Katie 00:03
This episode of The Internal Comms Podcast is brought to you by AB's Acid Test audit. Now, the most impressive comms professionals I know have great instincts, but they also know intuition only gets you so far. To be truly effective, you need a plan that's built on robust research and data.

Katie 00:29
Now in my experience, too many audit and research projects deteriorate into tick box exercises, they can often be tedious for participants and for comms teams, well, they often generate more questions than answers. Acid Test is the opposite. For nearly 20 years, organisations have been using Acid Test to gather rich, actionable insights and intelligence on how their people are thinking and feeling. What are the priorities of your C suite? What does success look like for your organisation? How can line managers be better supported? And what really matters most to your employees?

Katie 01:17
Acid Test is qualitative research conducted in confidential one-on-one interviews with a diverse cross section of your workforce. Now, these interviews are conducted in a very specific order, starting with the C suite, because we are also looking for alignment, misalignment and communication gaps. Each question is carefully calibrated to uncover precisely what you need to know. And of course, our consultants ensure the method is a message, leaving participants feeling heard and understood. So to find out more, visit abcomm.co.uk/acidtest, download a PDF to discuss with your team, and arrange an informal chat to discuss Acid Test with me and my a b colleagues. That website address again: abcomm.co.uk/acidtest.

Katie 02:30
Welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. This show is all about informing, inspiring, and generally energising those of us who are responsible for communicating inside the walls of our organisations. In each show, I pose searching questions to a comms practitioner, consultant, academic or business leader in a bid to understand how we can improve communication in the workplace. Today, we welcome Mike Klein back in my podcast hot seat. Now Mike is a leading voice in our profession. I've long been a fan of his sharp thinking and writing, his

business acumen and laser-like focus on ensuring internal comms makes a demonstrable impact on the performance of our organisations.

Katie 03:28
Mike does not jump on bandwagons, in my experience, quite the opposite. He challenges conventional wisdom, a former Democratic political consultant in the US, these days, Mike runs a comms consultancy from Reykjavik in Iceland. He is known for bringing a data-driven approach to organisational communication. Mike holds an MBA from London Business School and has worked on a number of high profile projects with a wide variety of organisations from Cable & Wireless and EasyJet to Shell and Maersk. Now, there are several reasons why I wanted Mike back on the show. First of all his #WeLeadComms campaign, which is making quite a splash on LinkedIn. I wanted to find out a little bit more about that. And selfishly, I wanted to ask Mike about his recent comms leader survey, which AB co-ponsored. What are comms practitioners around the world saying about their issues, opportunities and challenges at the moment?

Katie 04:37
I'm rather pleased to say that we actually cover a lot of ground in the show, we dig into the benefit of identifying and measuring what employees are doing, rather than how they're feeling. We talk about the future of hybrid working and remote working, what to do if our budgets come under threat in the next financial year. And a simple but powerful two-question survey, just two questions you can ask your workforce to ensure that your work is always focused on what really matters most to the performance of your organisation. So without further ado, I bring you Mike Klein.

Katie 05:22
So, Mike, welcome back to The Internal Comms Podcast. It's been more than two years since we've had you two momentous years in world affairs. But all I can say is yes, welcome back to the show.

Mike 05:35
This is one of the all time great honours in the internal comms world to be invited back to your podcast, so I'm revelling in that at the moment.

Katie 05:45
Thank you, Mike. Let's dive straight in. The first question I have for you has to be about your initiative #WeLeadComms, which I hope people have seen on LinkedIn if they haven't, of course, all the links in the show notes. First of all, talk to me about your aim with that campaign. Why did you kick it off?

Mike 06:08

It's funny, it's a funny story. And I'm glad you asked the question because I have been a leader and activist agitator in the world of the International Association of Business Communicators IABC for about 20 years. And I kind of reached the point of terminal frustration. And at the same time, I'd been asked by a couple of sitting members of the board to seek a position on the International Executive Board. Well, I go through the whole process of seeking this position. And I didn't get the position. And one of the things that I talked about, during my campaign, if it were, it's not really campaign, because it's you know, we'll talk about that process some other time. But the main thing was that there was a hashtag at IABC, called, we lead IABC. And one of my big frustrations with IABC was that IABC at the time, 18, 19, 20 had become very inward looking, and self referential, and there's reasons for that, and some of them are valid. But it was just getting really frustrating from my own perspective in terms of what I thought the communication world needed, and what I thought IABC should be providing. And then I didn't get selected for the port and after being invited to apply, and I said, You know what I could do #WeLeadComms anyways.

Mike 07:36
And so it started out of that peak. But what happened, and this is the miraculous thing about it, even more than what I feel it's doing for the people who've been involved, is that it led to a complete positive transformation of my relationship with IABC. Because what I realised was that I could not do daily features of people in the communication profession, who are taking initiative and making a difference either in their organisations, communities, or at a professional-wide level without going through IABC without involving IABC people. And there were some very brave IABC people initially, who agreed to be profiled. And what happened is that transformed the relationship because IABC members warmed to #WeLeadComms. And I warmed back to IABC in a major way, and we're now actively collaborating. For example, every Thursday, working with the Global Communication Certification Council, I do a joint #WeLeadComms, we are SCMP recognition programme, which mainly recognises IABC people who have participated in the certification programme. So the GCCC which is of course, an IABC initiative. And that was unthinkable back and, you know, back at the beginning of this initiative.

Mike 09:01
So that's produced, you know, in and of itself, a solid result, but there's been a lot of other great results. I mean, there's 4300 followers, so covering pretty much every country on the globe, with the exception of a few countries in Africa and South America, and we're working on those. More than 350 honorees. And the reports that I get from from participants are also excellent, like several people have been able to justify promotions on the basis of global recognition. Whenever I recognise somebody in a certain country, I'll get like 100 followers because of this person's

network and connecting to #WeLeadComms because these people have been recognised this is, you know. Basically this is a guy with a hashtag to a certain extent, but it's more than that, because, you know, if you're talking about celebrating initiative, the main thing is you got to take the initiative.

Katie 09:59
I think from an audience's perspective, so I'm just speaking from a personal perspective reading the post reading about the honorees. It's also a great way to feel inspired about your own profession, and people around the world doing amazing things. It really does also celebrate the richness and diversity of our profession as well. It really do feel like you're shining a light on all four corners of the globe. I don't know if that obviously that is your intention.

Mike 10:30
In sharing a picture of the global communication profession, part of my aim is to share a realistic picture and a better balanced picture of the global profession that has been presented over the years. The global profession has been presented as public relations, certainly through the 20th century and another 21st. It's not an accident that about half of the people that I've publicised or that I've profiled have been internal communication people, but I've kept it at half. Because I didn't want this to be an internal comms initiative. but I wanted people following this to get that internal comms is the engine room of the communication profession. And it's really the engine room of communication in any organisation because ultimately, the most powerful external communication channel any organisation has is its people.

Katie 11:28
We're going to come back to that Mike, because that's music to my ears. But also, I'm guessing listeners' ears as well.

Mike 11:36
This is the choir here, I get it and I want to, I want to preach as loud as possible.

Katie 11:44
Before we leave the #WeLeadComms initiative, just in terms of the mechanics of it. If someone would like to put themselves forward as an honoree, how does the process work?

Mike 11:57
It's a simple process, there's two ways to do it. One is follow #WeLEadComms. And if your profile matches what I'm looking for, which is really, you know, somebody who is a communication professional, who is taking initiative in their organisation or the company, and that's, you know, that's something that I could get within 15 seconds

of looking at your LinkedIn profile. The vast majority of honorees, or people who follow #WeLeadComms. And let's just from a time perspective, I mean, you know, if I don't want to have to sell anybody on the idea, I don't have the time or the bandwidth to do it. So if somebody is sold enough to follow #WeLeadComms, chances are, they're interested enough and being featured. And at the same time, there are a lot of people who follow #WeLeadComms, who don't want to be profiled because they have issues with exposure and stakeholder relationships and stuff like that. And that's perfectly fine. But you know, if you are somebody who is taking an issue, by and large, if you're a communication professional, you're taking initiative, and this is an essentially low barrier of entry, because at the end, we're all leading comms. That's the point. This is not a hierarchical initiative.

### Katie 13:19
Perfect. Thank you. So don't be a wallflower listeners, put yourself forward and follow the hashtag. Perfect. Thank you. Let's talk about a related initiative, the #WeLeadComms communication leader survey, which I believe has just very recently completed just recently closed. Can you tell us a little bit about why you developed that survey? And who has completed it before we go into the results of it?

### Mike 13:52
Well, I think before I do that, I just want to thank you for graciously sponsoring the survey, it was very much appreciated. What the exercise is about is to really give people who are taking initiative, the people who show up in this profession, a voice about what's going on in the world in which we operate, in our own professional situations, what's on our agendas, and what would we really like to make go away?

### Mike 14:23
So there were there were four qualitative questions. I've become really focused on qualitative research as a potential transforming activity that could shift a lot of the conversations that particularly internal comms folk are in right now. And so part of it is role modelling. It's like okay, you want to push qualitative research through your measurement masterclasses and through your consulting agenda, why don't you get lots of people involved? The funny thing was that the post that I shared about the survey got maybe six-seven thousand views, and I got 155 responses, which tells me something about how people feel about surveys right now. But you know, and I get that. But at the end of the day, the world as a former congressman wants it, the world is run by the people who show up. And the 155 entries that I got were fantastic. About half of them were from internal comms people. The other half were from either mixed, or external folk, more than 30 countries covered. And because of the way I asked the questions, I always asked the questions in threes, I ended up with 1000s of data points to work with. So I think the picture that's presented is quite rich, and quite interesting. Is it definitive? I don't know if it's definitive. I mean, one of

the advice points that I give to people about qualitative research is, given that we're not predicting an election, statistical certainty is not that important. What's important is that these are real views being shared by real comms people who are dealing with real issues. And that if you are a leader, a manager or a vendor in this space, it's worth paying attention.

### Mike 16:16

So the four main questions: What are the biggest opportunities facing communication world? What are the biggest opportunities that we're facing in our own roles? What are the main topics that we're communicating about? And what will we get rid of if we had a magic wand?

### Katie 16:31

Let's dive into the first one of those then the biggest comms opportunities in the world at the moment, what were people saying?

### Mike 16:42

I categorise the responses because a lot of people have different flavours of the same thing. Is it remote? Is it hybrid? Is it workplace strategy? And so I created about 15 categories. And there were two categories that were tapped for it all for the questions, one of which was workplace and workforce. And that was a bucket that included hybrid, remote, employee experience, employee engagement, culture, and capability building for particularly around managers and leaders. And the uber finding here was that none of these was a standalone category. None of these in and of themselves, really broke the double-digit mark. I think the key thing, however, is that employee experience and employee engagement, we're not putting the lights out. That, you know, even though these are things that are big topics that we've all been talking about for years, and particularly employee experience is supposedly the thing that everybody is focused on. It's really only part of this whole picture.

### Katie 17:54

Right, right.

### Mike 17:56

And also line management, this cult of subservience and service to line managers, which, again, has been something that's been a huge focus of a lot of internal communications, particularly consultants saying: this is the answer, this is the thing that we need to do. And it's just not showing up in this research. Maybe it's me, because I've never had a great deal loads of affection for a lot of these things. And some of the people in my, you know, my readership may be skewed towards people who don't think that much about this stuff. But I doubt the depths of case and of that, that many people are really focusing on my peculiar sectarian agendas. The

hybrid remote issue seemed to be by far the biggest of the ones in this bucket. And then culture generally, particularly as you know, looking at the implications of hybrid and remote on culture. And the issue with categorization is is this about hybrid? Is is about remote? Or is this about culture? We need to bake them all into the same category, because that's where that's where it's, you get the greatest coherence. My views on  hybrid and remote are that what we're dealing with right now is employee preferences and organisational preferences.

Katie 19:16
Yes.

Mike 19:18
And a year from now, it's a different ballgame. Because what's what's been happening is that organisations have been kind of refocusing and consolidating post, you know, post-lockdowns, for lack of a better term. Next year, you're really going to start seeing different business models competing with each other. You're going to be seeing office based companies, hybrid companies, and remote companies competing in the same spaces. And each of these workplace strategies has its own set of advantages. Hybrid employees like it, office based, there's proximity and managers like it. And then there's remote which is perhaps most difficult because nobody's got figured out what to do yet. But you've got the advantages of low overheads and global talent pool.

Katie 20:08
Yes.

Mike 20:09
What happens when you have real competition between these business models? I suspect that some of these results are employee preference and manager preferences will be far less important than the results of those kinds of those competitive situations, particularly insurance company. You know, is it possible to do an all-remote insurance company? Quite probably. How is that all-remote insurance company going to compete with the one that's insisting people go back to their central New York or central London office? And then the hybrid piece? How much flexibility do you have to bake in the hybrid in order for hybrid to work? If it's continuous flexibility, then it removes the predictability of having an office in the first place.

Katie 20:56
It's an interesting thought Mike, because what it means is the way we organise ourselves at work is going to become part of the business solution, our competitive advantage and how we design our products and services. So I might remove my

overhead costs or slash my overhead cost, because I don't need head office locations in all the major cities of the world. And I may then invest more in my people as a result, or maybe to compete more cost effectively. However, if my business demands lots of collaboration, and brainstorming, and knowledge sharing, I might think I really do need spaces for people to come together in real life. I like the thinking that actually, this is a business problem now not just a kind of employee engagement problem.

Mike 21:50
Exactly, exactly. And conversely, you can spend less on your people, if you, you know, are allowing them to live in lower cost areas with higher quality.

Katie 21:59
True.

Mike 21:59
And then you've got organisations competing with each other in the same space, which you don't really have now. You know, most of the most remote-first companies that I've seen are kind of startup or post-startup.

Katie 22:18
Yes.

Mike 22:19
A lot of hybrid companies could go either way. What I suspect is that hybrid is probably the least sustainable of the three paradigms because it combines the worst elements of both. You've got the complete dependence on local labour forces and geography. And you've got the demands for near-total flexibility, which kills the predictability. Office based companies that go to a four day week might end up being in the sweet spot of all those. Because that four day week, that free day may be sufficient flexibility for enough employees to be willing to sacrifice the daily commute for four days a week.

Katie 23:03
It also occurs to me, and we're seeing this AB, is we've got to think quite intentionally about the way we design jobs, you know that the actual role profile on how you do the job for the model that you want to create. So if you're, I don't know, if somebody who's just joined us, I'm thinking of Henry, who's just out of university, he wants to be in an environment where he's meeting colleagues, and particularly more senior colleagues, through the osmosis process to learn and grow and develop and all the rest of it. If that's not happening, and he's in a remote-first or remote only

organisation, we've all got to think much more intentionally about how we share knowledge.

**Mike 23:44**
Well, the topic of onboarding is a huge area of opportunity for internal comms people. And actually, nobody mentioned onboarding, in this entire survey as an area of opportunity.

**Katie 23:59**
Interesting.

**Mike 24:00**
And that's one of the biggest opportunities, onboarding and what I call super connection. You know, the practice of getting people in an organisation like starting with us as internal communicators taking ownership of the connection of people, particularly new hires, so that people can can help make them effective more quickly. A lot of people I've spoken to about that say that's HR's job. Well, you know, HR has a built in disadvantage around things that break down silos, and which increase lateral connectvity in organisations, and that they're responsible for the integrity of the org chart. So to expect HR to do this is to expect them to do something that they find constitutionally problematic. There's no reason why we can't just take the initiative and do this, which helps HR out, it helps the business out, and it underscores our value which is one of the other top four issues that comes up is influence and value. What is the extent to which were seen as people who matter and drive things and produce results for organisations?

**Katie 25:16**
I love the idea of super connectors. And I think we're ideally positioned to do that we are people people, we're nosy, we love a good story. We love connecting people and ideas. I think  it's the perfect task for us.

**Mike 25:30**
The second category that kind of was present across all four questions, was what I call priorities, content and noise. And this is really the category that covers what we do as communication professionals. And so it's the messaging, it's the storytelling, it's the content, but it's also what we do with it. Prioritising it, managing noise in the organisation, which is, again, a particular type of prioritisation. And the strategy itself, you know, what are we going to do to help support the organisation and achieving which of its objectives? This was something that was seen as an area of opportunity, and as an area of struggle.

**Katie 26:16**

The noise thing I'm hearing a lot.

**Mike** 26:18
Yeah.

**Katie** 26:19
I don't know, if you don't if you've got any reflection on on what you think is creating the noise. There's lots of channels, I think some of them have grown organically or let's say without particular thought or objective through lockdowns and remote working, suddenly, things have been switched on, I guess. And new ways of connecting have been established without a plan, that might be part of it.

**Mike** 26:44
That's part of it, and it's interesting, because the single biggest opportunity and the opportunity, say, using the control question, the first question, was seen as technology. And really, technology and channel management are effectively one and the same at this point. And what was interesting was that 19% said that technology was the biggest area of opportunity in the comms world at the moment. And actually 25% of those responding said that they were in the market for new technology.

**Katie** 27:15
Oh, wow. That's interesting.

**Mike** 27:19
This is a prime market around technology. We didn't get into a lot of nuance about specific technology platforms, aside from the fact that most organisations around the Microsoft suite as we know, and that not that many people were using many of the big brand name, internal comms platforms yet. And obviously, there's this whole big drama about the extent to which Microsoft is or should be the key platform, or whether you need to enhance the Microsoft suite or bypass the Microsoft suite. And obviously, that's a background conversation that's going on in the industry. I think the key thing is that, you know, there is an appetite for technology, but the real pain is coming from the prioritisation and the noise management.

**Katie** 28:16
Just on the prioritisation. Is that a problem with trying to pick apart what's urgent versus what's important? I.e. we've got stakeholders coming to us saying "please, I need this now." But we've got a business on a much more strategic level that needs certain initiatives prioritising and asked to spend some quality time thinking about how we're going to support those initiatives. Is that part of the problem, do you think?

**Mike  28:48**

I think it's more of a question of what's urgent and who's important.

**Katie  28:54**

Okay.

**Mike  28:55**

there's a political dimension to the prioritisation of internal comms content that perhaps drives a disconnect between what the organisation says it's, you know, says it values says it's pursuing and what it is actually persuing. That's a huge piece of what I look at in my measurement course, my measurement masterclass, and what I call the two question survey, which we were planning on discussing as well. But I think the key thing here is that in terms of where the opportunity is for communication folk, is to notice that this is an issue.

**Katie  29:38**

Hmm.

**Mike  29:40**

What I find is that there's a lot of comms folk who are being kept so busy that they can't address the stuffs, you know, strategically or forthrightly or cohesively. They're having to deal with, they're continually having to deal with ad hoc requests, maintaining existing channels, trying to justify or defend or manage or reprioritize around budgeting and priorities. Interestingly, about 70% of the people who participated in this said that their budgets were either going to be stable or increase.

**Katie  30:22**

That's good news.

**Mike  30:23**

Knock on wood, but that's a positive finding. It may give some people some breathing space to reprioritize strategically. But on the other hand, if your budgets– if someone's cutting your budget, you should consider it fair game to question everything you're doing, and everything that everybody else is doing that you're aware of. If we're going into a recession, the last thing we need to do as a profession is continue to view ourselves as subservient to all the other professions and just simply accept the cuts that are proposed and try to continue to provide the current level of service within those within those parameters. And I know lots of that's the default position for a lot of folks.

**Mike  31:12**

We need to sharpen our elbows, we need to agree to, you know, to fight for resources in the organisations in which we operate. And that involves several things, it involves being able to demonstrate the impact of what we do, demonstrate the risk of not doing it. And to challenge the value of stuff that's baked in. I mean, I know of communication functions that may have built in, you know, seven figure budgets, but that includes the annual management conference and includes the employee engagement survey, and your discretionary budget, may be lucky to be in double digits with your discretionary budget. If you're saying 20% budget cut, why can't you question the continued value of the employee engagement survey? Why can't you question having the management conference at a six star hotel?

**Katie  32:07**

No, I the question, I guess is if you want me to cut my budget, what do you not want me to do? And what value do you place on everything else that is being paid for? But perhaps also, a bigger question to ask or the starting question might be, because I don't know if you see this my but I see internal communications in particular, meaning very different things inside different organisations. A good question to ask off the bat might be what role does IC play here? What value would you like it to deliver here? What does it look like inside this organisation? And actually write that down. Get that agreed to, before you do anything else. Because you've really got to know: what's the game plan here?

**Mike  32:50**

Well, I think you need to take a step further back and set and say, okay, what are the real objectives of the organisation? So is it the stuff that you say your strategic priorities? And this is, again, where the two question survey comes in, when you're asking people the questions: What are the three biggest priorities that the company has? And what are the three biggest things that you're doing in your job? If the people in the organisation think your three biggest priorities are not the three biggest things on your priority list, then you've got a clear communication challenge, you've got a clear alignment challenge, and you likely have a clear operational challenge.

**Katie  33:30**

Yeah

**Mike  33:30**

And you you've managed to surface it, which means that you can then construct a comm strategy, rather than keeping the lights on in every channel that you have, or keeping every manager who wants a newsletter happy to actually doing those things that move the needle in each of those target areas.

**Katie  33:54**

What I also like about those, those two questions, Mike is if you ask those of senior leaders in the organisation, you can also then find the gaps. So if senior leaders are not all expressing the same three priorities, but instead 18 quite different ones, one of the first things you can do is go back to that cohort and say, "you might want to agree what they really are in terms of your strategic priorities before we even do anything else. Because one level of separation between you girls and guys here is going to create 17 levels of separation further down the hierarchy potentially.

**Mike  34:36**

If you've got leadership, or if you've got a practitioner who's really bought into this approach, you probably want to do it at four different levels. The first level being the expressed written priorities, as you know, as stated in annual reports or pronouncements in the market or, you know, CEO's annual statement or what have you. Then you do the Board, or whoever you call senior enough leadership to call them senior leadership. Then you do the organisation, and you do a demographic to see whether people are managers or whether people are staff. And you can do other bits of demographics, one of the things that I like to look at when doing this type of analysis is to find out whether there are, quote unquote, 'world nations' out there. So whether there are parts of the organisation that are operating at completely different sets of priorities than what's been stated, or what the managers or the senior managers are pushing. And if there's a manager to staff gap, you can then even look at okay, are there managers who are adding a bit too much in their own flavour?

**Katie  35:52**

I love all that, I think it's such valuable intelligence to, to give back to the organisation, particularly the senior leadership, because it really does uncover insight that they're not going to get any other way. Because if they simply walk around the organisation, they're gonna get the new paint and the red carpet treatment, potentially, and not actually find out what's really on people's minds and what they're placing as their priorities day-to-day. So it's really important intelligence, I think.

**Mike  36:20**

And they're not gonna get it from the Gallup Q12. A lot of the challenge with the role of employee engagement surveys, in the mix of organisational research, is that employee engagement surveys are designed to figure out how employees feel about being in the organisation. So like, do you have a best friend? Do you feel you understand the strategy they use? Does it seem that people care about you? This is, these are all feeling based questions. And indeed, if we want to go take a big step

back away from the communication leader survey for a second and look at organisational research in general, the biggest problem with organisational research is that organisational research that relies on closed ended questions, by definition focuses on how people feel. But management run their organisations based on what people do, in terms of sales figures, revenue, turnover, attrition, number of customers acquired, you know, these are actual managers of what people are doing. And work being measured against how people about feel about being in the organisation.

### Katie 37:40
So Mike, let's come back to one of the other questions you asked towards the end of your survey and bring this really close to home. You asked comms leaders to tell us how they hope to make a difference inside their organisations in the next 12 months. What did comms leaders tell you?

### Mike 38:00
There were two major things that they were saying. One of which is, was that they saw this whole workforce and workplace area that the hybrid, employee experience, employee engagement, remote piece as their biggest area of opportunity within the next 12 months. And that's not particularly surprising, because it tends to be particularly how internal comms folk are aligned. So I would imagine if you were looking at just the internal comms folk, that would be probably even proportionately higher.

### Mike 38:34
The second one is perhaps a bit more universal, is how they can see they could increase the extent to which they are valued and influential in the organizations. Those are not new trends. Those are pretty standard issue. And there's stuff that we can do as consultants and as an industry and as associations and institutions to support them in these areas, particularly in terms of getting the best practice together, maybe supporting some actual research about what's working, particularly remote/hybrid office, what's actually working in that space. I actually proposed some research in that area, with the Centre for Strategic Communication Excellence. And we're still interested in that is just getting people to get off the dime and fund this because this is going to take real time and real money to do. But the bigger issue is the opportunities that comms leaders are not seeing. Climate, which is probably the single biggest issue where we can make a difference organizationally as well as societally is purely in double digits.

### Katie 39:58
Wow.

**Mike 40:00**

As an area of opportunity, it's something that seems something to talk about, you know, in terms of what's, what's the topic on the agenda. But there is a signal lack of proactivity and ownership on this issue. And there's probably no greater issue in the world that could benefit from strategic communication support. Because right now we've abandoned the climate issue to the scientists and the activists. And the scientists are really great at formulating the problem. And the activists are really great and making it seem insoluble. But we have an opportunity to figure out what the solutions are and make those solutions accessible. To its credit, IABC is taking a very active role, and trying to figure out what it is we could do to catalyse communication leaders to take the initiative and make a difference in those areas.

**Katie 41:00**

I love that thought, Mike, and it's so important. And you're right, quite surprising in some ways, that it didn't come up as an important way to make a difference not just inside organisations but as you say, to the world at large. I'm wondering whether people just think it's too much of a problem. It's too big a problem to tackle. And they're not realising that every small step matters.

**Mike 41:25**

I think there's a lot of chicken and the egg. I think that as much as #WeLeadComms is about initiative and productivity in the communication space, we still have a lot of reactivity–

**Mike 41:38**

Yes.

**Mike 41:39**

In our space, you know. We're good at doing what we're asked to do. And we've got enough that we're being asked to do that we don't have time, we don't have bandwidth, we don't have a sense that it will make a difference, what have you. The reality is particularly within the climate space, there are issues which have societal solutions or issues that have behavioural solutions. And then there are issues which have political solutions. And we as communication leaders can help these issues get presented in a way that A) people believe that their actions will help make a difference. And in addition, actually, tangibly make a difference to the resolution.

**Katie 42:22**

You asked also my favourite magic wand question. So you asked if our community did have a magic wand, and we were able to make one of our day-to-day challenges go away, which one would that be? So what did your comms leaders tell you?

**Mike 42:41**

The big issue were the issues around priorities, content and noise would really show up around having spent a lot of their time and energy and budget doing work, that doesn't make a difference. And then the extent of influence and value perception that they have to be able to allow them to get the freedom to stop doing that work that didn't in the first place. And that came up to about 46% of the responses in that, to that question. So okay, we want to fix this, what do we need to do to fix it? In the absence of magic wands, the one thing that really shows up as a way to fix it is data. And that's one of the reasons why I'm focused on getting people to do the measurement masterclass, and getting people to recognise the power of collecting and presenting the answers to the two questions that we talked about. Not because the true questions in and of themselves are magic. But in asking these questions, you will present leadership with some gaps that you could then take action across.

**Katie 43:46**

Let's touch on your master class, because it's entitled Measurement: Putting it on rails. I think we've already talked a little bit about what you see people doing wrong in this space, which is measuring feeling not actually measuring what people are doing. And also not enough emphasis on alignment, which comes back to those two key questions, doesn't it?

**Mike 44:11**

Exactly. And I purposely use the term rails for a reason, which is that it's not just to put it on a solid foundation so that you can accelerate. It's that you have a gap between collective interest and individual activity. It's inherent in organisations. The issue is, can you bring those two things closer together, or at least manage the space between the two? It's hard to do it, if you're not aware of it, if you are aware of it, then you've got much greater options. So the rails are a visible image of the reality that we're talking about: the corporate reality and the individual reality.

**Katie 44:56**

You mentioned those two critical questions. There's really only two to ask your workforce, which is: what are the three most important issues facing your organisation? And then your three biggest things that you're currently working on in your own day-to-day job. Let's help listeners here by talking about the logistics behind a survey like that. How would you like to ask those questions in an ideal world? Would that be an online survey with open question textboxes that people could respond to? Would that be one-to-one interviews with a diverse cross section of your workforce? What would be your methodology? What would be your ideal way of asking those questions?

**Mike 45:36**

I don't have an ideal approach. But I think the approach that I outlined is the most pragmatic, which is that you do an online survey with three open ended responses to each of those two questions, perhaps one or two additional open questions, given your context, whatever your context is, and then a small number of demographic questions that allow you to identify groups of people, which may have some influence on either identifying divergent priorities and agendas, or which might add leverage to solving these issues. So you might want the person's name, you might not want the person's name, we might want their location, you might want their gender, you might want to know how long they've been in the company, what function they work in, what location they work at. That kind of thing. I mean, one of the big challenges of employee surveys, particularly surveys that ask about feeling, is that a lot of these questions have right answers. So if you're asking people, you know, the people you work with seem to care about you. It's like a North Korean election. How many people are gonna say no? If you think there's any element of traceability, and everybody knows they've got a unique IP address.

Katie 47:07
Yes, yes. So if there's low trust in the organisation, then we often see it very difficult to get open, honest, feedback. Even when we play the "we're independent, and your answers aren't going anywhere apart from to us" card. There's still that well, "yes, but who's paying for your time?" question that comes up.

Mike 47:27
Exactly. And that's, that's why I don't make any claim to statistical validity for this. The question then becomes, how many do you need to do? And my recommendation is as many as you can, it gets cumbersome at once you hit about 400. I mean, for me to analyse the communication leader survey with 155 participants took me two days. Somebody might say, well, I don't have two days to do that. So it's like, well, if you can invest two days to do this, you might be able to liberate your agenda from a whole lot of stuff. And you could articulate your, your needs to management much more powerfully. So, yeah, don't look at the time investment as a one off, look at the time investment as leverage against all the other time investment.

Katie 48:24
Exactly. If you're not doing this, what are you going to do instead? And perhaps this is the thing that actually saves you time. I'm just getting into the weeds on this slightly Mike, because I can see how it works. There is going to be some I want to call it laddering up of personal priorities to organisation priorities. So people are going to describe their own day to day priorities in such a way that it's meaningful to them, and it's how they express what they're concentrating on in their work. And there is going to be a little bit of work to do is there not in allocating or aligning those to how

the organisation articulates its strategic priorities. But presumably, that's a reasonably straightforward exercise.

**Mike 49:10**
It's actually an additional source of insight, the extent to which people are using the official terminology versus unofficial terminology.

**Katie 49:18**
Yes.

**Mike 49:18**
And my favourite example of that is you have a branded transformation programme. So you call it the Delphi transformation programme. The percentage of people who say the Delphi transformation programme is one of my top three priorities and use the term Delphi transformation programme, as a percentage of say, cost cutting or 'the damn cost cutting programme', that's a finding in and of itself.

**Katie 49:46**
That's why I love qual, because it's not just a statistic and never is, it's the way people have answered it. It's the language that they use. It's their tone. It's all of those things as well. Absolutely. Let's talk about your eBook. We've touched on engagement already here. But I think this is worth highlighting. And we'll put links in the show notes. It's called Employee Engagement or Business Impact? It's Time to Choose. And in it you write: "The pursuit of employee engagement for its own sake, has been a tragedy." Now, why is that, Mike?

**Mike 50:25**
I've been involved in internal comms for about 25 years, and I was involved in internal comms before employee engagement as a concept reared it's head. Internal communication, as of 1996/97, was on track to become a genuine strategic management discipline. The business schools were starting to take it seriously. You know, my MBA thesis was funded, looking at internal comms in the top 250 UK companies at this stage, and the whole thrust was about okay, how do we use this as a strategic business discipline? Then all of a sudden, the employee engagement report comes out. And everybody says the problem is employee engagement. And if we just increased employee engagement, we'd have greater productivity, and more prosperity and happier employees. What could be wrong with that? And the problem was that that movement effectively killed the progress of internal comms and strategic function, because it forced internal comms to be measured against employee engagement scores, which really focus on how employees feel, rather

than organisation performance, which is focused on what employees do. The business side of the business was in the money side, and we were collecting coupons.

Katie 51:46

I can't agree with you more wholeheartedly. I mean, clearly, there is a link between how I feel and what I do. However, that link is complex. It's nuanced. It changes minute by minute, you know, it's certainly day by day and month by month. And do I want to be part of any professional discipline that tries to deconstruct or analyse the link between feeling and doing? As I say, there is one, but it's much more beneficial and tangible just to measure the actions, is it not?

Mike 52:23

Well, the other side of feeling is that feeling is multi directional. And employee engagement doesn't address the directionality of feeling. Are people more engaged because the business is more successful? Or is the business more successful because people are reporting higher degrees of engagement? We have not come up with the definitive answer their question. I know in the world of sports, I'm a fan of several sports teams. Fans are much more engaged when the team is winning. But I don't know of any team that has won more consistently because the fans are cheering louder.

Katie 52:58

Yeah, very good point. What's driving what here? Also, we have one client who was very farsighted, got her engagement survey scores, and said: Katie, I just don't believe them. These are great scores, but when I walked around my organisation, I'm not getting that feeling. And so she commissioned a piece of work, which I think was a really insightful piece of work to find out what engagement actually meant to individuals across the organisation. And guess what, depending on where you worked, and what work you did, engagement equaled a lot of different things. For example, there were guys and gals driving cash around this business, because it was a retail operation. And they were motivated by autonomy, and the opportunity to wake up and plan out their day. People working in head office, we're very motivated/engaged by seeing a career opportunity and a career ladder. People working within teams in retail stores were very engaged and motivated by teamwork, serving the customer, solving customer problems. This is so nuanced isn't it?

Mike 54:16

The employee engagement score homogenises that and says you've got an 8.2 and your competitor has an 8.1, which means you're better.

Katie 54:25

Exactly.

Mike 54:26
The other thing that that means is that when you've got a top quartile engagement score, you don't have to pay attention to the feedback that you're getting, because everything's fine and some of the feedback we're getting is really uncomfortable for us to deal with. So long as everything's fine we'll not have to deal with that. So long I've got my 8.2 and my competitors an 8.1. I'm not going to look at the reward and recognition system.

Katie 54:55
Yes, I think we're both on the same page when it comes to engagementsurveys. It'll be be interesting to see how long they carry on for because clearly we've got technology now, there's lots of apps that encourages employees to give these pulse checks and temperature checks. I don't see those going away anytime soon. So maybe we'll move to things that are more continuous and always on, but potentially not necessarily more helpful.

Mike 55:22
The internal communication profession is not going to make employee engagement surveys and the whole concept of employee engagement as a driver of discretionary effort go away. I think the best we could do within the next 18 months is to accept that this is going to happen and get the permission to be able to explore this in more depth through surveys that focus on communication effectiveness rather than employee engagement. Because alignment is a communication effectiveness issue. It's not an employee engagement issue, you can have a totally engaged workforce of people doing whatever the hell they want.

Katie 56:05
That may be why they're engaged.

Katie 56:06
Exactly.And so what you got is a headless chicken ranch, but the scores are excellent.

Katie 56:13
Scores are great, but buildings on fire. Oh, my goodness. We can bring this all down to a model that makes sense because you have adjusted the 'think, feel do' framework to completely support and align what we've been talking about. Can you explain how you've adjusted that pretty well known framework? I'm guessing listeners will have heard of think feel do?

**Mike 56:39**

Well think feel do is the traditional internal comms strategy framework. And it made sense in the era before automated segmentation. So before we had platforms that allowed us to target different groups of people, we had to think of the employee workforce as a monolithic thing. Not because it existed that way, but because it was the best we could do. And then saying, what do we need people to think? How do we want them to feel? And what do we want them to do, at a macro level? And there were several weaknesses to this approach. The biggest weakness was that it wasn't reflecting the actual roles of people within the organisation, particularly as they pertain to change and to specific organisational objectives, and B) it overemphasised the 'feel', because all of those research tools that were used were asking people to rate things on a scale of one to 10, which always gets how people feel about something. One of the great pulse survey questions of all time, that one, I mentioned his name. He's an extremely esteemed colleague in this profession. He said, Do I understand the change: Yes or No? Do I understand the strategy: Yes or no? How many people are going to answer that question in the negative?

**Katie 58:01**

But 95% of people can say yes, I understand the strategy. That means nothing. Unless you test their understanding of the strategy, we can have 1000 people saying 1000 different things about what the strategy is?

**Mike 58:15**

Exactly. One of the great things that you can do with even something as basic as Survey Monkey, is you can run a quiz. So instead of say, asking the question, 'do you think you know the strategy?' You can say, 'of these four items, which are three from the strategy pillars?' I'm running this as my final exam for the measurement masterclass. So say which of these are things that we discuss? The fourth answer is learning how to get the maximum employee engagement score.

**Katie 58:49**

Just in case people weren't listening?

**Mike 58:51**

Exactly. When you ask a quiz question like that, you can get a huge amount of insights. And we talked about 'do, know, feel, say', this is the 'know', that you can you can tell what people know by asking them what they know. You're not asking them whether they know something or how they feel about their knowledge, we say, you know, 'which of these things are on the list?' And what you get is not only the number of people who get it, right, but you also get the extent to which each of the pillars is misunderstood, which is a finding in and of itself.

**Katie 59:28**

Absolutely. Because something's not being articulated clearly enough or not resonating with people. And actually, maybe it's not a problem with the comms maybe the pillar itself.

**Mike 59:37**

Right. Sometimes there's some strategic ambiguity–

**Katie 59:41**

Exactly.

**Mike 59:42**

That was that was built in to satisfy multiple stakeholders. This is not uncommon issue

**Katie 59:47**

By turning that framework around and making it 'do, know, feel', is that presumably also quite a useful framework to use when a senior stakeholder comes to with an ask? To say, the first thing I'm going to ask you is what do you want people to do differently to do anew to do instead of something else?

**Mike 1:00:11**

I'm onboarding a new client right now. And we've had really good conversations. And then we had a discussion yesterday about, okay, what are the strategic objectives? And what we found is, by having the conversation, we actually found some things that worked as strategic objectives, which are things that people could actually do that we could actually measure and track the progress. You know, because sometimes people particularly in comms, they want to throw money at comms and see a lot of output. So that they can convince the people that the money has been spent. But with this kind of research, we can look at not just whether the money's been spent, but whether it's actually done anything. And so being able to get it down to 'do' measures of specific outcomes that require achievement, or at least where the achievement level can be tracked, offers the organisation a lot more potential traction than just just throwing a bunch of posters on the wall.

**Katie 1:01:11**

Before we head over to those quick fire questions, which I'm very keen to ask you, it's interesting, where we find ourselves from an economic point of view. It's different around the world. We've got some interesting things happening here in the UK, but those issues, I think, are replicated in Europe and possibly across the US as well. What's your assessment of the comms sector as a whole at the moment?

**Mike 1:01:36**

The opportunity level is unprecedented. There is a lot of ambiguity, we are in multi dimensional crises, some of which we have no control over, we have no control over what Vladimir Putin is doing in Ukraine, we have no control over that. We have some control about how we react to it, we have very little control over that issue. Climate on the other hand, may be something where we've got a lot more control on it. Organisational progress is something that we've got a lot of potential influence on, because there are a lot of areas, and not just an internal comms, but where communication professionals in general can help enlighten people and mobilise them to support constructive solutions. At the same time, we also have an electorate that is increasingly despondent, and is either giving up or seeking quick solutions, which is not an entirely new phenomenon, but that's not getting better. And I think actually, inside of organisations, we probably have the most scope for visible constructive change and impact than we have anywhere else right now.

**Katie 1:02:58**

You're painting quite a vision for what our role could be, as IC professionals. To be those super connectors internally, to mobilise people around a common cause, to better share knowledge and intelligence across the organization's to solve the problems that really matter. I don't know if I've summarised that correctly Mike, But would that be broadly it?

**Mike 1:03:26**

Absolutely. And the expectations of us are very low. So in terms of the grand scheme of things, I mean, there's assuming that we can all afford to stay in business, the amount of impact we can have in the next 18 months is immense.

**Katie 1:03:44**

And finally, if we are asked to cut our budgets, being very clear with senior stakeholders what they actually want us, therefore, to stop doing.

**Mike 1:03:53**

Or what do we propose to do as a substitute for what we've been doing.

**Katie 1:04:02**

Yes, yes. Because weirdly, and I've thought this for some time, the fact that historically IC has had fairly low budgets has made us more creative and inventive, I think, because we can't just throw money at something. We do have to think, 'Ah, I've got three and a half pence, what can I do with it? Oh, dear, I've got to now be creative. And do something really clever.'

**Mike 1:04:30**

Right? You know, the problem of IC people is not a problem of budgets. It's a problem and remit and confidence.

Katie 1:04:37
Yes. Let's turn to those quickfire questions. I have to ask you a new set of questions because I'm not going to make it easy and just repeat the ones I asked you before, so to keep you on your toes I have to ask you this question, because you are a prolific and excellent writer – I love what you write, I often linked to it in my Friday updates. What's your top tip to someone looking to improve their writing skill?

Mike 1:05:05
Let people look at your first drafts rather than your final drafts. Most of us spend most of our time debating with ourselves about what we write, it's much easier to get the debate out of the way first, and then focus it, rather than have an internal debate and then an external debate.

Katie 1:05:26
So share those first initial drafts. Don't be frightened to get input and feedback early on.

Mike 1:05:33
Right? And if you've got stakeholders who are insisting on seeing near-final stuff to engage with you, then find other people to look at the draft. Particularly people who know who you're, if you're ghost writing, who your ghost writing for.

Katie 1:05:46
Very good advice. How would you complete this sentence? "World class internal communication is..."

Mike 1:05:55
I think it's stuff, you can track a direct connection with an actual business. We can talk about how great your production values are, how big your budget is, how much your C suite loves you. But unless you're delivering, more precisely, if you're delivering a connection with actual business impact that you can prove, you're in the top one percentile right now. I'd like to get that down to the top quarter by the end of next year.

Katie 1:06:25
Great food for thought there. And this is a question I like to ask because I think it's very hard to be inspiring, Mike, and I think you are very inspiring to our profession. Without being inspired yourself. So who is your inspiration? And why?

### Mike 1:06:41

I'm gonna give you three answers, since I like giving three answers to questions. And I think also it covers three different bases from where I'm coming from. I mean, the first is my dad, Frederick C. Klein, the former sports columnist for The Wall Street Journal, who basically taught me how to write. And he took me up on the offer of starting a blog when he finished writing this column for The Wall Street Journal. And every two weeks he maxed out his blog. And this week, he really did a fantastic job with a blog that I can share with everybody in the world. And it's all about how all of the major sports are now dominated not by Americans, but by people from other backgrounds. So it's like, he writes a lot about baseball, which is often difficult to share 'cause it's hard to explain baseball toanybody who's not used to baseball. But he really, to use a baseball term, hit it out of the park with his latest blog, and that was quite inspiring.

### Mike 1:07:35

I think in terms of the profession, there are two people who really inspire me at the moment. One as a guy by the name of Ned Lundquist. He's an IABC fellow, and he's the founder and editor of the job of the week newsletter. Every week, I think for at least 20 years, he's on like edition 5000-something of the job of the week newsletter or 500something, ridiculous numbers. Every week, he collects job offers and notices from a network of people around the world and publishes it, every week. If I didn't know about Ned Lundquist, I would never have had the idea #WeLeadComms. Wow. So it's a you know, #WeLeadComms is a direct descendant of job of the week.

### Mike 1:08:21

And then the third is somebody I've started working with recently, woman by the name of Sinead Cullen out of Australia and she is a kind of a communication/sustainability person works with a company called Oricon in Australia, and she is spearheading IABC's efforts to figure out what would it take to get the comms profession mobilised to support the climate battle. And she's creative, resilient, sparky, and it's just an absolute privilege to work with her. And she's a walking embodiment of what we all need to be to get through this crisis together.

### Katie 1:09:05

Thank you so much, Mike. That has been an amazing journey through lots of issues and challenges that we're facing at the moment. Thank you so much for your insight and your wisdom and your time.

### Mike 1:09:20

It's my pleasure. Thank you for the opportunity, and for the questions, for the for the chance to really articulate what I'm trying to do. And I look forward to having your

listenership and your support, as we deal with this stuff, certainly over the next 18 to 24 months.

Katie 1:09:41
I will again remind listeners that every link that you need will be in the show notes, including #WeLEadComms, so that you can follow all of Mike's activities. Thank you, Mike.

Mike 1:09:52
You are welcome.

Katie 1:09:55
Just a quick footnote before you head off. My colleagues that AB are currently working on a beautifully written and designed report that analyses in full the responses of Mike's global comms leader survey. So if you'd like a copy, just email icpodcasts@abcomm.co.uk. That email address again, icpodcasts@abcomm.co.uk. For the show notes to this show and a transcript, head over to AB's website abcomm.co.uk/podcasts.

Katie 1:10:37
My thanks to our wonderful producer John Phillips, and sound engineer Stuart Rolls, and my lovely colleagues back at AB, all of you keep the show on the road, and I am immensely grateful for you helping me do that. And finally, my thanks to you for joining us whether you are a longstanding loyal listener, or a newbie, thank you for choosing TICP. Plays of this show have risen by more than 600% this year, which is a testament to the growing interest in and importance of what we do in internal communications. If you'd like to help other IC folk find this show, please give the algorithms a little notch by rating us on Apple Podcasts. So my lovely listeners until we meet again, stay safe and well. And remember, it's what's inside that counts.