



The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 8

Episode 71 – Joanna Parsons, *Effective comms starts with knowing yourself*

Transcript

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. 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.

Katie 00:50

For nearly 20 years, organisations have been using Acid Tests to gather rich, actionable insight 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 AB 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 to understand how we can improve communication at work.

Katie 03:04



Now, let me set the scene for today's guest. In 2018, an important government review of the Irish national police force was published called The Future of Policing in Ireland, it contained many recommendations, not least the improvement of internal communications across the police force. Now in its 100 year history, the Irish national police force had never had a Head of IC. So step forward, my guest today, Joanna Parsons. When Joanna took on the role, there were plenty of challenges to overcome, not least explaining the purpose, the value of internal communications. Then, within a year of her appointment, everything changed for the force and for the public it serves. As Head of IC during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Joanna actually won four awards for the work that she delivered with the police force during that time. Today, Joanna works for a very different kind of organisation as Head of IC & Culture at the global tech company, Teamwork.

Katie 04:29

Now, I love everything about this conversation. Joanna talks candidly from lots of personal experience working in a really challenging environment. We talk about establishing your credentials with stakeholders, the importance of research, why the focus on resilience is perhaps a little wrongheaded and how to make the shift from order taker to strategic advisor. I hope you you enjoy this discussion as much as I did. So without further ado, I bring you, Joanna Parsons. So Joanna, welcome The Internal Comms Podcast!

Joanna 05:14

Thank you so much for having me.

Katie 05:16

I am going to jump in with a really meaty, weighty question. You were the first person to be the Head of IC with the Irish national police force, the first Head of IC, it's throughout its entire 100-year history. First of all, can you tell us a little bit about how that job actually came about?

Joanna 05:41

Absolutely. There was a big report published a few years ago on the Irish police. And it recommended a whole raft of changes and reforms needed across the organisation. And one of these reforms was specifically around internal communications, they just said it's not really working, needs to be improved. And so there was a mandate, then they had to hire a Head of IC. So that's how the role was created. There wasn't a very specific remit for the role just come in and fix it.

Katie 06:10

So a need had been identified. You rock up into the roll. What did you find? Tell us a little bit about the Irish national police force in terms of the size of the workforce.



The culture, I'm guessing, similar to other police forces fairly command and control, I'm guessing?

Joanna 06:29

Yeah, absolutely. It's a very big organisation there's more than 18,000 employees. Most of them are uniformed police. They're spread all over the country. They work in different shifts, and they're mostly deskless workers. You know, you mentioned the culture, I think I got quite a culture shock, when I joined, it's really not like anywhere else I've worked. Like, one very specific example is how you address people in the police really took me by surprise. So you're not allowed to call anyone by their name if they outrank you. It took me a bit of time to get my head around, you know, saying, "Hi, Chief" instead of, you know, "Hi, Alan." And for a while, I struggled with this. And then I realised this was actually really great. Because in such a big organisation, it's easy to forget people's names. Actually just look at their shoulder badge, you get their rank, and you go, "Hi, Superintendent, how are you?" And they would never know that you had forgotten their name. But you know, you're right. It was very command and control, very top-down, which was an interesting juxtaposition to how I usually work bottom-up. So very interesting from a cultural perspective.

Katie 07:34

I do want to dig into what you've just said there about working from the bottom up normally, but I'm guessing those first few weeks and months, and we're talking about before the pandemic hit, were quite challenging, because, first of all, did people even know what you were there to do? Because they hadn't had this role before?

Joanna 07:54

That's a great question. No, they didn't have a clue. And because it was, you know, a government mandate, 'you have to hire someone to do internal comms' it wasn't the police that decided this is a real need. So part of my role when I joined was that educational piece to kind of explain.

Joanna 08:10

You know, if you meet someone maybe that you went to school with you haven't seen in ages? They say, "what do you do?" You say: "Oh, I work in internal communications", they get this look on their face, like 'what? Is that a thing? I don't know what that is.' So definitely part of the job at the start was an educational piece. I joined in May 2019, so I had a bit of time, before the pandemic hit. And really the first few months, I was reading anything I could find, I was listening, and I was watching, and my initial priority really was to understand the organisation. If

communication was so bad, it was my job to find out why, what's the root cause of that? And then to come up with ways to improve this.

Joanna 08:52

Now, I was really lucky because just before I had joined, there was an independent culture audit, published by PwC. And that gave a really rich deep insights into the culture, had lots of specific references to communications. But basically the first few months I spent a lot of time drinking coffee. I met a lot of people I asked a lot of questions. I listened to everything. So I interviewed senior leaders, I held focus groups with Rankin fire police, I sat in on management meetings, I learned how things were done. And I learned how information passed around. And in a non creepy way, I spent a lot of time observing people or watching people. So for example, I remember sitting in the break room of a police station down the country. Just sitting there with a cup of tea kind of watching people come in and out. There was a big noticeboard inside the door, and I remember nobody looked at it. It was full of posters and flyers and no one even glanced at it. But what was interesting was as people went and made their cup of tea and they sat down, they were very likely to pick up whatever was on the table that we're sitting at, whether that's a newspaper or a flyer. So just observing how people behaved in the organisation was very useful. And that's how I spent my time when I joined.

Katie 10:11

I think that's so interesting because we often get, don't we, in other types of research that isn't observational, people either saying what they think the right answer is, or being deliberately negative, because they've got another point to make, and they're not particularly happy. Whereas I remember once actually observing how a team meeting or a kind of line manager briefing was being held, and the awkwardness of the line manager trying to repeat the messages that had come from above, you know, from the corporate centre that just weren't in his language, and also the equal awkwardness of people in the audience trying to react to this and not really understanding what entirely was going on. So I love the idea of just observing. It's so powerful, isn't it?

Joanna 10:59

A lot of people may not invest the time in doing that, because it does take time, I spent months just kind of going around the country and listening and watching. But then, by the time I developed a strategy, I mean, I really understood what I was doing. And I understood the audience and the audiences within the organisation. And that really set me up for success. If I hadn't spent that time at the start, I wouldn't have had the success I did later on.

Katie 11:23

How important was it at that stage, once you'd identified the role that IC had to play within the organisation, and your priorities at quite a high level, how important was it to actually communicate that? To socialise that? So people had a clearer idea of actually what you were there to do. Because I'm guessing the opposite could have been true. Rather than not understanding why you were there. You could have started to be asked to do 1000 different posters, potentially for those notice boards that no one was looking at?

Joanna 11:53

Yeah, no, that's a good question. I remember, again, I invested, I think this took me a whole day, but I had developed the strategy and I got it nicely designed, and nicely printed out. I knew this was the first time they'd had an internal comms strategy. And myself, and I had one report at the time, there was about 350 senior managers, my level and above, in the organisation, and we wrote them a letter, each of them, a personalised letter, I hand-signed it, we sent it in the post, which was how things were done in the police, they do a lot of things in the post. And I wrote them a personalised letter, introducing the strategy, saying, 'This is how I hope to help you, I'd love you to look through this.' And this was, at the time the most effective way to reach these leaders. And you know what? People loved it! I had loads of comments back going 'Did you really write a letter to all of us? I read the strategy, I looked through it.' The fact that I had it designed properly made it nice to look at, and that made them more likely to read it. And that really helped start that level of understanding of, 'oh, that's what she's all about. Okay, that makes sense to me.'

Katie 13:00

Oh, I love that. I also love the fact that traditional methods can still be effective in today's highly digital era, in fact, maybe more effective, because your post—your postal service is the less noisy space now compared to your inbox.

Joanna 13:19

I think part of it is identifying what works and like doing stuff in the post at that time was a big way that the police worked. So I was just tapping into what I knew would work at that time. So again, it's about understanding the audience and understanding how to reach people.

Katie 13:35

Then, of course, everything changed, I'm guessing really quickly. And Ireland like everywhere else went into lockdown. I can't even imagine how that must have impacted your work. How did it change what you were doing, and what became your new priority, I guess?

Joanna 13:52

It's a funny one because I mean, COVID affected every organisation but it was so much more extreme in the police. I mean, it didn't just affect our business, it became our business. The whole organisation completely pivoted towards COVID, it's what we did. So here in Ireland, we had some very severe lockdowns where people could only go out if they needed to go for the shops or see a doctor, for example. You weren't allowed to go further than five kilometres from your house, to get some exercise. And of course, this was all enforced by the police. So the information requirements for frontline police were massive. They needed to keep up with the changing laws so that they could enforce them properly. But they also needed to keep up with very quickly changing health guidelines so that they could protect themselves from COVID.

Joanna 14:41

Now luckily, I had been developing a digital newsletter, and I was able to very quickly launch this as kind of a COVID-19 update to the whole organisation. Now it was a bit rough and ready at the start in fairness, but I published a COVID-19 update every single day at the height of the pandemic, and this had health information, checkpoint instructions, PPE guidelines, social distancing information for different policing scenarios... You name it. This became the single source of truth for the whole organisation on what to do and how to do it during COVID. And honestly, everything else got dropped, I put my strategy to the side, I got my COVID blinkers on, and it was full on COVID comms for probably a year.

Katie 15:28

Just digging in a little bit, that email newsletter. Presumably you'd launched many in the past. Was that— were there some sort of tried and tested techniques that you were using to make that email newsletter or success? Or was it kind of test and learn as you went along? How did you approach creating that single source of truth?

Joanna 15:47

You know, when I decided to move on from the police, I had an email from a police officer that I had never met, had never talked to. And I'll remember this email forever, because he thanked me profusely for the work I had done. And he referred to this newsletter as the digital heartbeat of the organisation.

Joanna 16:06

This just stopped me in my tracks. Now, this newsletter had a really good open rate, consistently high at about 70% for two years. That's in an organisation where most people, they aren't sitting at desks, they didn't have smartphones or laptops yet. And the reason my newsletter was such a roaring success is because I really understood what my audience needed. So it wasn't really about well, I've done this somewhere else, and it worked. But it was understanding that police officers are

very busy, task-focused people. And they have a very strong aversion to what they might describe as corporate bullshit or management speak. What they really needed was short, sharp, bite sized chunks of information that were relevant, that they were useful, and they could consume it easily and understand it immediately. So for example, I put a very strict word count of 200 words for any front page article. And everything had to be in plain English. Like 200 words is pretty short – what I did was, I adopted that American military principle of bottom-line up front, which basically means: get to the point, put what you want to say at the start.

Katie 16:06

Wow.

Joanna 17:22

So a really practical tip for listeners, for example, is that you should absolutely agonise over the writing of your headlines and the subject line of your newsletter. So get to the point. Make it relevant. Make it interesting. I mean the way a journalist would do. So for example, an article about the correct way to wear a mask on a cold day, you wouldn't say 'instructions on how to wear a mask.' Instead, you could say, 'wear a mask onto your snood.' So if they don't even read the article, they've got the point, they've got the instruction, they know what to do. So that's about the like get to the point and the other. The issue with communication in the police was a lot to do with the tone of voice and the language that was used. Everything was overly formal, very long winded, quite hard to understand quickly. And you can understand this when you realise that police officers are trained to write for course, so they're trained to write down every single piece of information that might be useful. Keep it formal, keep it factual. So one big change that I brought in with this newsletter was to introduce a very conversational, relaxed tone of voice, simple changes like you're instead of you are or saying 'we' instead of 'an Garda Síochána'. And I also introduced some humour, which was completely alien to the police force.

Joanna 18:45

So in this newsletter, I use memes, cartoons, infographics, punns... Anything to make it memorable to get the key messages across. So for example, I remember we got some feedback that police officers were perhaps more likely to be a bit more complacent on social distancing when they were in the break room getting a cup of tea. So we did some communications using taglines, like, 'don't risk it for a biscuit' or 'COVID-19 is nobody's cup of tea'. For the most part, people loved the introduction of humour. And I got some kind of unexpected feedback that people said, it actually helps to alleviate the massive anxiety that they were having during lockdown and during the pandemic, and sparked some conversations between colleagues who might otherwise have only been talking about work. So it was actually a small change but had a big impact.

Katie 19:41

What's really interesting about that is that I sometimes walk into organisations that think because of the service or the product they're delivering and their type of customer, they have to mirror that external language and tone internally. And what you're saying is we can still do our work, collect information in an evidence robust way for court. But internally, we can speak differently. I'm just finding that really interesting because it means that as IC folk, we can actually push back on the external tone of voice and create our own one.

Joanna 20:20

I would agree with that. There's a lot of talk about alignment between internal and external comms. But certainly for tone of voice, sometimes it needs to be completely different. I mean, I wouldn't do a press release using that conversational tone of voice I would use in the newsletter. But certainly, I wasn't trying to encourage colleagues to speak to each other more as colleagues. I mean, lots of the internal emails, I would have seen flying around, there's lots of "hereunder" and "herewith" and it's all very formal. If you're just trying to tell people, you know, keep your distance when you're at the kettle, you don't need to be that formal about it.

Katie 20:59

Did you have to act as gatekeeper, as well, for this email newsletter? Because what my experience is, once these channels become popular, everyone wants to stick every message possible, you know, into that channel. And that sort of defeats the object in a way or they become a victim of their own success. Did you have to push back and really be careful about what went in it?

Joanna 21:19

That's a great question. And the answer is absolutely, yes. I was completely strict about it. And again, that's a reason why it was so successful, because I never let any rubbish get in there. And it was, you know, I had very strict criteria of this is what get in and this is what doesn't. I was also very strict on, this wouldn't be the case in every organisation, but certainly the writing skills in the style that I needed, were severely lacking. People would send in stuff, but I would never publish it the way it was sent in. I had a professional writer that would rewrite. Every word in that newsletter was professionally crafted, so that it was all 'get to the point'. And a lot of the feedback I had from police officers was "God, this is great. There's no waffle in this, there's no rubbish." You know, "Just get to the point. And let me get on with my day." So yes, very strict criteria about what goes in, turned away loads of stuff, tried to offer them other avenues to get it out if they need it. But yes, very, very strict approach to that.

Katie 22:24

I'm just interested in the personal impact that this all had on you. Because he you are still in a relatively new role, during an unprecedented time of immense stress, not just for you, but your entire workforce, and then the public they serve. What was the impact on your work life balance during this time?

Joanna 22:47

That's a good question. I'm not sure I had a work life balance at that time. Certainly not during the height of the pandemic anyway. I mean, when COVID kicked off, I had a two year old at home, her creche closed down for six months. So I remember my husband and I taking shifts, so I would work, and then I'd do childcare while he could work, and we'd swap back, and then we'd sleep. And we'd repeat the next day. Honestly, I think there's a few months of that summer of 2020, where, you know, my husband might say, "Oh, do you remember those were lovely sunny mornings, and like a take her out for a walk?" I don't remember any of it, it's just a total blur. And working that way is just completely unsustainable. I mean, I couldn't have done it forever.

Joanna 23:29

I know that people like to talk a lot about resilience. And I actually have such a difficulty with that word and the way that it's used in work. Because that seems to imply that individuals who are struggling to deal with something should just sort of buckle up and get on with it and just become more resilient, even when more and more work and more stress has been piled on top of them. There was definitely times when I didn't feel resilient at all. And you know what, that's okay. It was a very stressful time. But I think what kept me going, as I reflect on it, is a very deep connection I had with the purpose of the organisation and the purpose of my work. So the mission of the Irish police is so beautifully simple: It's keeping people safe. And generally, this refers to the police keeping the people of Ireland safe for me, I turned it inwards. My purpose was keeping the police officers safe, so that they in turn, could protect the public. I could see the impact of my work. I got lots of like, really nice and surprisingly gushing emails and phone calls from police officers who really appreciated what I was doing. They thanked me so much that that kept my spirits up. So I knew I was making a difference and I genuinely felt appreciated for it.

Katie 24:47

It's interesting, though, what you say about purpose, because obviously, there's not an organisation in the world probably at the moment that isn't trying to articulate its purpose or live up to its purpose. But it's interesting what you say there about the purpose really matters in the tough times, in the difficult times, when we're up against it. That's I suppose the moment when the purpose is really that guiding light, that inspiration, would that be fair?

Joanna 25:15

Absolutely. And it was a great tagline for me to use internally, across all the communications we were doing during the pandemic, to remind people, when you're in the freezing cold for 12 hours at a checkpoint, and you're worried about getting sick, you're doing it to keep people safe. When you are working at three in the morning to try and translate the new regulations that have just come in from a department in the government, you're doing that because it's keeping people safe. Or even when you're talking to people at the front desk of a police station, and you're encouraging them to take a step back, and you're wearing a mask. You're doing all of that to keep people safe. I mean, I couldn't have asked for a better mission statement to have during all of this. We constantly brought it back to that and tried to help people realise that no matter what your role was in the organisation, all of us were keeping people safe together.

Katie 26:13

By the way, I also agree with your point around resilience. Because it sounds like we're saying to people just toughen up. And actually, sometimes what we really need to do is step back, don't we, and just reflect, to think to take a break. I think that it's actually the opposite. We don't necessarily need to get tougher, we need to probably check in with ourselves and allow ourselves that time to step back and to reflect.

Joanna 26:39

Yeah, I totally agree. I hate this sort of individualised notion of just suck it up just tough up, you'll be grand. I mean, there's a bigger picture here oh well why are people so stressed? And what is the system in the workplace that's clearly broken that if people are like this? I mean, for me, I absolutely am guilty of, you know, trying to do too much by myself. And that can lead myself to get stressed. And something I'm working on, I'm really trying to get better at sort of matching my ambition to my resources. Not everything has to be the Rolls Royce approach to things. But there's always something underlying that that needs to be addressed. It can't just be telling people to toughen up. That's not very useful.

Katie 27:21

I did hear you say on another podcast, something I thought was really interesting, was that you'd you'd gone on a retreat, I think this is right, and some of that made the point that actually, you don't always need to give 100% all the time. Because potentially 50% of what you describe as 'quality work' may be enough for whatever stakeholder you're seeking to serve. Have I summarised that correctly?

Joanna 27:48

Yeah, you're nearly there. What they told me and this was a real like, really stopped-me-in-my-tracks moment. I was talking about this piece of work that I did, which was a brilliant piece of work, but I was exhausted at the end of it. And the coach said to me, "Has it ever occurred to you that your 100% might be somebody else's 200%? Maybe you're going above and beyond what anybody expects? And you really need to do that?" And do you know what? I just needed somebody to say that. I was like, "That makes total sense." Yeah, it really is. I think about that every day, several times a day, that coaching retreat was only a few weeks ago, but it's absolutely shaping my approach to work.

Katie 28:28

I mean, I have a coach I couldn't manage without her, she's got the brain the size of a planet, and every time I have a conversation with her, she sparks the fresh thought and I think is important actually to, to know the distinction between coaching and mentoring. I think mentoring is interesting. I think reverse mentoring is even more interesting. But coaching is really just guiding you to your own solution, helping you look deeper within yourself at what really matters rather than overlaying, you know, somebody else's advice on what you're doing. But did this coaching retreat, was it specifically for communicators? Or was it broader than that?

Joanna 29:05

Yes, it was just communicators thrown by a group called Calm Edged Rebels. It was quite a small group. So those three facilitators, four attendees, including me, and it was just a full day of very candid, very raw, sharing experiences and challenges, but also, like you said, a bit of guiding work to help us understand: what do we really value? What do we really want to achieve? Where are we going? Very introspective, reflective, kind of hard work, but very valuable work and the kind of stuff that bounces around in your brain for a few weeks after before you sort of settle on, "Oh, yeah, I know what to do with that now." It's not something I've ever done before, I decided to invest in it this year. I just wanted to create that space to kind of reflect on my work. And I would absolutely recommend it to anybody, it was absolutely brilliant to clarify that time for that reflection.

Katie 30:04

Yeah. Sounds amazing. Your current role, and the organisation you're working for, Teamwork, does sound very different to the work you were doing before. Was that shift very deliberate? How did you decide where to go next and kind of evaluate the various opportunities that you might have seen in the job market at the time?

Joanna 30:28

I think for a while I reflect on it, Teamwork and the police, they just couldn't be more different. So Teamwork is a tech company. They're all quite young and hip, they're

all kind of 20s and 30s. There's only 350 people, so it's much smaller, and they're spread out all over the world, more than 25 different countries, different time zones.

Joanna 30:50

It was a very deliberate move. When I decided I was going to look for my next opportunity, I actually took some advice from a recruiter and I wrote out a wish list. This is everything that I want. I don't know if I'll get it. But let's see. So I wrote down, I wanted remote working because I'd been working remotely for two years, and I just, I loved it. I wrote down that I wanted to go back to the private sector, probably in tech or pharma, because I kind of thought that's gonna be a faster pace. And I was specifically looking for a company where I would have some resources to deliver the work. And that last one is so funny, I remember talking to a company who were offering a very grand title, massive salary. And then in the interview, they told me, "Oh, you know, this job is really to improve internal communications across more than 20 manufacturing sites around the world. Well, you won't have any direct reports, you won't have a budget, you won't have any agencies because, quote, "it's only internal comms." So I didn't pursue that one any further. I definitely had kind of red lines that I wasn't going to cross. And you know what, Teamwork ticked all the boxes for me, and offered a very different role to what I'd done before, a really different challenge. And I've really been enjoying it.

Joanna 31:18

Tell us a little bit about those challenges, these new challenges, what do they look like?

Joanna 32:21

One really interesting thing that I learned about Teamwork, so we did quite a comprehensive internal comms audit when I joined. And, you know, in most organisations, what you usually find is that the broadcast comes from the top are quite good. And then the two-way engagement is quite bad. And you'll often hear leaders say things like, Why is no one commenting on my blog? Why is no one engaging in this discussion on the Message board. And Teamwork is kind of the other way around. It's so interesting. They have loads of two-way engagement, they have great two-way channels, but they more struggle with that top-down leadership comms, get the leadership voice out. So it's been really interesting to analyse this and come up with ways to get the leadership voice heard more clearly. And one challenge I'm tackling in Teamwork at the moment is their tendency to default to synchronous communication that involves people consuming communication at the same time, which worked fine when they started as a company where everyone was in Cork. They're all in the same location, they were all in the same timezone. But now they're a global company. Lots of employees like me work fully remotely, I'm nowhere near one of their offices. And lots of people are in

different time zones, we even have someone in Australia. So you can imagine that getting everyone together for a synchronous communication is quite tricky. So one of the changes that I've made since I joined was they had a weekly all hands call for 30 minutes every Thursday afternoon, and I have retired that, it was a very large investment of people's time. But there wasn't much return on this investment, honestly. So I am replacing that with a digital newsletter that can be consumed asynchronously. So consume it in your own time, whether that's the morning, the evening, or your lunchtime, it takes three or four minutes to consume it rather than a 30 minute meeting. It still enables two-way communications through comments and likes. And also it helps you know, some really useful feedback I got that some of our employees in different countries, English is their second language. So if they're on a synchronous call with an Irish person who's speaking quite quickly, they find it hard to keep up actually. So they were really asking for updates in writing, so that they could read it in their own time, consume it more easily. So all of these changes. Again, harking back to 'know your audience.' It all goes back to 'what do they need, how do they work, and how do they prefer to consume information?'

Katie 35:00

Just picking up on one thing you said there about the investment of time in an all hands call. I'm sure you told me about an online tool, do you remember? That people can use to actually approximate how much money their all hands meetings is actually costing their organisation?

Joanna 35:21

Yeah, there's a brilliant tool. It's called The Gathering Effect. That's the name of the website. And I used this tool when I was putting together the case, actually, we should retire this weekly call. And I knew I had to come at it from a commercial perspective. So I use this tool, and I plugged in data to say, how long is it on for? How often does it run? How many people attend? And what's the average salary that people attend, and it will spit you out a number to spit me out quite a high number that I was able to bring to my CEO and say, This is what it's costing you in lost productivity per year to run this channel. What do you think of this figure? Do you think you're getting that value out of that meeting? And he was immediately like, "okay, no, I hadn't thought about it that way." So if you're trying to retire an all hands, or you're trying to show the value of it, the investment of it. There's a brilliant tool, I can't overstate it enough. And it's something I haven't seen before.

Katie 36:18

No, I played around with it and it's really very impressive. It's also a great example of going to a leader and saying, "Well, I've got an opinion about this, but my opinion doesn't really matter. Here's the evidence for why I'm suggesting you should do X or Y," which makes your case so much stronger, doesn't it?

Joanna 36:38

Absolutely. And that's why, again, investing the time, when you start a new role, or even if you're in a role already, take the time and do a communications audit, get the data. So when you start making changes, it's not such a big deal, because people don't understand why you're doing it. And you'll find that kind of structural resistance to change wanes, when you have the data and the evidence and say, "Well, this is what you told me, and this is how people are feeling about this. And this is the impact of this. So we're going to change to this." People kind of go, "okay, that's fine!" So it's really, really useful to have that data.

Katie 37:14

Once you sort of packaged up content in a different way, and found the right channel to deliver it in an asynchronous way. Is that the biggest part of that challenge? Or have you seen any sort of unforeseen or surprising challenges with shifting to asynchronous comms?

Joanna 37:31

I think the biggest thing that surprised me in Teamwork is that they still default to synchronous meetings as a key way of communicating. Which I think I was surprised about, because obviously, before I joined, I had done my research, I knew they were across so many different countries and time zones, but I get invited to a lot of meetings, a lot of meetings, maybe with no agenda or no pre reading. So this is something that we're going to tackle probably as a cultural piece into next year to kind of look us, well, why are people just defaulting to meetings? If you're just going to share information, I don't think you need a meeting to do that just send us the information. That could be through a project management tool, that can be through an email. There's also nice tools, you can play around with the like Loom or Fellow where you can record your screen. You're still on it, so you can share a PowerPoint, you can talk people through it. But again, they can consume it asynchronously. And the advantage of that is, you know, imagine you have to present something to a leadership team, they're in different time zones. Leaders have busy diaries, you might be waiting three, four weeks to get a slot with them. Just send it to them asynchronously. Record it yourself, send it over, get their feedback. So that's a big thing that I will be working on now is trying to make that shift from sync to async. And I'm starting to get quite nerdy and excited about it actually.

Katie 38:57

Even if you haven't got one of those tools, I mean, years ago, I remember realising I couldn't communicate a comms strategy to everyone around the world that I wanted to. You can embed your own audio into the PowerPoint slide, if he really

wants to do it in an old fashioned way. But again, it gives people that, it's almost like presented it in person, maybe not exactly the same, but it gives that flavour I guess. So you're not losing the conversational element of the communications, which I guess might be a worry for some people.

Joanna 39:29

Exactly. I think it's just you know, with the switch from being in an office to being remote, some things are just replicated, whereas it may not be the most efficient or the most effective way to operate anymore. So those shifts need to be designed deliberately and with intention, and they do take a little bit of time as well.

Katie 39:51

Throughout your career, you've been clearly a trusted adviser and strategist to senior leaders. What are your reflections for listeners who are still on that journey and still, you know, keen to earn the trust of executives. Any sort of reflections, hints or tips?

Joanna 40:11

I'd say, firstly, don't assume that they understand what you do as a communicator, or how you can help them. So when you join, take a tip from me and the police, drink a lot of coffee, listen to people, listen to everything. So meet with different senior executives, ask lots of questions, learn about their work, learn about what they're focused on, keep the conversation on them. Find out what they're finding challenging, and then you can begin to identify ways that you can help them. So for example, I once worked with the Head of Digital who was coming up with all these cool tools and really exciting new ways of doing things, but really kind of got annoyed that people didn't know about this. And "they don't understand me, and I can't-" he was really struggling with the communication part of it. But he didn't know that that's what he was struggling with. So I was able to understand his needs and say, "Well, you know what, this would be great. If we got Barry who's been playing around with this toy for two months, let's do an interview with Barry, let's do a bit of storytelling, let's take some photographs. Let's do kind of colleague to colleague, communications rather than you as the senior manager saying 'this is great', let's get Barry to say it's great." Those kinds of things.

Joanna 41:24

So you can begin to identify ways to help them. And I'd say you'd often be really surprised at how grateful and appreciative senior leaders will be for your help. There are usually technical experts in their fields, that really could use some help with that kind of brokering or understanding or getting people to buy into something.

Joanna 41:46

And I suppose the other tip, I'd guess, you know, this probably comes easier with experience, and maybe with age and confidence. But when you're working with senior leaders, it's really important that you're not afraid to challenge them. You know, you're no good as the Senior Advisor, if you just say "yeh", you just agree with everything, and just take their orders. Because you're at the expert here. So for example, if a senior leader asked you to create a new page for the intranet, or they want a new blog written, you know, it's your job not just to take that order and execute on it, you have the conversation about well, "what are you trying to achieve with this new page? What problem are you trying to solve? Who are you trying to talk to? What do you want your audience to do with this information? So do you want them to feel proud or something? Do you want them to complete a form by a certain date? Is this the right avenue to take?" Often it isn't. That's your job to help them find that out.

Joanna 42:46

And I'd say, you know, my last tip would be, and this sounds so basic, but I really feel like I have to say it, is to make yourself approachable, be respectful, be collegial. I've seen quite a few senior advisors act absolutely, horrendously over the years, and then they wonder, "why don't people want to work with me? I can't get a meeting with the CEO. I can't imagine why." So always be thinking about your personal brand. How do you want people to see you? How do you want to be remembered? What do you want people to say to each other when you leave the room? You don't want them to say "Jesus, she's very awkward." She want them to say, "God, she was very helpful in solving our problems" or "the way she thought that out was very good," or whatever it is. Have that in the front of your mind all the time when you're working with leaders.

Katie 43:34

Such such good advice. I can't. I mean, there's too many to remember, Senior VPs of comms when I've asked "what's the most important thing in terms of building trusted relationships with your senior leaders?" They've said, "Tell them the truth being honest."

Joanna 43:53

Yeah.

Katie 43:54

But as you're saying, there's a way to do that. And if you do it in a constructive building collegiate way, not only will people listen, they'll come back to you again for your advice and your opinion. So I love that so much.

Joanna 44:08

Totally agree. I mean, my biggest challenge I think, by the time I left the police was that I was just in such demand from senior leaders, everybody wanted a bit of my time because they had built up good reputation not just as the newsletter lady but actually as someone who's good at solving problems and identifying the right way to approach something from a communications perspective. So I was more of a business advisor than a sort of an outputs creator

Katie 44:36

That's a very nice way of putting it, I've heard that a lot, you know, how to shift from SOS 'sending out stuff' to being the advisor. Yeah, um, this is gonna sound like a slightly sideways question. You studied sociology I noticed at university and I just wondered whether that background in the study of society, human behaviour, has that impacted your approach to communication?

Joanna 45:02

Yeah, I think it has. I studied sociology in Trinity College Dublin for four years. So it was four years of studying human behaviour, how groups of people interact with each other. And a lot of that has very heavily influenced how I approach communications, particularly the importance of listening to understand, and also around the different research methodologies you can employ to do that. The, for example, one of the research methodologies we learned in sociology was called participant observation, which basically means watching people. That's what I did, that day, I sat in the police station in the tea room, and I just watched people. So all of those methodologies to really listen and understand, I think that's where all that comes from. That's why I love it so much. And it's a really big part of my work.

Katie 45:54

I think it's important just to underscore what you've just said there: listening to understand. Because we all know people who listen for the gap in the conversation to say something else. They're listening for their turn, rather than listening to reflect on what you've just said, maybe to check they've understood it.

Joanna 46:16

There's a big difference between listening to understand and listening to reply, which is often the default of many people in a conversation. I would say your role, particularly as you're new in an organisation, you're trying to understand it, your role is to shut up most of the time! Just listen and let people tell you what they think and take it all in. You can ask the questions and probe but really, you need to just listen and understand before you make any changes at all.

Katie 46:46

Research, measurement falls naturally out of that. And it's obviously been clearly important throughout your career. I even found online a manual you'd created to help colleagues design and write better surveys. Measurement is one of those topics, if I asked IC pros, "what do you want to know more about? What sort of masterclass might you be interested in?" Measurement comes up time and time again. What sort of common mistakes do you see people making when it comes to research and measurement?

Joanna 47:18

That is a really good question. I think a lot of communicators seem to be afraid of measurement. They can get really stuck on what to measure how to do it, how often to do it, how to report it, who to report it to. And they get kind of stuck in overthinking and just sort of avoid it completely. I think the biggest mistake that people make is to measure outputs only, which are pretty easy to measure. So they might measure how many people attended the town hall meeting, how many people opened the email newsletter, how many people read the latest blog, and that's fine, you're measuring your reach. But you're not really measuring the results or the impact of those communications.

Joanna 48:00

So for example, going back to the police, I mean, I did measure the open rate for the newsletter, that was about 70%. And that told me I had a really good reach, I could get my message out across the organisation, but didn't really mean anything in terms of business results, and what was the impact of that. So during the pandemic, my ultimate outcome level measure, I worked with HR, who gave me data around how many employees were available for work during COVID. So outside of the pandemic, there's usually about 97% of the police are available for work at any given time. So I wanted to measure that rate to see if the communications were helping to keep people safe, keeping them protected from COVID, seeing how many people were self isolating, or who were sick. And actually, I won't give exact figures, but that figure has stayed consistently very high throughout the whole pandemic. And it was a very clear and explicit recognition from leadership, that the communications kept that number high. This communication's very clear, they were very frequent. People knew what to do and how to do it. So that measure is how I measured my impact on the business with that data from HR. So try to think maybe outside your own metrics, think about what you're trying to achieve, go up to that higher level, and try to measure that.

Katie 49:23

I mean, it does come back to what you said before about the 'do, know, feel, think' framework, because if you're employing that from the very beginning, particularly around the 'do' it can be hard to measure thinking and feeling and what people

saying, but 'do' things usually are pretty identifiable, aren't they? People are doing them or they're not doing them. And that can be measured and observed. So I also love the fact that you went to HR, we need these friends, don't we? In all sorts of different departments, to do our work.

Joanna 49:57

My advice is when you start somewhere, as an internal communicator, you need to immediately become best friends with IT and HR, because they can block your work or they can enable your work. And they will help you come up with ways of doing things and getting things out. So you need to go and make strategic relationships there straightaway.

Katie 50:18

I'm also interested in your thoughts about business strategy and business strategy documents. So clearly, the work starts by identifying where your organisation is going and what success looks like. Over the years, how useful have you found those business strategy documents? And is another important person, the man or woman who has crafted that, who most understands what the business needs to achieve, might not necessarily be the Director of Strategy, but perhaps even their number two, would that be someone you've sought out in previous roles too?

Joanna 50:58

Oh God, yeah, absolutely. And I actually, I love that you've brought this up, because for me, the most important thing that a really good internal communicator should do is to try to drive alignment to the business strategy, so that all the company understands where the business is going: what's the direction of travel? How do we all fit into that? How do I contribute to our overall success? And yes, absolutely, that key person, it could be the Chief Operating Officer, it could be the CEO, that needs to be a good friend of yours. And I'll give you a simple example of something you can do. Any organisation can do this. When I joined Teamwork – they do these quarterly kind of strategy updates. And I watched one when I joined, and they had a one page slide of the business strategy. This was the first time I'd seen it, I think I was there about three days. And I just couldn't understand it. I hadn't a clue what this slide was telling me, I didn't. But for the people presenting it, who had created this, it made perfect sense. So a way that I was able to help them was I took that slide, I copied it, and I just kind of rewrote it in plain English language. So like, I don't want to be hearing about a marketing funnel. I don't know what that is. But let's talk about bringing in new customers. The word churn, I don't really know what that means, oh, it means people who might leave for another business. Why don't we say it like that? So I created a really simple, plain English version of the strategy. We use that in the next update and I had lovely comments back. Somebody said: this was the thing I didn't know I needed in my life. Thank God, it's here. So really simple way of, don't

assume that people understand what the strategy and if the leader is telling you everyone understands that, don't assume that's true, either. So again, working from the bottom up. I tried to experience that first time I saw the strategy I was experiencing, just as an employee. And if it doesn't make sense to me, it's not going to make sense to a lot of other people either.

Katie 53:04

But secretly, have you found over the years that when you do say, for example, we're not going to say leveraging our synergies, and what does that actually mean? People have to stop and actually think about what it might mean, and actually get more precise, because sometimes this is Willie language to paper over cracks that people haven't quite defined what they need to do. I mean, that's a bit cheeky of me to say, but have you seen that too occasionally?

Joanna 53:30

Yeah, no, you're absolutely right. And I remember, there was a wonderful senior police officer, who was tasked with embedding human rights across the police. They were taking this new human rights approach. So he came to me and he's like, I want to do a podcast, I want to do this. He'd loads of ideas. He was so enthusiastic. And I said, Great. Park that for a second. Go back. There's a funny word here that I don't understand. What does embed mean? He's like, Well, it says, What does 'embed human rights' mean? He was like, what have you asked me? I said, Okay, let's say we went forward in the future five years. Human rights are now in fairness. What's different? Are people behaving differently? Are people interacting with the public differently? Our process is different, like, what is it you're actually trying to do? And this sparked a whole series of, Oh, yeah. Okay, maybe we need to go back and think about this. Get really prescriptive, get really detailed, and then we can figure out the communications. But it's a perfect example because you writes things like 'embed' or 'empower', or 'create awareness'. I will always challenge people on I don't know what that means. Tell me what that means. Spell it out. For me. That's how you get really good communications.

Katie 54:45

Yeah, I love that so much. I mean, just recently I actually asked my senior team to write a pre parade because I need to draft a new business strategy. I said, Write a pre parade do it from the heart. Imagine success: we've knocked it out the park delivered on our plan and more. What does it look like? What does it feel like? Paint that picture for me. And what you get then is something that's very real, it's very actionable, it's very tangible, can be a really powerful thing, as you've said, to kind of say, let's skip ahead, what does success look like?

Joanna 55:20

Yeah, and really, like, even get down into the weeds a little bit and really try to spell it out. And then you can work backwards from there. Well, if I want to achieve that, a poster is not going to do that for me. A podcast might not achieve that for me. What is it that we need to do to get there?

Katie 55:36

Before we go to these quick fire questions, I have to mention this. When researching people, one of my first places to go is always their LinkedIn page. And immediately when I saw yours, I thought, I'm not sure if I've ever seen one so informative, well laid out, so well written, we will put a link to it in the show notes. And I just wondered, do you have any thoughts reflections on this? Are you aware of creating a personal brand when you're writing that LinkedIn page? Because I thought to myself, I don't think this is just happenstance that this is so good.

Joanna 56:13

Thank you very much. Again, it goes back to your audience, right? And I mean, if you're on LinkedIn, I mean, I'm not looking for a job right now. But there's all your arm always thinking further down the line. So for my audience on LinkedIn is always a future employer. So when I'm writing anything on there, when I'm posting on there, I'm always thinking: what do I want them to know about me? And how do I want to be perceived or remembered? And my own personal brand would be very much around authenticity, kind of a sense of humour and creativity, and a commercial alignment to business results. That's probably what I try to get across. And, you know, if a hiring manager is on my page, and they're looking for a very formal, straight laced communicator for maybe a bit of a stuffy business environment, I like to think that they'll very clearly rule me out and say, No, she's not the right person for us. And I'm not. But if a hiring manager is looking for someone, very creative, able to deliver results can work well with senior leaders, and we're probably a good match.

Joanna 57:18

So think about who you're trying to attract. Think about it from their perspective. They don't know anything about you. They're landing on your page. What do you want them to see? And what do you want them to know? And remember, LinkedIn is brilliant for building a community as well. It's not just about 10 new hires. So I spent ages when I really committed to internal comms, I just went through LinkedIn, every person I could find that works in internal comms, tried to connect with them. Comments on posts, liking posts, engaging conversations, message people say hello, it's a really good way to build your network. I mean, just this week, I posted to ask for this, anyone got an experience of running a certain type of offence. I had tonnes of comments, my inbox got flooded. Not people trying to sell me their services, but just people going oh, yeah, I'll help you out, you want to have call? So it's really, really useful for getting ideas and free support as well.



Katie 58:14

Particularly important if you're a very small team or a team of one, for example. But I think what that comes back to we've mentioned it already, but it's underscored by that response, is knowing what kind of comms professional you are. So so much of the important decisions we make, and it's whether it's businesses making decisions about strategy or own personal branding, is what we're not going to do, what we're not going to be, and being really clear who we are on the image we want to project. So I think that's super, super advice, Joanna. Thank you so much.

Joanna 58:49

You're very welcome. Thank you for the kind words on my LinkedIn, that's lovely.

Katie 58:56

So let's go to those quick fire questions. If you've got time for them, that would be great.

Joanna 59:02

I do. Yeah.

Katie 59:03

Fantastic. What traits or characteristic Do you think that you possess, above all others, that has most led to your career success?

Joanna 59:14

I think I would sum it up in two words, which is dogged persistence. I'm not very good at taking no for an answer. Like what I tried to launch that digital newsletter in the police IT said no to me about 15 times, but I didn't feel like it was a legitimate no. So I just kept persuading and asking, so you really need to just stick with us. So I'm gonna stickwithitanus. Can we make that a word?

Katie 59:38

Yeah, absolutely. I like that a lot. Thank you. How would you complete this sentence: world class internal communication is...

Joanna 59:49

...is creative, audience centric, and focused on delivering business results.

Katie 59:55

Love it. Fantastic. Is there a book, it doesn't have to be a book, might be a report or a film or website that you would recommend if someone wanted to become a better communicator?

Joanna 1:00:07

I'm actually going to recommend you a YouTube video, which is by an American communicator called Matt Abrahams. He does really good stuff about comms, he has a really good YouTube video, about 50 minutes long: how to make your communication memorable. He has a lovely framework anyone can take and apply anywhere else. Go and have a watch.

Katie 1:00:28

Fantastic links in the show notes listeners, as always. And then finally, Joanna, we give you a billboard a bit of a metaphorical billboard, something for millions to see. And you can put on that any message you'd like, what are you going to put on your billboard?

Joanna 1:00:44

Do you know I'm not going with a commsy one here. I'm going to go with it. A kind of a throwaway quote that I heard on a meditation app by a guy called Jeff Warren, who talked about we live in such a stressful world where everyone's worried all the time, but there's loads of stuff going on. And he said, none of it is a big deal. That's what I would put on the billboards. None of it is a big deal.

Katie 1:01:09

I think that's such good advice, especially for today's stressful and difficult times. Joanna, it's been an absolute delight to have you on the show. Thank you for all your wisdom and insight.

Joanna 1:01:21

Thank you so much. I'm a big fan of your podcast, so I'm delighted to be on it.

Katie 1:01:28

So that is a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. For the show notes and a transcript of today's episode, head over to AB's website. That's abcomm.co.uk/podcasts. My thanks to Joanna, our producer, John Phillips, and sound engineer Stuart Rolls, and all my lovely colleagues that AB who keep the show on the road. And finally, my thanks to you for joining us. Whether you are a long standing loyal listener, or a newbie, thank you for choosing The Internal Comms Podcast. Plays of this show have risen by an incredible 600% this year, which is a testament to the growing interest in and importance of internal comms. If you'd like to help other IC folks find this show, then please give those algorithms a little nudge by giving us a rating on Apple Podcasts. So until we meet again, lovely listeners stay safe and well and remember, it's what's inside that counts.