably made two points. The general point is, if you can imagine, as an 18-year-old, fresh out the box cop, given a bit of training, and thrust out onto the streets, it's not until you look back that you realise how important that communication was. And I think there's a phrase from a famous guy that says, 'life lived forward, but understood backwards.'

[Katie 05:28]
Nice.

[Mike 05:29]
And when you look back, you think, Oh, my God, how did I ever survive, you know, some of that stuff? And of course, you then look back and realise it was all about communication. It was either about talking yourself out of a difficult situation, persuading people to do things they didn't want to do, or just generally engaging with people in a, you know, in a reassuring manner. But the specific point about having spent a career as a detective, clearly

communication was, was crucial. And again, it's not to look back and you realise that the, the kind of strategy and approach for interviewing suspects and criminals is not vastly different, to the way we communicate generally, with people we work with, or our stakeholders and you know preparation is important. Sometimes you don't have much time for that. But certainly when interviewing a prisoner, you know, the preparation part was, was critical, and in many ways longer than the actual event of having a conversation with a suspect.

Being clear about the purpose, if you relate that back to communication that we have now, you know, whether it's unofficial, a CEO wandering the floor or wandering the country or the world, there's a purpose behind the communication. And then I think the thing that many people didn't realise is listening is pretty important. And of course, when you're interviewing a suspect, you're listening for those little clues, or nuggets or opportunities, where you're going to look to surface a lie, you're going to look to surface a disconnect in the story they're trying to convince you of which of course, when it ultimately ends up in front of a jury at Bristol Crown Court is the bit that convicts the person.

The single most important point would be about silence. It's about when you ask a question and let the silence do the heavy lifting. And again, we don't realise how important a strategy that can be, even when we're talking to people in our own organisations. But yeah, those would be my reflections. I mean, clearly, for nearly 30 years communication was at the core of everything really.

[Katie 07:40]
It's interesting, you talk about silence, because this is just a personal reflection, actually. But I think there's a certain amount of confidence that you sometimes need to let the silence roll, and I often reflect and I don't, I don't know if there is a gender bias here. But I sometimes wonder, wonder whether women can be too quick to sort of jump in and be reassuring not to let that awkward silence roll. Would that be a, would that be a fair comment?

[Mike 08:11]
Oh, I think it's absolutely a fair comment. I wouldn't necessarily say women. I think it's a generalisation. So we are on dodgy ground here and likely to get in trouble. I appreciate that. But yeah, my experience is that men tend to want to fix things pretty quickly. Whereas women often– and I can only talk about having had a mix of, you know, decent diversity in a senior team versus an all-male dominated environment. Where you know, the testosterone the desire

to fix stuff, means the ability sometimes to listen, or to hear things is impaired by our enthusiasm to getting the job done. And of course, we all believe our own PR, don't worry. There's a little phrase isn't there. Some people are listening, some people are waiting to speak. My experience of working with women is they're much better at this than men. That's a generalisation.

[Katie 09:15]
And there's another phrase and it might be the Buddha. It might be quote from the Buddha, but it's something like when your mouth is open, you're not learning.

[Mike 08:11]
Absolutely.

[Katie 09:24]
Which again, it just underscores the importance of listening. So let's talk about organisational change, because I know as the commander in the police force, you were asked to merge three districts in Bristol and just for lots of our listeners are overseas, so Bristol: southwest city in England, population of just under half a million. So you were asked to merge three districts of that city into one city-wide organisation. And that merger involved around 1200 staff and a budget of £35 million and the vision there was to make Bristol the safest city in the world. Just for background, can you talk about what the catalyst was for this merger?

[Mike 10:09]
Sure. I mean, what I should say is that to make Bristol the safest city in the world was an audacious ambition that I was hanging the change around. But there was a serious point to that, because I would then say to people well name your city in the world that's safer. And of course, they would, you know, they'd go Quebec, or wherever, but it was an aspirational goal. And I suppose to answer your question, it was on the back of some pretty tough previous years. Bristol, in 1999, 2000, 2001, had become a bit of a crack cocaine centre, there was an endemic of crack cocaine, which fuelled crime, gang violence. And in fact, we were one of the first I think we were the first force to put routinely armed officers on the streets. So the country had had armed officers for a long time, but I'm talking about routinely armed for a while.

The Chief Constable at the time, Steve Wilkinson, who was an absolute advocate of geographic policing, which was about, you know, really understanding and working hard at a

community level, quite prescient, really, when you think about the challenge the service is facing at the moment, he was ahead of his time, in many ways. But I think he felt at that time that we had three divisions in Bristol, there was a lot to be said for pulling it together, one single voice, if you like, as certainly as a commander to work with the Bristol Community and political environment, efficiencies, effectiveness, economies of scale, etc. So it was for those reasons that he asked me if I would take this on.

[Katie 11:56]
And so I suppose the question our listeners would have is, what role did internal communications play in the success of this project? And from a leaders' perspective, in particular, what were the challenges you experienced leading that kind of level of change?

[Mike 12:14]
I think, again, I'll make the point that, you know, when you look back on your career, or look back on roles, we learn much more when we look back and say, oh, gosh, now intuitively, instinctively, I think I knew communication was going to be absolutely vital. I mean, you've got three divisions, two of whom thought it was a takeover. So it's, in fact, Dr. Mike Carter, who I now work with, he's the guy that should be on this call in terms of organisational change. He's an expert and a behavioural scientist, so I am, like, you know, the Sorcerer's Apprentice, but, you know, he would say that when organisations are going through big change, or kind of any significant change, there are three priorities for the leader or the leadership team. And those are communication, communication, communication. And, and when you've done all that, you haven't done enough.

[Katie 13:08]
Right.

[Mike 13:09]
Looking back, I can absolutely see how, knowing that now, I'd have probably done even more of it. But I can recount the times I was driving around Bristol, having the conversations with people for whom this change was going to affect their working daily lives. Yeah, it's probably what I spent most of my time doing. The irony, having mentioned crack cocaine and some serious stuff, you know, you end up as a leader, I spent most of my time dealing with the tricky issue of where were cops and police staff going to park and, you know, office accommodation.

It's bizarre. But of course, these are the hygiene factors that that either make or break people's commitment to the task.

Yeah, we often say don't we, what's in it for me? To start communication there, that impact on individuals that at a very high level, you think, wow, you know, really, we're starting there? But it is their day-to-day reality. And that's where people feel most impacted, I guess. So, as you say, it's the hygiene factors get over those first. How important was it to have trusted advisors around you? And I ask that question, because, as IC pros, we often want to be, need to be those trusted advisors to leaders, and I'm just wondering what your experience has been having those kinds of people around you and what you look for in them, and how important they are.

I mean, I think central to that, for me is having a team, whether it's a senior team or a team anywhere in an organisation that's built on shared values and trust. And if I go back to 2001, a long time ago now but you know, at that time in that when we were the centre of Bristol, we were under significant pressure from the Home Office around our performance. Because of crack cocaine, but they didn't kind of intellectually seem to get that, particularly the Home Secretary at the time who actually went on record as wanting me sacked. But the chief was very supportive. And but what was crucial at that time was whilst you're getting all this pressure from elsewhere, the team pulled together. And we kind of just metaphorically rolled our sleeves up. And thought right okay, the only person that's going to affect this is going to be us.

So as we moved forward a few years, you talked about trusted, trusted advisors, that senior team. And the new people that joined the team became, if you like, that, that trusted environment for me to check in, make sure that we were aligned, etc. But what was really interesting was, I resisted for a long time, the temptation to appoint, you know, what we in the police service would call a staff officer. There are two people that keep you sane. One is a good secretary, somebody that gets you to the right place at the right time on the right day, and saves you from yourself. And the other is a staff officer who sweeps around and clears up all your mess. And I always remember, Steve, you know the top guy actually went on to become the head of the Federation, we would go around Bristol, and I would sit and do what I do at desks and offices and, you know, have all this kind of, you know, jolly conversations with people

trying to raise morale or whatever, or take their difficult questions and give them my kind of Churchillian, this is where we're going. And I'd come out of those meetings. And I'd say to Steve, I'd say, "Steve, that seemed to go well didn't it?" And he said to me, I'll never forget. He said, "Mike, you think they tell you the truth?"

[Katie 16:45]
Right.

[Mike 16:46]
He said "they tell you what they think you want to hear. And then they tell me the truth when you've left the room." Now, I'd like to think he was exaggerating, partly to make a point. But his point was well made.

[Katie 17:00]
Yeah.

[Mike 17:01]
And that's never left me, that… And it's a bit like, again, if you relate it to the news this morning, where, you know, they are suggesting that head of a certain state is not hearing everything that is going on in an operational capacity. Because either he won't hear or people are too afraid to tell him. And there's this little phrase, you know, tell the total truth faster. Because if we get the total truth quicker, A, it makes life easier. But it might stop us tiptoeing into a disaster.

[Katie 17:40]
We kind of edging nearer my next question, actually. So this segues into it nicely. But when we spoke before, I'm sure you said there were four elements of great leadership. I wonder if you could share your views on those four elements with us?

[Mike 17:57]
Well, I mean, we could fill any big room on the planet couldn't we with books on leadership and all the rest of it. It's just a personal view. And I, I think, to not steal this, you know, without referencing, I think it might even have been Carter. But there's a sense that what leaders do, number one is create a purpose and direction. So whatever it is we're doing, you know, where is it we're going? What's the ambition? The second thing is around how do you align people around that task. Thirdly, motivate people. And fourthly create a culture of leadership.

And, you know, at its core, in essence, for me, this is about where people share a common goal to get up every day, and we know where we're going, and share the values, then it'll work. If one of those components is missing, A) it can make life pretty miserable for the people involved, take the P&O employees at the moment, or make life very difficult for the senior team. Because again, if you reference the P&O chief executive, you know, whether he had them in the first place, that is an utter abdication of values.

[Katie 19:12]
Yes.

[Mike 19:14]
And, you know, if he felt he was being forced into a course of action, by an overarching owner, then resign.

[Katie 19:24]
Yeah, absolutely.

[Mike 19:26]
So that's my, that's my view. And I think, from a communication point of view, I was thinking about this under the 'how do we motivate people' there is a very nice little exercise that has now become a key part of my work with people that work in my team. And I give an endorsement to this guy called Nigel Risner, who I've had the pleasure of listening to for many, many, many, many years, come and talk to a leadership group I'm a part of, he says there's only one reason people come to work. And when you say that people's ear prick up, like what? Yeah there's only there's only one reason we go to work. And that is to have our personal needs met. And if you think about that, you know, that's not about our wider, broader life's ambitions, it's about in the world of work, what are our personal needs, and if you can identify the top five personal needs, that you that you have got for being involved in what you do, and then you check in against them, you will know whether a) you're in the right role, or right job or right business, but b) whether or not what's happening to you is allowing you to be the best version of yourself.

And for leaders, managers, to know what those five personal needs are is pretty critical. It doesn't always mean we can meet them. For instance, you know, someone says, I have a

personal need to be able to park my car 100 yards away from my office. Now, unless they are disabled, that might be a need we can't meet, I have a need to be at the school gate at three o'clock every day, yeah. But knowing the needs can instigate a much better conversation about how that person can contribute to the organisation. Does that make sense?

[Katie 21:12]
It makes sense. And what I love about it is it's so simple. And I often think about these things that the simpler the question, actually, the more difficult it is to answer sometimes. Because you really do have to think: what are my needs? How would I prioritise them? I think that's a great question.

[Mike 21:30]
Yeah, and share them. And you're right. I mean, my experience of doing this little exercise is people will often see it as a checklist. Right that's it, I've done the five, tick. But actually two things: one, they've really got to matter to you, *really* got to matter to you. And then when you score them, and this is important, they don't just sit there – I then say, okay, okay, out of five, to what extent is that need being met. And when you say, anything from a three, below, we have to have a further conversation. But when you've done the five, I'll then ask you to do number six, because you then push your thinking, and often number six, becomes something that should be in the top five. And it's ironic how often money doesn't actually make it to the top five. Now, I say that with some sensitivity at the moment, given what people are experiencing across the country. But you know, at times, it's not about the money. It's about purpose, it's about work life balance, it's about the environment.

[Katie 22:36]
I agree with you about money, I say to my team, you know, I just want money not to be an issue. So I want you to be paid well enough to feel that we can take that subject off the table and talk about other things.

[Mike 22:51]
Exactly, that's exactly right.

[Katie 22:53]
I loved, the thought, I suppose, in some ways I like the most in the sense of where we can dig in, as communications professionals, and just advice to leaders is the fourth one that you mentioned, which is creating a culture of leadership. That really appeals to me, because I think

we probably need to move away from organisations that's built on the basis of the hero at the top of the pointy pyramid, who is the all-seeing all-knowing person. If you create a culture of leadership, and that permeates the whole organisation, the success of that organisation just must become more sustainable and more endemic and more for the long term. I don't know if you've got any reflections on that. But I just I just feel that that is so important at the moment.

[Mike 23:42]
I agree with that. However, circumstances change, you know, there is something about situational leadership again. You know, people talk about leadership styles. I mean, there's not a wrong style, there's just a wrong time to deploy it. And that depends on the context, the context in which you're operating in. You know, if there's an organisation you are experiencing a, you know, potentially catastrophic, or profit warning, or an oil disaster, or whatever it might be. Yeah, we really haven't got time to sit around and collaborate on, you know, all the options. You know, there is there is an imperative to make a decision and to sort something out quickly.

As opposed to if in slower time, we know we need a more creative collaborative solution to something, then we as leaders need to be able to tap into those skills. And that goes back to what we were talking about earlier. If the leader believes his or her own PR and finds it really difficult to listen to alternative views, then culturally, you're going to be in a certain place. So this is complex. And arguably, the world has become more complex. Well, I think when I started life could be complicated. Now it's complex. And with that, unfortunately, comes a lot of the frames of reference that we used to have for things, when we pull those out of our either memory bank, or bottom draw, your file that says, when this happens, here's a standing order that says do this. They don't work anymore. So leaders now need to be far more adroit, flexible, agile, you know, they really do need to be thinking in a different way. And yeah, COVID, and things like that are just examples of how you know that the world has changed for leadership.

[Katie 25:43]
I've heard you say that taking a course in coaching was transformational. I'm sure you use that word. And I'm just wondering why that was, you know, how did that course change your approach?

[Mike 25:58]

No, it was transformational. Absolutely. And the reason being, again, you go back and you then reflect, and there is, at one level, a misunderstanding about the difference between mentoring and coaching. So in the police service for a while, you know, we had a mentoring programme. And as I look back, I think, essentially that enabled people that have been around for a while to tell people that hadn't been around for a while "this is how you do it." And that can be appropriate, you know, that can be appropriate, you know, why suffer when someone's been there and knows how to how to do something. So mentoring absolutely has its place. Really, really does. That's not the point I'm making. Coaching is a very different relationship. Because where most of us feel the need to fix stuff, or offer our hard earned views on the world or a problem, we are merely making an assumption that we know all the context and information that the person is wrestling with. So to take you back, you know, I believed I used to have an open door policy, I can see it now people would sort of knock on the door or the door be open and they'd say, have you got 10 minutes boss. And you go, yeah, of course I have, come in.

Probably, you know, the first seven seconds of them speaking, you are picking up I think you're I think what they're asking for is this and wham: "yeah, I can help you with this, blah, blah, blah." I often now look back and think they probably left the room ,walked back down the corridor thinking that isn't what I went for in the first place. And of course, we now realise that people will often start talking to us about something, knowing that that's not really what they want to talk about.

So it's a long winded way of saying that, yeah, I went through this coaching course, and realised that I was probably a pretty crap listener, and wasn't well armed in asking really powerful questions. And so for me, it became the most significant piece of leadership training that I could ever have had.

[Katie 28:05]
Wow.

[Mike 28:06]
Learning to ask powerful questions, being curious enough to ask those questions of others and yourself. And then being confident enough to shut up and let this resonate with somebody was quite transformational, because coaching is about helping people raise their own awareness, so they can take responsibility for their actions. So whether you are working with somebody on

an intractable serious problem, or merely just doing their career review or appraisal, for me, you know, what I learned there has, and not just at work, to be honest with you. You know, the things we do at home and the way we behave at home with our significant others is, yeah, my wife would probably say I still aren't any better at that. But yeah, at least I know, I'm now consciously incompetent.

[Katie 29:04]

I was going to ask you, you talked about powerful questions. Do you have an example of a powerful question or some guidelines around… Do you instinctively know what's a powerful question in the moment? Or can you describe to us how you generate a powerful question in your mind? What are the questions you're asking yourself, if that makes sense to actually generate the right question?

[Mike 29:29]

So a lot of this is about a mindset. Malcolm Gladwell wrote a book called Outliers, where he talked about it takes 10,000 hours or 10 years to be really good at something. You know, I think I passed the 10 years of coaching CEOs about four years ago. So I think we might need to extend the 10 years to 20 years. You're always learning but at its core, are some fairly basic tenets.

So for example, what I learned was if somebody knocks on my door now and came in and said have you got 10 minutes, instead of just starting, I go yes I have, and what would you like to get out of this 10 minutes? What's the goal of the conversation for you? And then really listening to what it is they are saying to you. And then as they're speaking, you are listening for those cues that go, this isn't really what they want to talk about. And so there is a powerful question that's, um, what are you not telling me?

[Katie 30:29]

I like that.

[Mike 30:30]

And it's amazing how often people will respond to that with, oh, you know, something I don't or oh he's caught me out, or actually the real… And I have had some remarkable bits of feedback when you ask that question. And then there are simple questions like, tell me more. Tell me more. And when you when you extend that offer, people will, because most people aren't used

to being given a blooming good listening to. Summarising what you heard, I have a personality profile that means I sometimes struggle with the detail. So I'd be a big picture stuff. So when you're dealing with people who are very, very analytical, whose profile is about, I need to understand the detail. I've learned I have to, I need to play back to them. So just tell me what you think I just said. Or, tell me what we've just agreed. And then you can follow that up a little bit. So out of 10, to what extent are you confident about this task?

And of course, if they give you anything less than an 8, go round it again. Because the world we know we spend our life with misconceptions, misunderstanding, misrepresentations, not really understanding what the heck he was on about. So I think I don't know if that helps. But yeah, I think we can be very, we can be very assumptive. And we miss out on the truths and the opportunities. And I think it just taught me and I think it's a life's work, I don't think we ever get there. Listening, really listening is hard. Boy, is it hard if you're going to do it authentically. But if you really want to hear the nuggets, we have to at times.

[Katie 32:27]
Fantastic, thank you. Let's talk about data and insight. Listeners will know about employee experience, what often gets called EX and customer experience, CX, but your organisation Tensense has developed something entirely new. Can you explain your approach to data and insight and how your solution is different?

[Mike 32:52]
Yeah, I think we talked earlier about the world being complex, and of course the world, and particularly leaders are overwhelmed with data. You know, now it's, it's like drinking from the hose of it. But of course, what we have to do is to be able to very quickly make sense of it. And take action, sometimes in pretty critical stuff, whether that's, you know, disasters or, you know, urgent issues in an organisation. And so, you know, Tensense started life really when Dr. Mike Carter built our original diagnostic around a science called organisational sense making. And at its core, sense making really is what's the story here, then, therefore, what do I need to do about it? And the research and lecturing on sensemaking has been around disasters. So whether that was the Tenerife air disaster, Challenger, Bhopal, Bristol children's baby hospital scandal, the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes, terrorism, it's about taking the lessons from, if you like, very extreme tragedies and disasters and applying it to the world of business.

So what Tensense did is we took Mike's science and realised that actually, yes, you're right organisations have an overwhelming amount of data that they can put on their business intelligence dashboards. I'm not denigrating employee experience or engagement data. It's important, but it's a fairly narrow slice of a view that an employee has all their environment, the leadership, the teams, they're part of, their own, if you like employee journey, and everybody's very, very familiar with customer experience. But even an organisation like Gartner, one of the leading software analysts, they are now talking about something called total experience as a source. So we're talking to them because they've got EX, they've got CX, what they haven't got is OX.

And so what Mike and the team have built is what we call organisational experience data. So this is for me as a CEO, what can I tap into on a daily basis that tells me, what's the story in my organisation? Across my organisation? And how can I, in real time, tap into what the significant opportunities and threats are in a way that we don't get with employee engagement, we would argue, and certainly not with customer engagement, because they will tend to be a bit backward looking. And so with very few questions, Mike has built something that gives that insight to leaders. And when that's integrated with their financial information and other business metrics, it allows them now to take a more predictive, forward-looking view of what might be happening. So, if you like, you know, it's automating some very, very clever questions, to help leaders make better decisions.

[Katie 36:02]
And I understand that you ask questions related to four key areas, can you share those four areas with us?

[Mike 36:10]
Yeah, sure. I mean, I think if Mike was here, Mike would say he has produced questions that when connected, give you a very powerful overview and insight of the organisation, the performance of the organisation, and where your threats might be, and where your opportunities lie. We happen to display the results and the results of the collective answers to those questions through four lenses, that will make sense to people. So, what the first one is around, where is the performance energy in the organisation. And we talked earlier about if you are on the left-hand side of our performance curve, you know, where success resides, you know, the leadership style, the communication, would be very different than if you flipped over, and you're P&O at the moment or, you know, lots of other examples you can give where we're

in more challenging times, or heaven forbid, we're in failure where the lights are about to go out. So that's the first one, important to know where the energy is being expanded in the business.

The second one then, is motivation. And this is a reflection of leadership. It's called the motivation lens. But this is the balance between leaders providing challenge and support to their people. And those listening might have even been subject to that kind of change. You know, we're very good at times of praising people, sometimes we're not so good at holding them to account. And what we're looking for is that correct balance, so people feel committed to the organisation.

Thirdly is around team attributes, we're looking here at what are the attributes that will allow us to build high performing teams in our organisation? Now those first three lenses, you'll be able to glance at and go are we in the right place? Yes or no.

And the fourth one is around culture. And lots of people do lots of work on culture. But Mike has deliberately looked at the climate, because this is about in the moment, what can leaders do? And so our culture map, when, and it's not culture is not right or not? Right. What it is, question for leaders and organisations is what does our culture need to be to allow to enable us to be successful? It goes back to your question earlier about, you know, how we collaborate on things. You know, this is all about cultural orientation. And leaders need to understand what it is that they are building, what sort of culture are they nurturing? What are the behaviours and leadership characteristics that go with that? So those are the four lenses, you know, we display those visually. And then we have a very clever algorithm that connects them to produce a high impact automated report. That's a summary of what Tensense is.

[Katie 38:55]
Fascinating. I believe your tool asks employees to answer questions in a very specific way. So where you need to actually ask the audience, as it were, employees, certain questions. Can you tell us a little bit about how, yeah, how you ask questions and the kinds of answers you're wanting to get and how those answers are framed, I guess.

[Mike 39:16]
Sure. Now, yes, you know, you might want to invite Dr. Mike Carter back onto one of these because again I am in dodgy ground here, but I've heard him speak about this many times. And

it is quite humorous, you know, because he would say that, you know, mankind 1000s of years ago, you know the notion of fight or flight? The only thing that 'man' – the generic term – needed to know is, who to fight, what to eat, and who to have sex with. And frankly, they took nanoseconds. The only thing that took a bit longer was what to eat. They were a bit more choosy about what to eat. Yeah, it's the fight or flight issue. So, you know, for those people that are exponents of organisational sensemaking, this is about providing just enough information.

So there is something called system one thinking and system two thinking. So by way of example, we go into a board meeting. And what happens is that actually what they call system one takes place, we are all arguing, rowing, working out how we can make our point, how we can denigrate somebody else, how we, where we can get more money for our bit of the business, blah, blah, blah. What happens though, at the end of it is something called system two, outcomes, a nice tabulated set of minutes and, you know, action points, and nobody would ever know what went on during the course of the cut and thrust. So what we're about, we want to tap into the emotional, intuitive reaction of people to where they work. And we're not interested, this is going to sound odd, we're not interested in the people. We're interested in what the people know.

And so by getting them to answer questions in a more intuitive, emotional way, we get to the heart of the issue really quickly, based around the 80:20 rule. So we're not about precision, we're about plausibility. You as a CEO, have got so many things going on, so many things you could communicate about, actually, we want to reduce that equivocality and bring it all the way down to: Okay, here are the two or three things that plausibly you should spend some time on, or ask some more questions about because this is where your problem lies, Volkswagen, or Boeing, you know, or Brew Dog. And you need to ask some questions, before this becomes a serious issue.

[Katie 41:46]
I love that phrase, we're not about precision, we're about plausibility. Because I can imagine some management teams getting completely stuck in trying to find out exactly what the problem is, where it is how it started, and all of a sudden, it's too late to do anything about it. They've got stuck in the weeds. Whereas if they presumably just decided, broadly speaking, this is what we think's happening, this is our gut reaction. This is our system one, this is how it is, they can move faster. And even if they're not moving in exactly the right direction, at least

they're taking some action, and hearing and listening more as they go. Is that the thinking behind that?

[Mike 42:27]

It's a very good summary. There is research at the moment that says about 58% of decisions are taken, leaders take decisions based on their gut. Now, nobody least of all us is saying that leaders intuition and gut isn't appropriate. It is. But again what Gartner would say this is about augmenting decision making. Now what does that mean? Well, that means it's the fusion of art and science, we take what we as leaders have learned over all the years, we tap into people's, hopefully we tap into what people know, you know, we talked earlier about you know, what is it we're not hearing? And often we're not very good at that. And COVID has made that harder with you know hybrid work and etc. So it's the combination of, of what intuitively, you know, what our guts telling us, but with better data, to augment that decision making process, if that makes sense. And if we are too reliant on precision, and there's nothing wrong with this, don't get me wrong. But the world's moving too quickly. I need to know in the moment, what is going on, I've got multiple decisions to make. And some of them are really critical and complex. So I think where the world's moving towards, or where it is moving towards, is that augmentation of, you know, that instinctive, I'm going to make this decision, but actually, I've now got some data that confirms that I'm a) looking into the right place. And I'm about to probably make the decision that's in line with the priorities.

[Katie 44:00]

I suppose my question is, how important is it that you're creating a model and data that is almost predictive, as opposed to what we often see from see, annual or quarterly reporting, which are sort of lagging indicators of performance, if that makes sense. So what you're hopefully building is not quite a time machine, but something that helps people project and think forward and predict.

[Mike 44:25]

Yeah, so I mean, the exciting thing for us and on our investors is that using patterns and templates, as we get more data, we will be able to become even more predictive. But at its simple level at the moment, you know, given the lenses I mean, I can give you lots of examples of organisations whose performance based on their financial data is showing that let's say they're in upper quartile of the organisation that they're part of. I'm gonna give you… so let's just say Dallas, the Dallas office, okay? Is hitting its numbers. But I'm sitting there and I'm

looking at our lenses. And I'm looking at where the performance energy is. And I'm suddenly seeing that the response from people based on the segmentation if you like, because the senior team will see the world differently from the people on the ground. The people on the ground are going, we're feeling something just shifting here. It's a bit like when the St. Paul's bobby came to me and said, boss, there is a different feel on the ground here. I always remember him coming and saying to me, Chris he said, there's a different feel on the ground. You know, there's some new people in town, do you know what I mean. And so you kind of, those were the early warnings.

So that's, you know, relate that to the organisation, people know first. And so if you then see that people's commitment is just dropping and they're becoming more anxious. If under the team attribute lens, we've lost a bit of trust, we're not kind of telling it, or don't feel confident enough to give our leaders the fierce messages. If culturally, we've lost some of our dominant orientation, I'd be going, I'm not convinced that our performance figures will hold up in the next quarter, or the one after that. That's the time to look. And of course, if we'd got really good performance figures, and OEX data is Top of the Pops. Well what can we learn? What can we share? What is this leadership team doing? Or what is the context here that we need to learn from? And that's what we're about. And you made the point that allows leaders then to look through the front, the front windscreen as opposed to always dealing with legacy stuff.

You mentioned employee engagement earlier, we had a really nice piece of work with a fairly major part of the defence industry. And they ran up because they just had their third annual survey. And they couldn't shift the dials. And so we gave them a bit of help. And of course, they went "ah, I get it now." So we were able to give them what the causality was, of why the people kept answering their engagement survey in a certain way. And once they knew that they could do something about it.

[Katie 47:17]
I'm just curious about the technicality of how it works tactically, how often are people having to answer questions? And that seems like a silly question in a way, because what I often hear is this word survey-itis. So my clients are saying, we can't ask them your set of internal comms questions now, because I've just done a survey about well-being and they're just about to do a survey about hybrid working. So how often are you asking people questions and, on average, just roughly, how many questions are you asking?

[Mike 47:47]

When we started this, we had cards. So I want you to imagine, I've got a box of 360 cards, right? And a big board that lays out the strategy of an organisation. And I would go around to our clients, and they would play 360 clue cards. Now, the problem with that is it takes time, it's a bit of fun, but you're only getting results from the senior team that are playing the cards. Nevertheless, it allowed them to surface what, in their perception, was the big issues. So if you then fast forward, we put that on an app we messed around with it, reduced the number to where we are today, where what Mike has done is identified the fewest number of clues that give you the biggest insight.

[Katie 48:32]

Wow.

[Mike 48:33]

And so that's got down to 16 clues, 16 questions, and the way that we avoid survey fatigue and also, frankly, people's now inclination to sometimes not even answer them correctly. Is that we deploy it through people's collaboration tools. So everybody's familiar now with Microsoft Teams, for instance, or Slack or whatever. So imagine you log on this morning, and you will just get a prompt, and there'll be a clue, and it's still visually looks like a clue card. And we're asking you to maybe complete one or two cards, clues a week. At worst, it's 16 every month. So it's not a big demand. Go back again, to what we talked about purpose, clarity, you know, where people know why they're doing it and that they will be influenced in the strategy, decision making of an organisation. They complete them, we get a massive, high rate, right? Because the clue makes sense. It's very easy to complete. And so if you like we create droplets, so it becomes an embedded way of how the organisation operates rather than "oh my god, I've got to sit down for 20 minutes and I've got to answer a bunch of questions," which frankly, nobody does anything with.

[Katie 49:52]

I mean, this brings us very neatly onto the subject of employee engagement, which I wonder if we can touch on very briefly. When we spoke last, you said to me, just look up how much Workday acquired Peakon for, so what they had to pay for Peakon. So Workday, and just in case people don't know, is the kind of HR Finance cloud SAS type solution and to acquire Peakon, which is an employee engagement app: $700 million last year. I couldn't believe it. So clearly, measuring employee engagement is very big business. I had Professor William Kahn on

the show, the professor, the Organisational Psychologist that actually invented the term personal engagement at work in 1990. And through my conversation with him, it became very clear that he is rather unconvinced if we say we use that word of efforts to even try and measure this. So I'm just really interested in your thoughts on employee engagement. And actually, whether you think there's actually something almost I'm not going to say dangerous but unhelpful in attempts to measure it.

[Mike 51:07]
First thing is organisations like Peakon, Culture Amp, Glint absolutely have – no doubt about that at all – very sophisticated tools. You know, they ask great questions, and they absolutely play a really important part in the organisational development, you know, leadership, etc. And they tend to operate in the world of the EHRD. And are very important attributes for their strategy. Absolutely. But what we're talking about, it's still a contact sport. You know, so the question about what it measures. Still, at some point, we as leaders have to engage with our people, look them in the eye, have an emotional connection, care about their, you know, their personal life, etc, etc.

So, a bit like I was talking about augmenting decision making, engagement augments a certain aspect of an employee's journey and experience of the organisation. We are very different. You know, what we're working with Gartner on is that we add a significant component that they haven't got, we also collect our data in a slightly different way. But we believe we are responding to where the world is at the moment. CEOs don't have time, we are also very interested in the person in an organisation called the chief data officer Now, a chief data officer's role – and in the States, they're already saying there's going to be a dearth of them – the need for the chief data officers is becoming ever apparent. Their job is to give the story to the chief executive. Their job is using business intelligence, analytics, to provide the story. Now, we believe we provide a critical component of that story. That is about stopping Boeing 747s falling out the sky, Volkswagen creating the kind of crisis they did, unless, of course, leaders are wilfully blind, or really are behaving in a very Machiavellian, bordering on the criminal, way. And that's different to what do our customers feel about, you know, our flight experience. And what do our people feel about being an employee within Boeing.

We're about and like I said earlier, we're about highlighting on a daily basis, what people know is going on in the business. Because if I don't know that, I may well not be focusing on the right things or taking the right critical decision.

[Katie 53:45]

It reminds me in a way of when we're measuring things to make sure that you don't confuse satisfaction with effectiveness. And you're making me think of this, you know, that engagement is all very well. But the experts that I've had on the show often say to me, but engaged in what. So it's not enough to be happy and satisfied at work.

[Mike 54:06]

We've just deployed a tool with a US company. The CEO is newly in there. And I think I mean, I'm not going to give you any clues at all about this. But he's gone in and he's found they're all hugely overpaid, have fantastic personal terms and conditions of work. Been there 20 years. How do you think they're going to complete an engagement survey? But when he completed the OX data, the company is on fire. And he has sacked pretty much all of the executive team. And this is within 21 days of joining and single-handedly gone to the right country to re-establish customer relations and come back with a $60 million deal. It might be an extreme example.

But if, I mean, if listeners could visualise a sigmoid curve, okay? And draw it in your mind a sigmoid curve, bottom left, building, top left, success, flip over challenge, bottom right, failure, left hand side of the curve, good. But you imagine you are in top left, success. That is the place you want to be. But it's also very dangerous, because that's where complacency sits in. That's where Kodak said, what have we got to fear from an apple? That's where BlackBerry said, we are a perfectly entrenched organisation, and so on and so forth. Because the idea is that you put enough disorientation in the business, enough challenge to go again, build success, build success, build success. And so the example I've just given is people were very comfortable until they're not, you know, until leaders, curiously leaders ask good questions. Why are we doing it like this? Well, we've always done it like that. Why have we only got one customer? Well, they're really good. And they pay us a lot of money, yeah but what if they went? And so on and so forth. You get the idea.

[Katie 56:21]

Yes, I do. You talk about organisations being essentially two shapes. And this. I was intrigued by this thought, can you tell us more about this? And what does communication look like, inside these two shapes of organisations?

[Mike 56:38]

Well, this is, again, Dr. Mike Carter, I, I'd encourage you to link in with him and give him a hard time. But he teaches or did teach on the MBA programme at Bath. And in the early days, he would talk about triangles and domes, we would take the mickey out of him, you know, he'd run a whole MBA session on triangles and domes, but again, if your listeners visualise a triangle, and then visualise a dome, and Mike would say, well, what sort of characteristics of organisations do those represent? And you kind of go triangle military, my old game the police service, hierarchical layers of command, layers of communication. And on the flip side, what's a dome look like? Where it's much more flexible informal layers of communication, etc, etc? And then of course, you ask people, well, where you currently work, where is that? The interesting thing about police services is its extremely hierarchical, as you'd expect, in some ways, you can identify them as mass production on the left mass innovation on the right.

But you take a young cop, as I was, you know, you're in that hierarchy structure, but you're then thrown out onto the streets with all the discretion in the world. So it's interesting in terms of decision making, the communication, there is certainly a particular way of operating. So on the dome, what really reflects the dome, and what's interesting to me, is, it's often the more creative industries where innovation thrives, etc, is people take responsible initiative. And that is a really critical component of that. Because, you know, leaders need to be able to delegate. You know, it's not about losing accountability. But in some organisations that creativity, that innovation, that ability for people to mess up quick and move on, is vital. But yeah, so you can have a massive, massive conversation about triangles and domes.

[Katie 58:41]

I love responsible initiative. I love that phrase, because that's saying, I'm gonna give you the guardrails, we're going to put those up. But other than that, off you go. And that's such a powerful thing. Yeah, there's a phrase I think Tim Ferriss uses, which is something like, it's amazing how suddenly more intelligent a person becomes when you tell them that you trust them. In other words, you know, left to their own initiative, people will find the answer, as long as you're just as you say, give them the guardrails.

[Mike 59:17]

There are building blocks to this aren't there. Some of your listeners may have read The Five Dysfunctions of a Team by Patrick Lencioni, but what the pillar, the key pillar is trust. And he will say there are two ways that you build trust. If you really want to accelerate it, one is share

your personal histories. And second is share your profiles. So many people will be familiar with Myers Briggs you know personality profiles, etc, etc. Whichever one is your preference, share them. Personal histories is interesting. You know, that's about the conversations which take us out of the work environment so that we know a bit more about the person. So what Lencioni is saying and I absolutely buying to this, is where we can build trust, we can have the right kind of conversations. And, and you can only ask people to take responsible initiative, if they do feel that they are in a trusted, safe environment. And that, going back to what we talked about earlier, communication, coaching questions, framing it, so that you've framed someone's role in an environment where they feel comfortable to mess it up, or comfortable to ask.

[Katie 1:00:29]

What you're describing, which is a big theme of mine that I've thought about a lot over the years, even wrote a book about it, is collective wisdom. I've had this thought for some time that most organisations in terms of their products and services, those can be replicated and will be replicated pretty quickly. Your competitive advantage lies inside the minds of your people, what they know what they feel what they can imagine, invent, develop, contribute. And that's the thing you've got to unlock. And that's why for me, this game, internal communications is so important at the end of the day.

[Mike 1:01:05]

I'm going to unashamedly plug a personality profile, but there are many, we just happen to use Insights Discovery, they do it with a colour language. And that, for me, is a communication tool. And once I realised what my profile was, and that it was opposite to my wife's, or that I have an exec team that is dominated by red energy, right, so red energy is about vision and get it done, which is the opposite of green energy, which is all about, do it together. Collaborate, you get the idea. Reds communicate don't they, reds communicate. When I first entered the world of the private sector, you get a one [word] reply text. Yes. No. Well, I took this blooming personally. Where was the "Hi, Mike, how was your weekend? On reflection I don't think we should do this." Instead of No. I'm exaggerating to make a point. But not much. There's good day bad day behaviours, but as a communication tool, it is vital. And for leaders to be self-aware, it starts with where do I go, particularly when I'm under pressure?

[Katie 1:02:27]

Yeah, that's a great question.

[Mike 1:02:28]

How do we tap into the creative people in our organisation, importantly, how do we, how do we tap into those that are good at the detail?

[Katie 1:02:39]

Yeah.

[Mike 1:02:40]

You know, within a few seconds, you can spot the kind of profile of the person you might be selling to or needing to influence or whatever else. And if you go, if you come to me with your 24 PowerPoint slides, I'm going to switch off. But for the blue energy, well you need the detail, you must have the detail. How can you possibly make a decision if you just give me the headlines? And but we're stretching the definition to make a point.

[Katie 1:03:09]

My final question really is, I guess a question on two levels. And it's about strategic decision making. So much of your work is about, as we've talked about, making the right decision, how you make the right decision, in not just as you said earlier, not just in a complicated world, but now in a complex world. And I wanted to ask this question also, because on one hand, we might be in a position as internal comms pros to help advise leaders on the right course of action, whether to make what decision to make, but also in our personal lives, there are times when we come to a fork in the road, when we really do have to make a decision about something. And so I just wondered, do you have any advice on how we can all either make smarter decisions ourselves or help others make smarter decisions?

[Mike 1:03:59]

I think it's a brilliant, brilliant question. But for me that connects some of the threads we're talking about. So what I mean by that, well, asking better questions and being curious, getting insights from other people, has got to be a good thing to do. And this doesn't work when someone comes up to you and says, could you tell me where the railway station is? And you say, well, where do you think it might be? That's, yeah, that's less than, helpful. But when we're talking about strategy and choices and where the organisation might have so somehow, we have to create an environment where we can tap into the knowledge, the insight, the understanding of people that may be part of this game. Linked to that, we've just talked about it, knowing people's profile. If all you ever do is tap into the kind of high-level red energy, you are going to miss something. You know, if you're an organisation that is now under threat from

competition, where you need to be creative and innovative around your product or services, you need creativity. That might mean reducing the bureaucracy in your business to create more innovation and creativity. So from a strategic point of view, so it's about knowing that that culture, and the profile of people.

And then the third element we talked about, is we make decisions, but we need data. And that's the revolutionary part here. You know, that's the bit that you know, CEOs no longer need to get in their planes, and fly all over the world, destroying the planet, to try and find out what is happening in their factories in Singapore, in Germany, in the US, wherever. They can tap into given, you know, the analytical world and the software available, whatever it might be to get data, then they augment and go back to that it's about augmenting decision making. It allows them to do it in a more timely, relevant way. That's how I would see it. At the end of the day, leaders still have to come to the party with, you know, we have a vision for this business. And at the day before all comes back to communication, whether interpreting data, asking the right questions, talking to people, it's all about communication. That's the game we're in.

[Katie 1:06:23]
Yeah, I just want to reinforce something you said more than once, which are so important where you said, and you talked about the chief data officer, but you said, what's the story. And I think that is the thing that often gets missed the story that needs to be told around the data, the actionable insight. And what's so great about turning the data into a story is that it becomes compelling, it becomes memorable, it becomes repeatable. So yeah, I don't want to lose that thought, because I think it's really important.

[Mike 1:06:54]
Often data doesn't necessarily give us the so what? And that you just made that point, it is about actionable data.

[Katie 1:07:04]
Mike, do you have time for these quick-fire questions?

[Mike 1:07:07]
Go ahead, boss.

[Katie 1:07:11]
If you could go back in time, what careers advice would you give your younger self?

[Mike 1:07:17]

Follow your passion and your pension will follow.

[Katie 1:07:22]

I love it. Complete this sentence or complete it in your own way. World class communication is…

[Mike 1:07:31]

…the ability to hear the difficult messages.

[Katie 1:07:35]

Oh, I love it. I love it. Is there a book a website, a report, a film, it doesn't really matter, that you would recommend all listeners should read to better understand leadership and or business strategy, either of those, or both?

[Mike 1:07:50]

Well I've referenced The Five Dysfunctions by Patrick Lencioni. It's a really simple read. But it's a very nice, little metaphor about how you build high performing teams. So I'd absolutely recommend that, you know, start with trust and ask yourself the questions, you know, to what extent are you, you know, can you score yourself against these? I mean, there was another book that I read a long time ago called Heroic Leadership by a guy called Chris Lowry. And basically, he was describing a 450-year-old company, it was the Jesuits. But it's a really interesting read. But it brings out at you all that stuff about culture, principles, values. And I think that is so so crucial. As we move forward in this murky world. If we can only reconnect with values, that would be that would be great.

[Katie 1:08:42]

Lovely. I like that. Finally, we give you a billboard for millions to see you can put any message on that billboard you like, what's your message going to be?

[Mike 1:08:53]

My best mate in the world is my nine-year-old grandson, Woody. And this was, honestly, this is a fascinating little anecdote. We were walking along. And he was saying, and we were talking about being a class leader at his school at his primary school. And he was telling me why he didn't think this kid should be the leader. This is not right. It's not right. And I said to him, go on

then, Woody, give me the three attributes that you would look for in your primary school class leader. And these are what he said. And these are what I put on the billboard: teamwork, kindness and good ideas. That'd do for me, I don't need to read Patrick Lencioni or anybody else.

[Katie 1:09:40]
Wow.

[Mike 1:09:41]
Because often as leaders, we think we do teamwork. We're full of bloody good ideas. But the bit we often miss is the kindness. I thought: this is out of the out of the mouths of babes.

[Katie 1:09:53]
Mike all I can say is a huge thank you. This has been such an informative instructive, fascinating conversation. So thank you so much for your time.

[Mike 1:10:04]
It's been good fun. Thank you for the questions.

[Katie 1:10:11]
So that's a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. For the show notes and the full transcript, head over to our website, abcomm.co.uk/podcasts. If you did find this episode helpful, I would be very grateful if you could give us a review on Apple podcasts. That will help other IC pros out there find our show. We still have a few guests still lined up for this season, including the IC citizen himself, Martin Flagg, who teaches blogs and consults on all things employee comms, so you may want to hit that subscribe button today.

Our listenership has literally doubled, quite suddenly, in 2022. So whether you are a long loyal listener, or a newbie, thank you, thank you for choosing the show. I know there is a lot of competition out there for your time, and your attention. Please continue to reach out to me on LinkedIn and Twitter. Tell me what you want more of, what you want less of, recommend potential guests. I genuinely want this show to be as helpful and as inspirational as possible.

Thank you also to John Phillips, my producer, Stuart Rolls, our sound engineer, and my very hard-working colleagues at AB – all of you keep the show on the road. Thank you very much.

Until we meet again, stay safe and well, lovely listeners and remember, it's what's inside that counts.