



## The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 8

### Episode 70 – Reaching across the aisle

#### Transcript

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Katie 00:03

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

Hello and welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. Every fortnight I sit down with the leading lights from the world of communication, business and academia to tease out smart thinking, fresh ideas and new tactics for improving communication at work. My guest this week is Shelby Scarbrough, author of a new book *Civility Rules! Creating a Purposeful Practice of Civility*. Now, I'm guessing many of us feel that we are living in a more polarised society. Shelby, like many others, says we are losing our ability to have constructive, healthy debate. We attack not the idea we don't like but the person who holds it. At work, we are certainly seeing employee activism on the rise. And while I think we do want employees to speak up and contribute, we also want those conversations to be courteous, constructive, to move our organisations forward.

Now, Shelby has a wealth of experience in complex, high-stakes communication through working at the White House. I was keen to learn from Shelby the practices and principles that lead to positive relationships and productive communication – especially how we as comms professionals can build bridges between people and create more consensus, more unity and ultimately deeper understanding between individuals, teams and groups. So, without further ado, I bring you Shelby Scarbrough.



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

### **Shelby 03:36**

I'm delighted to be here. And I know that we're on different time zones so it's kind of fun to think what your day has been when my day's just starting.

### **Katie 03:44**

Absolutely. Shelby, I'd love to start, to be honest with you – and I know we're really here to talk about your book, and we definitely will – but you have had such a fascinating career, which I'm guessing has involved many communication challenges. One of your very first jobs was actually in the White House working for President Reagan's advance team. The first question I have for you actually is can you just tell us what an advance team actually does?

### **Shelby 04:16**

Sure, the word 'advance' is actually a kind of a clue, as we go ahead of the President in advance to prepare all of the details of a visit, and then execute the visit and literally are in advance of him in that. We're walking in front of him to lead the way so to speak, but it's all of the logistics, it's all the details of where, when and how. And the what is up to him.

### **Katie 04:40**

That must have been an amazing experience. Are there any key lessons that you learned through that role that you still put into practice today?

### **Shelby 04:51**

Yes, and with a little bit of modification, you know, the White House and I'm sure the Kremlin and Buckingham Palace and all of these other places for the heads of state are places of kind of perfection, because you don't have a lot of room for error. It's very important that the work be really precise. And, so, I had to learn at a young age to shape up any sloppiness and colour inside the lines a little bit, be very precise about what we were doing. But you come to learn that perfection is not possible. And I also learned that in that job that it was not possible, but it was how you adapted to what was not perfect. And, so, one of the things about advance is we thought through absolutely everything, or we tried to. If something didn't go right, then we had a plan that you could look at and know to how to get back to it, or how to adjust and where your latitudes were for adjusting. You know, 'Oh, we've got 10 more minutes in here that we can pull from or we can...' You know, you can adjust very quickly if you're prepared. If you don't know the roadmap, then you can't adjust the route. You just wander. So, that's the idea behind presidential advance. It's the idea behind preparation and professional behaviour in a business or in a job. And



that I still look at to this day. And I think I strive for excellence more than perfection at this point in life, but I still want to achieve that level of professionalism that people can believe in.

**Katie 06:19**

I love the idea of preparation enabling you then to pivot, to flex, to change course. Because I guess you've got, as you say, that overall direction of where you need to go. And also, it gives you confidence to do that as well. You're not a rabbit scared in the headlights, as it were, I'm guessing?

**Shelby 06:39**

Exactly.

**Katie 06:40**

You went on to work at the State Department as a protocol officer. Another job that sounds really interesting. What did that job involve?

**Shelby 06:52**

So, it's sort of the flip side of what I did at the White House, which is the President for me was one client, if you want to think of it that way from a business terminology and many venues. So, we went everywhere with him, but he was our guy the whole time. In protocol it's a different client every time and but similar venues. So, the White House, the State Department, Capitol Hill, some landing zones, Andrews Air Force Base. There might be a dinner out or something like that but for the most part, it was in Blair House, which is the President's guest house, or wherever they were staying. So, those would be the venues and that was pretty standard whereas the client was different. And they all came from different cultures and brought their own expectations and lots of different things to the mix.

**Katie 07:37**

I'm sure there's lots of things you can't share, many stories, because of non-disclosure agreements. But are there any little stories you are able to share with us?

**Shelby 07:48**

Just some funny things, you know. They're not big things that might start a World War, thank goodness. I didn't have too much of that in my purview. Although, again, if we messed up, we could ruin some relationships or we could impact some relationships but things like we would have a motorcade on the tarmac at the airport for a country when they came in and it was all manifested so that everybody had a specific seat, and we had negotiated it with this country. And the style of the country was, in many countries, but the style of this country in particular was really more informal and they didn't really follow exact, precise things very much. But the

challenge, if they didn't do that is they would end up in the wrong place because the motorcade was going to split. And, so, I kept trying to emphasise, 'If you're not in the right car, you might not end up in the right place.' And, of course, they came off the plane, and I didn't know any of them, so we have to rely on our counterparts to make sure that those people are in the right cars. And, of course, that didn't happen. They all just kind of ran off the plane and got into whatever car they felt like getting into. And when the motorcade split, half the people ended up in the wrong place. So, the motorcade split: one part of it went to the Department of Treasury for a meeting. The other part went to a hotel to drop people off. And people were all mixed up. So, in my world, at that time, that's a big deal, because now you have to fix that. It's not the biggest deal in the world but in my world, when perfection at that point is the key, that makes a little bit of an anxiety attack and you have to figure it out. Fortunately, the principal got where they were going, and he probably didn't know unless his... I can't remember who got mixed up but unless his Secretary of Treasury was in the wrong part of the motorcade, he was probably OK overall, or the interpreter, for example.

**Katie 09:34**

And, also, you can't have very important people just hopping into cabs, can you either? Or into taxis? Because they have to be protected. Moving them around is not a straightforward business I'm guessing.

**Shelby 09:46**

Correct. Correct. And I had another one where we were in Poland for a trip with President Reagan after he was out of office. We had gone back to the plane and I was in charge of making sure the motorcade was all correct. And I said 'Ok, let's go' and we left and I didn't notice that the interpreter wasn't in the motorcade. And it turns out he overslept and he was in the hotel still. So, their secret service, some of it was back at the hotel, we had to send them back into that room and they banged on the door and woke him up, threw him in the shower and ran out to the airport. But President and Mrs. Reagan had, we were delayed leaving. We just serve them breakfast, etc, but the poor interpreter was so embarrassed that he kind of slunk on the plane and sat in the back jump seat. And but, I mean, we couldn't go to the next city without him.

**Katie 10:33**

I'm just curious how it worked – did you literally have bibles for different countries and states and cultures? Because I'm guessing whoever you were dealing with, there was a different kind of protocol, was there?

**Shelby 10:46**

Yes, at the State Department we were lucky to have resources. We had CIA briefing documents, which were unclassified. So, they were things that talked about the unclassified aspects of the government, the head of state, the cabinet, you know, just information so that the names, how to say them, that kind of thing. And any particular things that we needed to know that were general. We didn't see anything that was about, you know, world peace, or anything like that in our office there. But the other thing is, we used the desk officers who were in charge of each country. There was a country officer that called a desk officer, so if we needed to know anything about that country in particular, we would talk to them. And especially things like gifts or food, we learned personally first-hand things about their attitudes towards time is a big one. Some countries are very late and time is relative. Other countries are very prompt. And, so, we are very prompt as a culture and the White House works on a very tight schedule. So, if there was a country whose style was to just kind of show up when you needed to show up, that was always a little stressful.

#### **Katie 11:49**

All of that work must have involved building a really close, trusting relationship with some incredibly important people, both your own people, your senior politicians in the US, but then dignitaries from abroad. Do you have any thoughts, advice on how we can all build more trusting, strong relationships, perhaps with a senior leader or senior stakeholder?

#### **Shelby 12:17**

The first and foremost idea that comes to mind is, well, consistency and reliability are really important for building trust, because people can trust that you're going to be someplace or that you're going to do something. But I think the bigger one is really just almost the most obvious, which is to tell the truth and be straightforward. Mrs Reagan was somebody who you didn't want to pass baloney on to anybody but she was really precise and really direct in her questions. And I think all with the right heart of wanting to make sure that it was right for her husband and that he was going to be shown in the best light and have the best opportunities to present his message and communicate with the world or with world leaders. And, so, she was a person that I always said, 'Look, if you just tell her the truth, it's not always easy, because she might not like the answer.' But if you try to whitecoat it or powder over it or something, you lost her trust, because she knew that's what you're trying to do. And so most successful people with her were the ones who are just direct and said, 'This is the way it is. Now, if you don't like it, we can change it, or we can't change it' you know, and just we're honest and not tried to make it sound a little nicer than it is because the tendency is to want to please people. I understand that tendency. I'm a people pleaser. I work to serve other people to make their lives more effective and

efficient. But at the same time, not being straightforward is not helpful, because it doesn't help with expectations. And it ultimately breaks down trust.

### **Katie 13:46**

For listeners who work for a business with, say, an international workforce or an international reach, or maybe even just within their borders they've got a very diverse workforce in terms of different cultures, have you got any thoughts or advice for building bridges between people of different cultures? Because you must have seen that interaction happen well, and not so well, so many different times.

### **Shelby 14:12**

Yes. I have a friend who once said, 'Why do we always have to...' because I sort of talk about reaching across the aisle, reaching out into somebody else's culture. And she says: 'Why do we always have to reach out into somebody else's culture? Why can't they reach into ours?' And I thought that was really an interesting and kind of telling statement about where somebody's headspace was on the giving aspect of things. So, for me, it's about wanting to know about somebody else's culture and wanting to be respectful of the elements of their culture that I might have an impact on negatively, hopefully positively. But if I'm going to do something that's going to impact them negatively, I'd like to be aware of that and not just be ignorant of it. So, it's up to me, it's up to us, to want to reach out and take a look into another culture. So if everybody does that, then everybody's reaching out into each other's cultures. But that doesn't always work that way. It's just in a perfect world, that that's the way it works. But we can't control what anybody else does. So, do our homework, you know? I mean, if we've got somebody of a different race or culture, or even within our own country, even if they're all of the same descent, you know, the United States is a very diverse place just geographically. And there are traditions, for example, that are very different in each of the areas. And so again, some people in the south, it's a little more informal in some ways, and very much more formal in others. And, so, you kind of have to know about that and learn about that, before you try to really step into that culture. My biggest experience share on that, I just tried to ask and say, 'Look, I'm not familiar with this. And if I am doing something that is not kosher, to use a cultural word, then please let me know, you know, then we can have a conversation about it, or just let me know. I want to learn.' You know, I'm open to learning. I'm not trying to make a mistake. I'm trying to not make mistakes.

### **Katie 16:08**

Yes, I like that because you're showing your intention very explicitly. That's what matters most to people. It's not the mistake, but whether it happened with the right heart, you know? I think that that makes the difference, doesn't it?

### **Shelby 16:23**

Absolutely.

### **Katie 16:24**

Let's talk about your book, *Civility Rules!* And I think we should start with a definition, because it was clear from the get-go reading your book that when you talk about civility, it is much more than simply politeness or good manners isn't it?

### **Shelby 16:41**

Right. And that's what comes up in the dictionary, you know, a form of speech or action that is polite and courteous, something like that. And, I mean, every dictionary is slightly different, but that's fundamentally what you get when you look it up. And what I found is it's so much more than that. I used our first president, United States first President George Washington as a baseline for this book, because he wrote when he was about 16, he translated a French primer, a French etiquette book into English, into Old English at the time. And he said there were 110 rules and they were kind of funny. You know, 'Thou shall not stand so close so as to bedo a man with one's spittle' is always a favourite of mine, especially in the time of COVID, because it comes in handy these days. You know, what I did was say, 'OK, these are kind of funny and archaic in some ways. Which ones apply today? And what do they really mean?' And I bucketed them all. So, I literally took a spreadsheet and categorised them and then sorted the spreadsheet, and the spreadsheet came up with five or six different values really, which is honour and respect and trust and courtesy is definitely one of them. But that to me is like the cars on a bridge, you know, the bridge's courtesy and the cars that go over a bridge to connect two sides of land, to connect to things, they change over time. You know, the styles change. So, the style of how we connect with people can change a bit over time. COVID is a good example. Standing so close so as to bedo a man with one's spittle is a pretty good gauge, because then you're out of germ shot in a way but in a Western culture, three feet is the traditional space between people that's comfortable for friends and strangers. Close friends can stand closer, right, but people we just meet in general, are talking at a cocktail party, three feet, but COVID change that. So that's the changing style of the car on the bridge at the time is now six feet became the norm, right? So that's kind of what I look at courtesy, but trust, respect, dignity, humility, all of those things are much heavier, much weightier and significant in how to form a practice of civility.

### **Katie 18:51**

And your book seems so prescient for the time that we live in today, you know, our age where by many indicators incivility appears to be on the rise. Do you have any personal thoughts on what's driving our lack of civility in society in general?

### **Shelby 19:11**

People look a lot to social media and I kept kind of pushing back on that for a while. But I agree that social media is a challenge. I think it's a big challenge. It's affecting our youth. It's affecting our attention spans. It's affecting how we show up in the world because of the anonymity in a way. Everybody wants to have a voice and be a star. Doesn't matter how you do it, the pithier, the shorter the better (which I don't agree with) but that's the way it is, again, because of our attention spans. So, we're not engaging in substantive, thoughtful interactions. And that is a challenge. We're in society. We're trying to deal with big issues and people disagree on some of these issues, or at least they disagree on how to achieve good outcomes. And even if we agree on what the outcome needs to be, we may disagree on the pathway to it. And having those discussions is a lot harder when we've lost our debate skills, when we've lost our communication skills. So, the irony of the internet is we're in communication all the time. The internet is always on, always there, rapid fire, always available. And, so, communication is nonstop. But is it good communication?

### **Katie 20:31**

And what's interesting about your book is that you aren't simply suggesting this will be a nicer, calmer, more lovely society to live in. There is a lot more at stake than that. I've heard you say: 'Without two voices in the room, there's no democracy.' So, the reason we need civility is actually quite important to the bedrock of a civil society would you say?

### **Shelby 20:59**

Yes. I wrote the last chapter of the book sitting in my little country house on the porch watching the world go by during COVID. And I realised I called it a love letter to America. So, this book is a little bit US focused in the sense that it was based on George Washington's Rules of Civility, but his family did come from Great Britain. And it's timeless and the concepts are timeless and transcend all cultures, really. So, it doesn't matter who's reading this in general, it applies. From a democracy standpoint, I believe that freedom of speech is very important. And if we don't have the ability to voice our concerns out loud or share or dispute or disagree civilly, if we can't do that, then we can't find common ground, ultimately, we can't have a discussion. And if only one voice is heard, that's basically communism. So, that's not the kind of world that I believe in. I believe in democracy and free speech, and the ability of the individual to pursue happiness and their own destinies. But we live in a collective culture, we live in a society. So, we have a responsibility individually to participate as a group. It doesn't have to be groupthink. So, there's a big difference there between having a cooperative society that functions and a society that has the ability to disagree and to talk about issues, to come to the best conclusion possible and to argue out what the best way forward is. The other way is just dictatorship. And that's not a place I would like to live.



**Katie 22:40**

It's interesting because from the very beginning of your book, what you notice is that you say, 'It starts with you, it starts with the self, it starts with how you want to show up in the world.' And I thought that was so interesting. We're not projecting what we want to see on others so much as behaving in a certain way and role modelling certain behaviours. Would that be a fair reading of your book?

**Shelby 23:04**

Yes, because we have to control our controllables. The only thing that we can control is ourselves. And by doing that, we have the opportunity to positively impact other people, hopefully. I just wrote an article for a magazine that's coming out in a bit and I talk about how one of the first questions people ask me about civility is 'How can I challenge that so-and-so when they are uncivil?' And I say 'Well, the premise of the question is actually awkward because the bottom line is you can't change them.' And what we want to do is tell that person off, right? That's what they're asking me is, 'How do I nicely tell somebody off? I've got a big problem with that.' And that doesn't mean that I haven't wanted to or that I haven't done it, OK? Because I'm not perfect and we are all human. And one of the things that gets in my way a little bit is when I see injustices in the world. Somebody's being treated poorly, I want to stand up for them. So, I step in to a bully, something like that. So, I think we can agree that there are places that we are tempted and more tempted to behave uncivilly but even in the face of a bully, I tried to stay true to my values, which is the trust and respect and honour and dignity. And, so, I try not to take the dignity away of somebody. That's really tempting, is to want to do that. If we really want to see the change, I think it's really important to stay with the practice as much as possible.

**Katie 24:23**

Let's talk about civility at work. You say: 'In the workforce of the future we will need people who know how to mediate conflict.' Is this because you actually see conflict potentially increasing in the workplace?

**Shelby 24:38**

Yes, it is. Right now it seems to be increasing. There's a lot of, you know, people wanting to call other people out on things, on their behaviour, which is a challenge for me because I'm not sure I have the right to tell somebody else what to do (now after I just told you that I would stick up for somebody who's being bullied, alright, so where's the line there?) And the challenge is we will, I think our bar for what is OK, there's just such change in diction and things that we're supposed to, words we're supposed to use, and it's a little random. And, so, we have to, I think being a little patient with people, understanding how to mediate conflict means that you can say, 'OK, how do we get to back to a common space of understanding and how can we turn the heat down a little bit in the room, if it rises?' For some reason, there's a lot of

righteousness that 'I have the right to speak up and use my voice.' And I don't disagree with that, but that doesn't mean you use it to abuse. There's a difference there. And being able to present your ideas in a civil manner I think is more effective long-term. It's a way that people hear you. If you're screaming people really don't hear you, they just hear screaming. And if they hear insults, that's all they hear is insults. They don't hear constructive information that might help them change their mind or change behaviour. That just doesn't work with people. That makes people defensive and they don't behave in a way, nobody's going to behave the way that we want them to. So, for me, it's about how I behave, how I show up. And then the mediation aspect of it is where we're going to move more and more towards machines and mechanisation and artificial intelligence. And it'll be interesting to see how well a robot or a computer can mediate emotional intelligence. So, for the time being human beings, we need to rely on human beings to do that mediation, so those skill sets as the other jobs go away, those skill sets are going to become more valuable, which is the short answer after my long answer.

#### **Katie 26:35**

I couldn't agree more. You mentioned this already, you break the concept of civility into core ideals of courtesy, humility, empathy, trust, honour / respect. One of those qualities or virtues, I guess, that I'm particularly drawn to is humility. And I think that's because, from my experience, the best, most successful leaders and businesspeople seem to be both passionate about their own ideas and beliefs, but at the same time carry in their head the thought that they could be wrong, if that makes sense. Would that be your experience too?

#### **Shelby 27:14**

Oh, yes, every time I'm talking on a show like this, I am very cautious and careful about what I say and what I do, and not to the point of parsing it in a politically correct way, but to say, 'Am I bringing my best self forward? And am I humble enough to recognise that I am a learner in this process, too?' And that's one of the reasons that I called the book *Civility Rules! A Purposeful Practice of Civility* and creating one because it's a practice, it goes on and on. And we evolve and we learn all the time. So, I have some basic premises that I try to live by but, you know, I'm open to conversation with somebody else. If somebody's listening to this and disagrees with me, I'd love to talk about it, because it'll help me evolve my own thought process in this and hopefully I will touch their lives a little bit, too. That's the hope. We are just human beings that are flawed. And, so, we can always learn something new.

#### **Katie 28:14**

It's a great mindset to have, isn't it that open mindset? Tell us a story about a friend of yours called Andrew Sherman. I did actually Google him. He's written a lot of

books on business, and a particular book called *The Celestine prophecy* by James Redfield, your friend, Andrew seems to sort of, in some ways, kind of live his life by the ideals that are the core idea of this book. And that is that everyone we meet has a message for you. And I'm just wondering, does your friend Andrew really behave and live like that? And, if so, what does it look like in practice?

### Shelby 28:53

When I go see him – he's a lawyer, we're very good friends – but when I go see him in his office, he pulls out his pad of paper and he takes notes on everything we talk about. So, it's maybe habit from being a lawyer, but it's also I think, it's his way of tracking what we talk about, so he can follow up efficiently and effectively if there's something that he agrees to do or in his thoughts, and I'm kind of the same, I mean, I write notes down but he just does it almost like the old psychiatrist who takes out the notepad and says, 'OK, why don't you have a seat on my couch and tell me everything.' But he wants to know what's up, he wants to know what's going on. And he retains all of that information and turns around and spews it out into massive amounts of very helpful books for people. It's just incredible. I have a great deal of respect for him and he's been a friend for a long time. So, yes, we all have something to learn. And again, that's the core of humility. So, he's expert in many things, but he's such a lifelong learner. Then he turns around and shares what he learns.

### 30:00

It's an amazingly good practice. And I think also for communicators and leaders inside businesses, as you walk around your organisation to always keep your eyes and your ears open, and the thought in your head, 'What am I going to learn today? What does this person know that I should be aware of?' is a great practice. It must be.

### Shelby 30:23

Yes, inquiry is fascinating. And it's a great way to open up a conversation, you know, is asking a question about somebody else. We had a warmup exercise at an event the other day that was really nice. It was 'Tell me something you learned today.' 'Tell me what your greatest accomplishment for the day was.' 'Tell me what, you know, what you consider your greatest accomplishment.' One guy said he closed a round of funding another person said they, you know, got their parents to the doctors. Each one had a whole story behind it and it was fascinating because you learned a little bit about that person in the time. And I just I kind of like those things. Especially for somebody, I'm kind of shy, and so for somebody like me to walk into a room where I don't know somebody, there's certain questions that, you know, are kind of kitschy these days, 'What's your superpower?', which I like, sometimes when I do conference mediation and stuff like facilitation, sometimes that's fun to hear. But it's kind of gotten old at this point. And if we really want to learn about somebody

below the surface, it's not 'Hi, how was your day?' It's 'Tell me something exciting that you had go on today.' 'Tell me what your worst moment was.' I mean, that just instantly bonds you rather than 'Hi, how are you?'

### **Katie 31:30**

I think also because there's a vulnerability in answering some of those questions. And again, vulnerability is something that, although we might feel uncomfortable about it at the time, actually does bond human beings to each other, doesn't it?

### **Shelby 31:45**

Yes, yes. Instead of saying, you know, 'What do you do for a living?' Sometimes I say, 'Tell me what you're passionate about. Tell me what you've been working on lately.' 'Tell me something...' is just something a little more broad that, that's not 'What's your title?', which I like to know, but it's just as more interesting than, 'Oh, OK, you're a lawyer. Okay.'

### **Katie 32:03**

Can you tell us about the sign that President Reagan had on his desk? I just thought this was absolutely a brilliant quote.

### **Shelby 32:12**

He had a sign on his desk that said, 'There's no limit to what a man can do or how far he can go if he doesn't mind who gets the credit.' That was something that when I left the White House and I went to the State Department, I went into the Oval Office to say goodbye to the President. And it's actually floating out there on the internet, which is a little embarrassing, but he said, 'You're just going to the State, we're going to see you a lot, I know' kind of thing, because he knew that I was going to be coming back with all these heads of state and seeing him but it was, you know, leaving my position at the White House and going over to another building in the government. And, so, he gave me a replica of that plaque that was on his desk and I took it to heart. That's again a bit of humility. There's that old saying of 'Winning ideas, many authors. All bad ideas and orphans', something like that. Those are those concepts. There's plenty of people who take credit for things, but it's kind of a beautiful thing in a way to step back and not worry about the credit because you approach life a little differently. More than anything, at least what motivates me is to know that something I did had a positive effect on people. I don't necessarily need it to be called out. I try to share the gratitude and share the credit and/or give the credit away when possible because of that sign that he had on his desk.

### **Katie 33:35**

I can't not ask you this, as a huge fan of *The West Wing* (to the point that I actually bought Aaron Sorkin's scripts, I was so obsessed with the show) is there any reality to

that show? Did you watch it at all? And think 'Well, yeah, there was a bit of it like that' or was it all just total make believe?

### Shelby 33:55

I remember when the show was on I people would say 'Is it really like that?' I'd say 'Well, it looks kind of like that. They were pretty good about how it looked.' But the biggest difference, at least in the White House that I served in and the ones that I've been in, is there's not a lot of chaos in there. There were people walking around all the time, everyone is very busy. Busy, busy, busy. And I think that in a movie or a TV show, they want to show and represent that it's a hive of activity. And, so, to do that, they have people walking around all the time. But in the real White House, it's very calm. It's very quiet and there's not a lot of chaos. There's not a lot of hustle and bustle. Even when we had guests come in. One of my fun jobs, every once in a while, was every Thursday, President Reagan used to do something called 'admin time'. And it was about an hour long and it would be the time that we put all of these kinds of random things together that didn't fit anywhere else maybe. So, that would be when the staff who was leaving might go in (like I did in the story I told before) or Miss America was visiting. So, she would come in and the Boy Scout of the Year would be there. And, so, there'll be all these kinds of different groups that just were quick hellos, and, you know, two-three minutes apiece, and so we just move them through very efficiently. Even when I had all those groups, I took them and separated them all around the White House, all around the West Wing, so that they could have their own space, their own experience, that they weren't part of a crowd, they were their own thing. So, I put one group in the Cabinet Room, one person in the room across from the Oval Office, one person, I mean, I would spread them all out, one person right outside the Oval Office door, because they would be the next person going in, that kind of thing. And they kind of move through this system. And it was fun to create that specialness for them.

I think the one thing that was fairly accurate for me from the show, *The West Wing*, was that you always had to think on multiple levels, like 'Who is this going to impact? What is this one thing I'm doing going to impact in every way?' So, it could be a political level, it could be a governmental level, it could be a personal level, it could be a family level, it could be an international level. Everything we did had multiple ramifications and, so, you had to kind of think in 3D. I was not a policy person, so my work wasn't directly impacting policy. On the other hand, it was. It was setting up a situation and making sure that all the pieces were in place so that that policy, or those policy discussions, could go forward in a healthy and organised manner and in the best way possible without interference from other noise, without mistakes, without people walking in the room. From that perspective, I think that *The West Wing*, the show, really kind of did hit on the right note there.

**Katie 36:39**

I love that thought of thinking in 3D. Because I think that's often the job of the comms professional as well. Somebody might just be thinking of one audience, but the comms professional knows the segments of the audience are so different, and has to think on all those different levels. So, thinking in 3D, I think is a great phrase to describe that, actually.

**Shelby 37:01**

Everything that we did in my role was, I was a trip coordinator within the advance office. And what that was, sort of, I kind of liken it to the hub of the wheel, because all the information would come in to us and then we had to disseminate the information back out. So, if somebody said, 'We need to move the schedule by five minutes', I had to think 'Who needs to know this information?' I mean, first of all, everybody did but who needs to know it first because what's the timeliness of this? Who needs to know it next? What does it affect? What does it impact? So, it affected the plane arrival and departure. So, what does that affect? That affects the airport. That affects the motorcades. That affects security. I mean, it just affects everything. The luggage handlers, you name it, right? So, it affects absolutely everything down the line, a five-minute change. We took seriously every little teeny change and made sure that we did, if we were doing our job right, that we would communicate it to every office. So, we communicated a lot to the West Wing, which would be senior staff. So, multiple offices there: the Secret Service, the medical unit, the military office, press office. You had to think about who it impacted at every turn with every tiny piece of information.

**Katie 38:11**

How can comms professionals, then, in your view, facilitate productive dialogue and conversation? You've had lifetime experience of doing this? Are there any particular tools, techniques, principles that you hold dear that you can recommend to listeners?

**Shelby 38:29**

Yes, there's two. Both of them involve meetings and meeting structures. One of them is what we call a 'countdown meeting' for the president, for when we had presidential advance meetings. So, on the road, there were countdown meetings. The key principles sat at the front of the room. So, the head of the advance office team, the head of the Secret Service team, etc, they sat at the front of the room and everybody on the team sat in the audience. They had a meeting every day and they went through the schedule that we put together, that was line by line. That was every single movement within five-minute increments, and even less if we had to, but we started with five-minute increments, and listing out exactly who was going to be met, what their names were, I mean, just every little detail, 'turn right, turn left, step

up three steps', you know, all of those things. 'Be met by this person, get on this helicopter, sit in this position', all of those details. And, so, they would use that script, essentially, as their meeting notes. And they would talk through the event from start to finish every night. So, it wasn't just 'Do you have a change?' That just shows you the level of detail that you needed to pay attention to, because the slightest little thing that somebody didn't hear right the day before, or they may have said it differently in this meeting. 'So wait a minute, I need some clarification on that. Do you mean this?' So, everybody was on the same page. Very important. By having those details in place, when things changed on the spot, which they sometimes do, we could adjust more quickly as a group, as a team, because we all knew what the overall plan was and what we were trying to accomplish. And, so, if something got off schedule by five minutes, you know, that we can communicate and say, 'OK, we're going to take five minutes out of the speech', or we're going to do something, whatever it happened to be. That doesn't mean there weren't, you know, things that really messed up. Obviously, when the President was shot, that was a big change of schedule. But they were prepared then because we all knew what was supposed to happen. And then they all had their contingency plans. Everybody had their contingency plan. So, all of that is communications.

The other one is something that I learned through an organisation that I've been very involved with, actually served as chairman of at one point, global chairman. It is an organisation called the Entrepreneurs Organisation. And it's called EO. There's another organisation, it's very similar. People know it as YPO: Young Presidents Organisation. We all kind of operate under the same premise, which is, first of all, we don't give advice, we share experience. So, we don't 'should' on people. We don't say 'you should...' So, in a meeting in interpersonal relations and interpersonal communication in corporate communications, I would like to remove the word 'should' or telling people what to do. So, even if, like, writing the article I just wrote, I didn't write 'you should' in anything, because it's like, 'OK, here's a way of doing things.' I said, 'this is how I do it. And this is what happened.' But I think in internal corporate communication, it needs to be more direct and precise, usually. But there's a tendency to do mandates. And there may be ways to rewrite it so that it is much more approachable than a directive.

And then the other is that, in meetings, we'd start with one word, open one word close. So, we say at the beginning, we go around the table and say, 'Shelby, what's your one word?', and I would say, 'happy' or 'joyful' or whatever it was. And then at the end, they'd ask again, 'What's your one word?' and everybody around the table would say what their one word is. And it's a really great gauge to see if you've moved the energy, moved to unity, from individualism to unity, or how the meeting has changed. One time I was in a meeting, and everybody started with 'frazzled' and 'stressed'. The meeting ended with people saying 'understood', 'comfortable', that,

you know, that kind of thing. And one person still said 'stressed'. So, when I left the meeting, I turned to my colleague (because I was a consultant there at the time), I turned to my colleague who ran the organisation and said, 'What do we need to do?' And he said, 'I need to go talk to that person.' I said, 'That's it, because she needs something that she didn't get in that meeting.' And then to try not giving advice in the meeting, but even just sharing, 'OK, in my experience' it takes longer and it takes patience, but it's a very effective communications tool.

### **Katie 42:39**

I love that phrase: 'we don't should on anyone' because it comes back to what you were saying before about being open. So, you're saying 'This is merely my experience, let me share it with you. When I do this, I find this happens.' But that's said in such a way that it's a humble way of saying it. It's not saying 'These are the rules and this is what I think is right.' It's just sharing experience and leaving the door open for someone to either share a similar experience or something that perhaps they do that works very differently. So, it's a very open and an equal way of starting a conversation. I think that's such great advice. We did touch on this earlier, but I am going to ask you it again because I can't not. Imagine that we've got a listener, I'm sure we must have one, that is working for a fairly difficult boss. So, for example, or maybe their boss's boss, they're finding is uncivil. So rude. Just difficult to deal with. Aggressive. I'm just imagining. Do you have any advice for that person? How can they best deal with that situation? Should you just ignore it and plough on? What would you say to that person?

### **Shelby 43:52**

I don't believe anybody needs to tolerate being treated with disrespect, OK? So, first of all, we need to have a certain sense of ourselves. Being humble is not being an amoeba. It doesn't mean that we can be abused or walked on, treated poorly. I personally have found that it's easier for me to just sort of try to look at what is going on with that person. And most times, they're having something going on that is not about me. Now, if I want to stand up and say, 'You know, this isn't OK.' I've done this a few times and sometimes I've done it really politely and sometimes I've done it impolitely. I've just pushed right back and said, 'Back off, buddy.' That is effective if it's really a problem. If it's more just a nuance in it, that it's just somebody's in a bad mood and they may not realise they're being disrespectful or something like that, or that you're feeling disrespected, I try to do it in a little bit gentler way. Sometimes, I find the best way is through somewhat of compassion, like 'Is everything OK today? I'm just finding you rather abrupt and it's kind of taking me back. And, you know, I'm happy to figure this out with you and get something done, but maybe we can start over? And is there's something I can help you with, that's not this, that's outside of this', you know? And it sometimes takes people a little bit by surprise, even just enough to disarm them, to make them look back on



their own behaviour without saying, 'You're being a jerk.' There's just some ways to handle it with diplomacy and civility. That doesn't mean that you're letting people walk on you.

**Katie 45:31**

It's so interesting, because you're reminded me of an interview I did with Chris Voss, the hostage negotiator. And he said, 'When you've got a boss that clearly doesn't want to talk to you, is in a bad mood, doesn't want to have the conversation, sending out very negative vibes, the best thing you can do is actually address that head on and say, "It feels to me you don't want this conversation at the moment" or "This is not a good time for you."' Because if you plough on and just carry on, even if you're being incredibly polite, that person knows they're sending out those signals. And if you don't address it, you're just going to annoy them even more, if that makes sense. So, I think you're absolutely sharing hostage negotiation advice as well there.

**Shelby 46:18**

We're all human. So, maybe there's something going on that we don't know.

**Katie 46:21**

Are you OK to go over to those quick-fire questions? We've just got three of them, if that's OK?

**Shelby 46:27**

Of course.

**Katie 46:28**

How would you complete this statement: 'World-class communication is...'?

**Shelby 46:32**

World-class communication is effective. Now, what is effective? So, if you have a goal in your communication, was that goal achieved? And how was it achieved? The premise I go by with this theme of civility is achieving it effectively is having somebody else hear what I have to say. And I do that effectively is by speaking to them with trust and respect and dignity and not expecting them to trust me, not expecting – I mean, I want to be trustworthy, but not expecting anything from them – but me being trusting, being trustworthy, me being respectful, and me offering them their dignity rather than trying to strip them of it. So, those are, to me, effective communication skills. And that's world-class. Because when you're out there, I think of dealing with all of these heads of state and all of their ambassadors and all of their staff and there's just so much happening at any one time. And again, you just don't know what's going on behind the scenes. So, communicating effectively and efficiently without taking somebody's dignity away.

**Katie 47:37**

Is there a book or it might be film, report, website that you would recommend if someone wanted to become a better communicator?

**Shelby 47:47**

Besides mine? There's the lack of humility!

**Katie 47:51**

Yours goes without saying.

**Shelby 47:55**

I'm kidding! You know, there's a lot of them that I think are interesting. I don't know the exact titles, but *Difficult Conversations* is a good one. *Walking on Eggshells* is another one that goes much more into the psychology of things. The harder the person is to communicate with, this is more about really getting in somebody's head than just, you know, 'Am I using correct English?' or 'Am I using correct grammar?' in communications, which I think is important by the way, it's very important. And choosing the right words is important. But in the article I just wrote, I call it heart work. So, it's going to come out in pretty soon, but I call it heart work, is this looking forward to working from your heart. So, I'd say any of the books that are about leaning in and emotional intelligence, all of those are my favourites. They really inspire me to put those into play in my own life.

**Katie 48:45**

I like that so much. And, again, it's funny how you remind me of that conversation with Chris Voss because he talks about the importance of listening out for somebody's values. And, also, Sally Sussman, who's the Vice President of Pfizer, when she was talking about people who are anti-vaxxers. She said, 'we don't call them anti-vaxxers. We just call them vaccine hesitant.' But, actually, whether someone's massively pro-vaccination, or hesitant, deep down they've got the same values. They want to keep their families and their loved ones safe. So, she starts with that premise. So, I love that idea of actually the psychology around the communication, and going deeper into 'What are the values here that I hold? And then this person holds?' It's a much more nuanced and deeper level of communication then, isn't it, I guess?

**Shelby 49:38**

For sure, and you know, we don't do debate clubs much anymore. And I wish they would come back because I think they taught really amazing skills to people. They usually had, you know, a lot of times in a debate club you would argue the opposite of what you believed. Or maybe you did believe it, but you'd be given one side to



argue. And you actually should in preparation for a debate... (I just said the word 'should' I don't know if you caught that? I'm going to take that back) In preparation for a debate it is often a practice to prepare both sides of the argument because then you're more prepared to debate properly. But that also shows empathy, it helps you see the other side and understand why the other side might be persuasive and have a really good argument.

#### **Katie 50:25**

So, finally, we give you a billboard for you to put a message on for millions potentially to see. It's a bit of a metaphorical billboard, really. But what would your message be on your billboard?

#### **Shelby 50:39**

That's pretty easy for me. I would quote Mahatma Gandhi and I would just write in very big letters 'Be the change.'

#### **Katie 50:47**

Shelby, thank you so much for being on the show.

#### **Shelby 50:51**

Thank you so much for having me. Lots of fun. You're a fun interviewer. You're fun to have a conversation with.

#### **Katie 50:57**

Thank you, Shelby.

So, that's a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. For the shownotes and the full transcript of this episode, head over to AB's website. That's [abcomm.co.uk/podcasts](http://abcomm.co.uk/podcasts).

If you enjoyed this episode, I would be very grateful if you could give those algorithms a little nudge by giving us a review on Apple Podcasts. That will just help other IC pros out there find our show. We have some great guests still lined up for this season: an interesting mix of in-house practitioners, advisers and consultants. So, you may want to hit that subscribe button today.

Thank you to Shelby and to you for choosing the show. Please continue to reach out to me on LinkedIn and Twitter with your feedback. Your comments are invaluable, and I do try to respond to everyone. My thanks also to our wonderful producer, John Phillips, our sound engineer, Stuart Rolls, and the lovely people back at AB who keep the show on the road. So, until we meet again, lovely listeners, stay safe and well. And remember, it's what's inside that counts.