



The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 8

Episode 73 – Jennifer Thomas, *Forging your own path*

Transcript

Katie 00:03

This episode of The Internal Comms Podcast is brought to you by AB's 2023 Action Planning Workshop. You may have heard it said that a goal without a plan is just a wish. To achieve your goals, you need to plan how best to use your time, your energy and your resources. This half-day workshop which can be held in person or virtually gives you a valuable opportunity to step back to evaluate your team's impact in 2022, and create a concrete action plan for the year ahead. Plus, we will bring along case studies of our own work with other organisations to galvanise and inspire you and your colleagues.

Katie 00:55

To find out more about this highly interactive workshop, head over to abcomm.co.uk/planning. You'll find a document there with everything you need to know about the session. That website address again, abcomm.co.uk/planning. Start 2023 with a plan that brings unity, clarity, and focus.

Katie 01:32

Welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. This is a show to inform, inspire, and generally energise those of us responsible for communicating inside organisations. Designing and delivering effective internal comms is rapidly climbing the corporate agenda as organisations grapple with the challenge of attracting and retaining employees, creating environments where they can flourish, and aligning everyone's efforts around a common meaningful goal. To find out how to do all this, each fortnight I ask a comms expert to sit in my hot seat. Today for the last show of 2022, I am thrilled to be speaking with Jennifer Thomas.

Katie 02:26

Now Jennifer is many things. A senior in-house practitioner currently at the London Stock Exchange Group, where she is Head of Communications for its data and analytics business. Jennifer is also a prominent diversity and inclusion advocate, and a former England 400 metre hurdler. Google Jennifer, and you get the word 'trailblazer'. Now in this conversation, we talk about many things: how to ensure you're sitting at the right tables, why it's absolutely okay for your career path to be a bit squiggly, and how when it comes to diversity, equity and inclusion, organisations need a mirror moment. If you can't have an honest assessment and reflection on where you are, says Jennifer, it's really hard to define where you should be going. This is both an honest and inspiring conversation, which I think will resonate with anyone who has ever felt they don't quite fit in. This is a story about finding your own way and your own voice. So Jennifer, welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast. It's a pleasure to have you here.



Jennifer 03:50

Okay, see, I look, it's a pleasure for me to be here. I'm really looking forward to the conversation we're gonna have today.

Katie 03:56

Why don't we start chronologically, if we may? So you were born in London, to parents from South America, Guyana. But you grew up in Toronto, and spent the summers in California. And I read somewhere that you said that you were mocked for your London accent when you move to Canada. And actually this caused you to retreat inside yourself. At one point you even stopped talking. Is any of that accurate? First of all, but also, what impact do you think that early experience had on you?

Jennifer 04:31

Firstly, yes, it does sound like I've done a little bit of a tour around one half a globe. So in terms of all those various countries, cities, locations, yes, that's all correct. London-born; Guyanese descent. So both my parents are from Guyana, which as you said is in South America, and often just as a point of education, so people think, 'Oh, you're South American,' which technically, yes, but however, Guyana is just at the tip of South America next to Venezuela, but really close to the Caribbean islands. So oddly, it is considered as part of the West Indies and the Caribbean. Although geographically it isn't, if that makes sense?

Katie 05:09

Ah, it does, it does.

Jennifer 05:11

So we tend to think of ourselves in the community as part of the Caribbean and West Indian community, as opposed to the South America. And that's no discredit to our South American brothers and sisters. But Guyana is the only English speaking country in South America as a first language. So that's a little bit of a trivia. But yeah, when I was about seven, seven or eight, we moved to Toronto, Canada. And that's effectively where I grew up. And most people will think Britain, Canada, North America, net net net, what's the difference? Other than a few accents? And I suppose as you know, clearly, they're both first world countries. And so from an economic point of view, yes, sir. Very close similarities, but culturally very different.

Jennifer 05:52

Got Canada as a Commonwealth country, Canada is very different to the US. And it's very different to Britain. So in the UK, so when I, you're right, when I did move there, and like, these are all reflections as an adult through to being a child. But the thing that still stands out for me is, you know, people didn't understand my accent. And not something that I think instinctively we probably think about. And actually, I think, in this day and age, you know, London accent, you know, it's interesting, and exotic. People love it. But, you know, children will be children. And when you're a young kid, and you're different, that point of difference becomes a sticking point and can stigmatise you. So yeah, I was teased. And ironically, the

element of it that seemed odd to everybody else, was because I was black and British. And that was the bit that people found odd. I think, if I was white, and turning up with a British accent it would have been perfectly fine. Right?

Jennifer 06:50

So it was that element that people seem to struggle with. And, you know, I remember people saying, 'I didn't even realise there were black people in the UK', which, you know, we sit here and we're about to go into 2023, which just blows your mind, you know, this was back in the early 80s. You know, I'm giving away my age. But it wasn't that long ago, it had a profound impact on me. And, you know, I was a really bubbly outgoing child, which, thankfully, I'm back to being that as an adult, but there was a period, you know, within that, and look, moving is traumatic for children anyway, you know, whether you're moving down the road or moving cross country. But having that element, I think, was my first, I guess my first experience, really feeling like an outsider. So yes, it had a profound impact on me and in my finding my voice, but it gave me an added skill if we put a positive spin on it, because in those quiet moments, as you described, so I didn't, don't worry, everybody, I didn't stop talking completely. But I was very conscious, so I just became a lot quieter than probably I would naturally be. But in that time, I was listening and learning. Listening to how they spoke, phrases tone, the irony that I work in comms today, all of those things were things I was particularly paying attention to, so that I could mimic how they were speaking, and the phrases they would use and try and drop all of the, you know, London UK lingo as well as the accent. So even today, which I love today, I've got a bit of a mishmash of accents, just because I've lived in so many places. And and I love that now. But it was difficult as a child.

Katie 08:28

Was that something that you just had to work through that would eventually resolve itself? Or was there something in particular that made that breakthrough that made you feel more accepted? I'm just wondering it for others that might be going through something like that? Did you simply have to work through it? Or did something actually, was there an intervention that helps a family?

Jennifer 08:51

No, I, I had to work through it. Yes. And look, I don't want to make it sound too tragic. I've got amazing friendships from my time in Canada that I still have today, like some of my very best friends are from when I went to school in Canada. So I did get through it. And I came out the other side. But it was probably the first year or two. And I think you're right, others of us that will have children that may be experiencing some variation of this in school of just being different and not fitting in. I've got two young boys, so I'm conscious of it. Right And I think we have so many other things to worry about today that I didn't even have to worry about back then. But no, I found my own way to resolve, rightly or wrongly, there were no interventions. Nobody was trying to help me. The teachers were doing their best that they would welcoming any new student to school, but I don't think they understood quite frankly. I think people quite got what I was going through and it was probably 'Oh, that's just a bit of teasing. You know how kids can be', you know, all of that rhetoric that goes around that. So I found my own path. Once you're not the new kid anymore and just trying to find other

ways to fit in. And you'll probably hear me talk about the phrase to fit in quite a lot. I think it's something as, as human beings we're constantly struggling with whether consciously or subconsciously, we all want to feel part of something, right?

Katie 10:13

Yes, yeah.

Jennifer 10:13

And nobody, nobody wants to be in an out group. So I just think it's a consistent theme, that I think it gave me some of the tools that I still use today, to feel included, right, or to put myself in a position to be included, and found other ways to connect with people and other similarities that I could connect on.

Katie 10:36

You went on to study the most unusual combination of subjects I think I have ever seen. So here we are listeners: economics and dance, do please elaborate on this interesting combination.

Jennifer 10:51

And as I get older, I tend to forget that I did that craziness. Look, I think in a nutshell, that really just sums up me, I've got so many different sides. To me, as a young girl, as a child, my parents had me heavily involved in lots of extracurricular things. So I was involved in various degrees, sport, the art, performing arts and music. And so I just did all of that as hobbies sort of growing up. And the dancing actually elements of it, I was taking very seriously until I got to about my mid teens and started with ballet. And for anybody that knows anything about ballet, it's something you have to zero in quite quickly at a very young age, if you're going to do that as a career going forward. And I sort of got to my early mid teens, and realise as much as I loved it, I didn't want it, it wasn't my career path. And so I started to dial down the dance, dial up my music, and dial up my sport. So I was constantly flexing those three things throughout my childhood and adolescence.

Jennifer 11:56

When I went to university, so I went to university as a thank you referenced in California. So that was one of my stop offs around my sort of tour tour around the world. And the connection, why California? My sister lives there. So when I was growing up, California became my second home because I used to go there for holidays, etc, etc. So when my sister got married, she she moved there. So it wasn't unfamiliar to me, which was part of the attraction, I wasn't going somewhere completely new. I already had friends, although not going to my uni, but I had friends. And I just thought, why not, you know, four years of university, let's try it and see. But one of the things was I was looking at various universities that I really still to this day value of the North American system. Because Canada has a similar system as well. Where are they really think about that holistic, what you know, the Americans tend to call it liberal arts education, where your first two years, you're really going far and wide, right, you're allowed to explore, you have your core subjects, like most universities have, but you can do lots of things around it. And actually, they don't want you

to declare a major until you get to your third year, because they also encourage you to do that exploration. And you know, a lot of people start with a, 'I'm going to be a doctor,' 'I'm going to be a lawyer,' 'I'm going to do this, gotta do that...' But you really are able to change your mind a zillion times until you get to that third year.

Jennifer 13:18

So because I had that opportunity, you know, I went there with economics in my head. And I really wanted to think about economics business, that side of it the the corporate world. And probably true to my childhood, I was like, I'll just pick up these extracurricular bits, a little bit of music, I got back into my sport. So I did athletics, or track and field as they call it in America, and I picked up my dancing again. So I had left it a bit in my late late teens. And I just thought I'll take a few classes, right, something to do. And I literally just fell back in love with it. And started taking more and more courses, fitting them in wherever I could around my other subjects and my sport. And then when it came time to declare my major, you know, we can talk about mentors and people who just influenced you in your life, you kind of get like a key professor that sort of overlooks when you're trying to make your decisions on your major. And between my Economics professor and my dance professor, you know, my dance professor said 'you're well on your way to a degree and it really actually wouldn't take much for you then to get a degree in it.' And it just got me to think about it in a different way. And I thought why not? Why not? Who says I can't write who says it has to be a traditional subject and the subject has to match the other subject? And again, the beauty about the American system is you can literally create your own degree

Katie 13:24

Brilliant.

Jennifer 13:45

So it doesn't have to be one of the ones they have in their list, as long as you can hit the requirements to get the degree at the end. They're not bothered, they're like over to you, you tell us what you want to do, and we'll make it happen. So I loved that. It was a key reason I went there. So yeah. So that's how it came to be. And one of those key requirements to get a degree in it, though, you still have to write your thesis at the end, which is our baby dissertation. And not that baby actually. it is quite long, but still not as long as the dissertation. But you have to combine the subjects. Oh, that's the killer thing, the subjects because it's only one thesis.

Katie 15:28

Wow.

Jennifer 15:29

So my thesis was looking at the economic model and how it effectively doesn't work for the performing arts sector. Because you don't have your traditional supply and demand, which would be really interesting to look at it in this day and age. So if anybody out there, you know, has got kids or if that's it, I think it'd be really interest because I think it's changed a lot over the last 20 something 30 something years. But if you think back about performing arts



sector, and actually how uninclusive it was, and exclusive it was yes, and expensive it is to really indulge in performing arts, but a lot of those economic models have changed now, because they're trying to make it more accessible and get more people attending, going to the site, going to performances and really engaging with performance, performing arts creativity.

Katie 16:16

Amazing.

Jennifer 16:16

That's how we got there.

Katie 16:18

It's incredible.

Katie 16:19

Has your, I mean, it must have done your background in economics must have impacted your approach to communications. And I asking that, particularly because a lot of my guests come from a more wordsmiths journalistic type background, rather than a mathematical one, or even a scientific one. How does that background in economics impact your approach?

Jennifer 16:41

Well, it's quite funny because now I often say I do words, I don't do numbers, I definitely would never class myself as a serious mathematician or scientist, there are people in the economics world that are far better skilled than me in that, but what I was attracted to in economics is more around the theory, right, which still really, really like. And I think that's the way my brain works. Again, these are all reflection points, I don't think I quite appreciate that at the time. But I think that's why I was drawn to it. And I always knew I wanted to work in the corporate world. The skill set, I learned through studying economics has given me the ability to actually take quite complex information in financial market world, or financial services worlds, and almost translate that quite quickly. And I do think that is the fixed skill. And I think for people who were probably more on the technical economic side, wouldn't necessarily have the other bit of the coin that I think I bring, which is the understanding and the dissecting and translation of all that amazing technical, mathematical and scientific information, right. So I do think I use that every day at work. And I don't think it's any big surprise that, you know, the majority of my career has been in financial services. And I've been able to take that technical nuance and blend it with the creative thinking, and the engagement that we all talk about, then within communications.

Katie 16:41

I think that's very interesting, because I was, my next question was going to be, you know, how would you recommend to listeners, they deepen their business acumen. But I think you've given a hint at this, because you might not need to understand the answer to the



equation so much as the underlying theory of how markets work, or how businesses make money. Would I be barking up the right tree there?

Jennifer 18:43

Yeah, no, I think that's completely fair. And actually, one of the things you know, as I became more senior throughout my career, and what I really encourage my teams to do, I've always had this way of working that I think as communications professionals it is really difficult. And I would almost argue next to impossible for us to be effective at our jobs if we aren't in the business. Whatever sector right to work in, right. It's not just financial markets and financial services, you know, whether it's retail, whether it's tech, whether, you know, whatever sector you work in, I think really understanding what your business or organisation does, how they make money, how they turn up to their customers.

Jennifer 19:27

I think that business acumen is critical. It's absolutely critical. And I think one of the unique things as comms professionals, which I often say to people when they're like, you know, 'comms, what is that? What do you do?' I always say we're the people behind the scenes that have to be able to concretely talk about the business, engage people around the business, and transcend all those messages that our exec business stakeholders want to convey to influence an audience in some sort of way. And we have to do all of that. And we don't do the business.

Katie 20:06

Yes, that makes sense.

Jennifer 20:07

That is really hard to do. So effectively, we are learning to be subject matter experts at something that actually isn't our day job. You know what I mean? We're running a p&l, we're not running the business, we're not working in a bit of the business that is delivering the business. Right? That's really hard to do, whether you're on the internal comms side, and you're having to do that to your colleagues, or whether you're on the external comms side and having to do that with a PR lens through the media. Quite hard and quite technical. And when I explained that, they're like, wow, like, yes, it is a skill. Not everybody can do comms, despite what everybody thinks. I think it is critical to build those skills, as well as your communication skills and making sure that we as professionals are connecting in this lesson getting under the skin of it.

Katie 21:01

Do you have any go to processes, when you rock up inside in your organisation to think to yourself: How do I find out about how this business makes money? What are the forces that govern the sector? Where do you start?

Jennifer 21:15

There are a few things, you know, I talk about getting under the skin. What is what does that actually mean? I start with a map, who do I need to meet? This is relationships and



stakeholder management at its best, right? Who do you need to know in the business? How do you do those mini teachings, right? Sit down with somebody for half an hour, an hour. And look, not everybody has that time, either the stakeholder or you in your diaries, but then I'm thinking: well, what can I join? What team meetings can I join? What forums can I join? What activity that's already in existence, I can just sit there and absorb.

Katie 21:28

Yes.

Jennifer 21:48

And I talk about being a sponge for a while where you literally just, you're drawing in all this information, which probably doesn't make all that much sense initially. But slowly, the bits start to join, and he and you kind of have an 'aha!' moment. But you have to move from sponge, shall we say, where you're listening, you're in real listening mode. And then you have to have, I think, be an active participant in those business conversations. And I can remember early in my career, you know, this is sometimes harder to do when you're more junior, right? You know, being in the right meetings, being around the right tables isn't as easy when you're more junior in an organisation because somebody more senior is at those meetings around the table. And I remember fighting really hard and talking to my boss and my boss's boss. And almost going in with my ask about which meetings I really thought I needed to be into. And presenting my case as to why I think that's a good idea to be there, and trying to remove that 'it's just senior people who get to be visible with execs,' whatever your senior management kind of hierarchy looks like, and putting my case together about what value I'll be bringing into those meetings and taking out that will enable me to be a better comms business partner to that whole business or that particular stakeholder. And I fought really hard for that in the early days, you know, it's a bit easier now that I am more senior, because I naturally get invited to those things. But I think all of us should be doing that. And then I think for those of us that are leading teams, that should be part of your leadership.

Jennifer 22:03

You can't do it.

Jennifer 23:07

So again, I'm always consciously thinking about where the other members of my team should be. It doesn't always have to be me. And sometimes I might do the initial sort of connecting in. And then I'll say to the business, you've got so and so on my team, work with them, have them come to the meetings, it doesn't have to be me. Bring me in if you need me. But I'm really clear. They also can turn up as a decision maker, you know, so I think it's about how do we empower ourselves? And then for those of us that are leading people, are people leaders, how do we empower our teams to be able to build that skill set? I've talked about kind of having that accumen. It's really hard to do if you're on the fringes.

Katie 23:41



Let's bring this right bang up to date. You are now Head of Communications Data and Analytics at the London Stock Exchange Group. I don't often see comms coupled with data and analytics and in people's job title. So another interesting combination. What is it that combination of subjects that attracted you to the role? Or I'm asking that question, because did they actually design the role around you? So that's, that's, that's an interesting question. And also give me a sense of what the role actually involves day to day.

Jennifer 24:41

Sure, um, a little bit of history, at L-SEG, as we call it, London Stock Exchange Group. So most people will be familiar, you know, whether you're based here in the UK or further afield of the London Stock Exchange, right, the exchange, the venue, the stock exchange, all those buzzwords, that is very much true and I say hear in our offices where the exchange is. But most people think that's where the organisation starts and stops. And it doesn't actually.

Jennifer 25:07

Let me start with before before the deal on the data and analytics part. So data feeds the markets, there is quite a mammoth size of data that already existed in L-SEG, which is effectively helping investors, asset managers, anybody managing portfolios, make those investment decisions, right. Again, if you're familiar with sort of playing in equities and other assets, you might already know this, if you're not you kind of think you choose what you invest in. And data sits behind all of that, right? And analytics sits behind that. And then there's a whole trail of a transaction to go through in buying and selling. So L-SEG, does all of that.

Jennifer 25:48

What happened almost two years ago, now, the beginning of 2021, was that they acquired a business called Refinitiv, which is an was a data analytics business. But they bought in much more capability and bought in a wider global reach around that. This happened at the beginning of 2021. And as they were thinking about the integration of that business, because it's a huge integration. So D&A as we call it makes up about currently about 70% of L-SEG's revenue.

Katie 26:23

Wow.

Jennifer 26:24

And if I give you a sense of our employee base, I think I'm getting my numbers right here. So before the acquisition, let's say L-SEG probably had about three and a half, maybe 4000. Employees, we now have about 24, 25,000.

Katie 26:38

Wow.

Jennifer 26:38

Across the world, right? So it was a big sizable transaction and acquisition. And as you can imagine, a huge integration piece. We're still on that journey. As I said, we're only just coming up to the two year mark of that. So I got approached about the role. Getting to your question about why that role. And hopefully, most of you are already thinking about, 'Gosh, a huge communications task there,' right? Already, both internal comms and external comms. And I wasn't here when they closed the deal. But you know, having worked on a transaction before I can imagine all the comms energy that went into that. But I kind of came in post-day one, as they call it. And when they approached me, the thing that actually drew me to the role is I love creating and building or fixing, so to be able to come in at the beginning of this journey and really think about what the organisation needed at this juncture, build a team, to you know, a lot of the leadership was new, whether you were sort of new new into the whole organisation, or you've come from a different bit of the organisation, and you were moving into the data analytics division. That excited me. I thought, that's something I can really get stuck into, and help to create the engagement; help convey the messages; helped to influence, you know, through the media and get people to understand what L-SEG is as a whole, but the role that data and analytics plays in that ecosystem that most people just don't think about, or they think it happens somewhere else.

Jennifer 28:15

The other element that sits within the data and analytics, so data analytics is a division of L-SEG, effectively. And the other divisions are cap markets, which is you know, affecting the LSE. And then you've got what we call the post trade sort of post transactional things, which is like the London clearing house, for example. To be able to lead communications for our largest division is really interesting, really interesting to me. And I thought this was something that I could really get stuck into and be part of. Now that's not for everybody. It's a lot. It's a lot. It's a bit crazy. You know, you're building, you're building and building comes with its challenges. But as we like to call it with those challenges comes lots of opportunity. Lots of opportunity. So that's what appealed to me. The other bit that sits within our our data analytics division is what we call our benchmarks and indices.

Jennifer 29:07

So people might be familiar. Well, you'll you'll know about FTSE Russell because you hear about the FTSE 100 The FTSE 250 The FTSE Russell Brand, sits in our sec.

Katie 29:07

Ah.

Jennifer 29:11

Many people also don't know that or realise that, that when you're hearing about the FTSE 100, you know, don't that's the equities, and then the benchmarks and indices, those are the things that investors track the asset managers track. And so when they're building portfolios for their clients, they're trying to think what's the right basket of assets and best assets. They're normally tracking against indices, and benchmarks, which helps them evaluate potential performance so that they can advise their their clients and their investors

accordingly. So all of that fits in data & analytics. And you know, the irony going back to where we started at this conversation, I definitely don't sit here as being an expert in data and analytics. We've got some big brains, amazing brains and this organisation that they do that. What I do is I come in as the translator, and I cut that and I go, 'Okay, give me all this real complex information and how do we dissect it and make it palatable and making sure we're connecting with our audiences in the right way so that they understand what we do?'

Katie 30:28

Just an observation around acquisition, I think what I've seen most over the years is acquisitions that are never quite finished. So the deal is done. But for whatever reason, no one has properly knitted together, sort of culture values, mindset. That seems to be a longer journey that no one's really stayed the course at at lots of organisations I've seen, would that be a fair description do you think of acquisitions? And is this something that you're very keen to counter where you are?

Jennifer 31:03

Yeah, I think if we were speaking generally, yes, I think I'm with you, you hear and see that quite a lot. Given I came in post the deal closing, I have to say, I was, you know, this is all part of the courting process, as I call it, when you're looking at a role, I was very impressed in the depth of thinking that had already gone raishin, actually, because you right, because often, there's a real focus on the deal. And all the things like culture, how we're bringing two organisations together is sort of, oh, we'll deal with that next or later. But actually, a lot of thinking went into that at pre deal stage, you know, immediately after and kind of leading up into your day one.

Jennifer 31:47

So I actually found it was a really warm handoff, if you will. And look, I'm not doing this on my own, I'm docked in very closely to my other colleagues on what we call the group side. And I work very closely with our Head of Internal Communications and our other corporate PR team, to do this knitting, right to do this. But I think you know, and often our CEO talks about this, you can't just create culture in a PowerPoint deck, right? And then on day, 15, it is. You have to cultivate it, nurture it, all of it. And that does take time. And I think often, what sometimes senior leaders miss is how much time and energy and effort actually needs to go into that. It's not a once and done thing. And this is where, you know, as communications professionals, this is where we add the value, right?

Katie 32:39

Yes

Jennifer 32:39

That we can come in and think about that pathway, help design almost the the visionary end goal, but set up the right things to help the organisation get there. That's critical, really, really critical. And I think there are probably some organisations and senior leaders and boards that forget how important that is, or just how long it takes, you know, our CEO talks

about the patience that comes with integration. You know, I said, we're only just about to embark on two years. And the danger is you can get really impatient because you think, 'Oh, God, why have we done this yet? Why isn't this happened yet?' And they say, you know, culture really takes about a good sort of three to five years, right? For it to be embedded into an organisation where, you know, we talk about that 'just is,' that takes time. That takes time. So I think we are well on that journey, not without our bumps in the road, and not without our challenges. But I think there's a real focus on culture. And again, you know, when you think about two very different cultures coming together, actually, you kind of think that sort of fast moving FinTech, Go, go go, versus L-SEG, which you know, is used to being in a regulated environment really understands that elements of things. And really thinking about the steps that it takes, sort of get to that end result.

Jennifer 34:07

Bringing those two together, it's quite a powerful combination. But it's also learning on both sides from a behaviour and mindset point of view, and you're trying to get the best out of both those worlds, previous worlds, and meet somewhere in the middle, which then would give us quite a unique culture, I think, in sort of a financial markets infrastructure space. And that's what we're banking on. Right, that that's the 'Why come and work here.' Yeah, it will feel very different.

Katie 34:35

I've heard you call yourself a corporate translator. I think you've actually used this phrase already. And I'm thinking just, you know, reflect on what you've just said, because there's an element of translation or at least building bridges through an acquisition as well where both sides need to understand each other. But is that corporate translator all about what you've talked about, which is that making sense of the theory making that clear, bringing things to life in a way that people understand?

Jennifer 35:04

Spot on. I mean, that's exactly what it is. It literally says what it does on the tin, right? And I use those words deliberately. I'm sure you know, your listeners will be giggling, I'm sure we all have many stories where you, you sit in any set, set meeting and you think 'huh? what?' my audiences are not going to get that they're not going to understand it. And I get that you're super excited about it. But if I use that language and go out verbatim with what you've just told me, we're gonna lose everyone. Yes, we've all been there. Right? We've all been there. So again, I think our value add is being able to come in and understand the needs of the business. So taking that in, and then using our expertise to advise and guide and help them execute, on how they get their language to meet what we know our audiences want to hear and will understand and it will resonate with. That's effectively our jobs. Right? If if we put it through the funnel? Yes, that's, that's what we're here to do. So yeah. I call myself the translator, because I feel like that's what I'm doing every day, little loans, just translating it for myself, yes. Then getting it ready for our audiences to consume it as well.

Katie 36:18

You've worked right across the comms disciplines, and I'm just curious on your thoughts. Do you consider the internal audience different to other ones? Or should the same rules and approaches apply, do you think?

Jennifer 36:33

I think the same theory is the same regardless of audience back to what we've just talked about, right? So you're always trying to get your audience to engage, period, whether it's an external audience, or an internal audience, employee audience, so a lot of I think my methods of doing that apply across across the piece, right, you just tailor for the audience. So your channels will be different, how you turn up your tone might be, you know, you start to segment. But the principle is still the same.

Jennifer 37:08

I think though, with employee communications, I think it comes with a bit of an added nuance of perhaps a big emphasis on connection. So it's not just engagement. And I think that's even more so given where we sat about to get go into 2023. And everything happening across the world people are experiencing the world of work is very different from where it was two and a half, almost three years ago. I think employees are looking yearning, searching for connection in a different way than perhaps we're not perhaps, definitely than we were three years ago, five years ago, 10 years ago, 20 years ago, right? We are no longer just sort of walking through the doors, keep our heads down, deliver a set piece of work and leave again, right? I think people want more, they want purpose. They want to be able to connect with their employers, they want a reason beyond just the paycheck to work. They want a sense of pride. They want flexible working environments. They want organisations that play to their morals and values. You know, I just think the world of work is very different. And so therefore the role employee comms plays in that is also very different. So I just think it's an added nuance and consideration of I think sometimes stretching our senior stakeholders an exec to, to really hone in on that. Yeah, because it matters. It matters. And so you can't, you can no longer get away, we definitely can no longer get away with what we will call one way push communication. Yes, that's gone. People want to engage in conversation, they will tell you what they think, yes, more openly than perhaps again of years past. They want to feel heard, they want to see change. So I think again, I'll say that presents an opportunity for us as communicators, to stretch our thinking and our creativity and mindsets around that engagement and connection piece with employee comms

Jennifer 37:09

I love that answer. And I think that's so insightful and also incredibly helpful. The word that struck me when you were saying that was meaning, you know, creating that meaning around the work that we do and whether that's a personal meaning around the task, or why the organisation exists and the problem that seeks to solve in the world or contribute to the world. I don't know if you've got any reflections on that. But would meaning be a useful word in that context?

Jennifer 40:05

100% Other people might, you know, roll their eyes a bit. Here we go. There's comms people with their fluffy words. I don't think it is fluffy. And I think even the the hardest of people, business people that turn up, they also want meaning as well. Right? I think that's front and centre of how we operate. And again, I think that sector and industry agnostic, right, yes. And it might turn up more in other sectors than others. But I think it's across the piece and different sectors will be further ahead on that. So we were like, yeah, we've always been doing that. Of course you have, because just the nature of the sector, you know, financial markets, certainly not right? They have not traditionally been in that space. So people will be in and industries will be on different places on that pathway. But I think it's holistically important and meaning is important. And sometimes that's a challenging conversation to have when you're in those real technical business conversations. Right> But it matters. It matters and people are leaving organisations when when the dots don't align, yeah. That people have choice. They are choosing to work somewhere else. If those other elements aren't being fed.

Katie 41:22

Yes, absolutely. Yes. I read a very scary stat. Well, depending on how you look at it, there's a labour shortage of 85 million by 2030 they reckon, so it's a candidates market, people can vote with their feet. So everything you're saying really resonates with me, considering what I've been reading. On the surface, you seem to have had a very successful and linear career. But I know when we spoke prior to this interview, you've actually been made redundant not once, but twice. And I just wonder, do you have advice for dealing with knockbacks first of all?

Jennifer 42:00

Yeah, definitely. So it's really easy, especially in this day and age, we go on all our social channels, and everything looks glowing and linear and perfect. Because that's the way we definitely not the case. So I haven't had a linear career, a good friend and former colleague of mine, she owns her own business called Squiggly Careers, because that's exactly what it is. I think very few careers nowadays are linear, actually, I think it's a bit of a myth. And the danger of it is we we build our development against a linear career, and it feels like a knock back.

Katie 42:37

Right. Ah, interesting.

Jennifer 42:39

And so I'm always coaching people to almost drop that analogy completely. Because you're almost setting yourself up in a lot of instances to instantly fail, which isn't nice. So. So I think it is good to think about a bit of a squiggly career, career path, and the trajectory, hopefully, will be linear, if that's what you choose, not everybody wants a linear career either. Right? Again, going back to our conversation, the world of work is just different. It's very different now. And actually, what you should be doing is looking for the roles and the opportunities that I call it 'feed your soul,' give you what you need, and help you feel a sense of accomplishment. And that's your definition of that sense of accomplishment. Not

anybody else's, no textbook, not HR, it's your definition, your career, because there will be knockbacks, challenges, stumbling blocks, you know, whatever you want to call it, there are going to be hurdles along the way. And understanding the landscape with which you're trying to navigate is what helped me with those hurdles and challenges. I'm always thinking about what am I doing today that feeds my soul? That fuels me for what I'm trying to do tomorrow? So I've spent quite a lot of time thinking about what that tomorrow is. And tomorrow could literally be tomorrow, it could be next week, next month, it could be 10 years from now, again, my definition, nobody else's. And it changes and evolves because as human beings we change and evolve. So what tomorrow looked like 15 years ago, for me, it's not what tomorrow looks like today, right? So it's also okay for that to change, which is why I say it's your definition, nobody else's. As long as you're really clear what that is, and I always encourage people to take the time to do that thinking in whatever way you do your thinking, your mind mapping, you know, find your way to map it and articulate it. Because when it's hard and when it's challenging and when you get a hurdle or knock back. Going back to your own personal vision is what keeps the momentum and keeps you going.

Jennifer 44:57

And it can also help you anchor in decision making, well, should I? Should I take a sideway step? Should I, you know, maybe maybe I'm taking a real turn in my career, and I have to take a downward step, that doesn't have to be a negative, right? If it's all knitting together for what you ultimately want to do, your decisions may be very different to what people might think you should decide, right? Yeah, going back to our communicators, the language that we put around this is really important, because some of that language is what leads to the feeling of failure, the stagnation in our careers, how we think about ourselves the lack of confidence. So I'm always just trying to reframe what I'm trying to do, so that I can keep the energy to keep going, Yeah, because it's never linear. It's never perfect. Nobody just hands you the next promotion and the perfect role's sitting over there waiting for you like, it just doesn't happen that way. And look, some of us just have more luck than others, you can talk to a myriad of very senior successful people. And when you hear their stories you're like wow. You know, don't be fooled by the LinkedIn posts, the load and the social posts. Everybody has their own story of how they got to where they've got to. And the more you try and seek that perfection pathway, I think the harder it will be.

Katie 46:30

That's such good advice. You are a senior black woman in a male dominated, I'm guessing white dominated sector. And of course, I have to ask you about that. But before I do, I want to check with you. How do you feel about those kinds of questions? How do you feel about consider, you know, being considered a role model or a standard bearer for others following in your footsteps? I'm just curious about that, before we get into the detail.

Jennifer 47:03

Yeah, I think, and I've been in different places at different times. Sometimes, if we go back to where we started with this conversation of the fitting in blending in phase of my life, I would have had a real allergic reaction to those kinds of questions. Because I don't, I don't want to be spotlighted. I'm trying to blend in desperately trying to be included. I don't I don't

want to be the different one. The only one, the minority, you know, whatever I don't want to be. Then I've you know, there are times where I actually feel a real a real sense of responsibility actually. And that comes from the amazing people I've had in my life that have inspired me, coached me, encouraged me, you know, whether that starts with my parents through to, you know, other family members, friends, bosses that I've had, other senior leaders, a lovely mix of people who have helped me get to where I am today, I'm not here on my own, definitely have not done it on my own. And so I do feel a real sense of responsibility to be that for others as well, because going back to our, those inside thoughts about the career we should have, or what we should or shouldn't be doing at this stage of our lives. And we're looking to our left and right and benchmarking ourselves against other people and being really tough on ourselves. Those role models can be a real anchor and a real inspiration. Yes. And I do know, you know, I know it's a really overused phrase, but it's difficult to be what you can't see. It's really difficult to even imagine, if I keep don't know what you don't know, if you never see it. Let's not underestimate kind of how that plays out and how it registers on a really deep, conscious level. Because I think people hear that you kind of go, 'Yeah, but...' it's messing with you, even when you don't think it's messing with you. It's really deep rooted. And I think I see that even more so now that I'm a parent, right? I see that in my kids. So it is important, I think, for me to be vocal. I'm, you know, I'm honoured. If people think I'm a role model. You know, it's not a title I give myself. And it's not a title, it's serious responsibility that I take very, very seriously. But I'm now in a place of, I must do it, I have to do it. Right. Because critical, it's critical. It's critical, because I see it through my children's eyes, and I see it with through people that I'm connected with and work with every single day. I see how important it is and the impact it can have. So I take it very seriously. And I'm happy that you asked me that question. Very long answer but...

Katie 49:53

No, it's it's an excellent, excellent answer. What's your reflection then? When you look back on the last, I don't know, 20 odd years on the on the progress organisations have made when it comes to diversity, equity and inclusion, obviously those things being actually quite different in many ways. Are you Are you impressed? Are you frustrated? How do you feel about that progress?

Jennifer 50:19

Again, I think I go on an emotional roller coaster with this, as well. Not least because the last few years, everything that's unfolded from George Floyd to the atrocities that continue across the world. I mean, obviously, George Floyd was a real moment. But sadly, not the only moment, and those moments haven't stopped. So that can get that can wear you down again, in ways that are so deep rooted. And look, there might still be people thinking out there, you know, yes, we're seeing stuff on the news. But you know, those people, you don't know them firsthand. You know, why or how does it impact you so much? You know, and I think the reason we've had the kind of conversations that we've had in the last few years is because it's a trigger. It's a trigger to all the things that people of colour, not just people of colour, but but anyone who is a minority, and doesn't fit the mould of the majority. And that looks very different across the world, right? It's different things to different people in different communities. But it triggers all of those experiences. It's the extreme tragedy,

and it hurts, it hurts and it cuts really deep. So, you know, to answer your question, how do I feel about it, it's difficult to come out of that and say, all the right things are happening, and we're progressing really well, and, you know, we're about to turn a corner and everything's gonna be solved, because sadly, that's not that's not where we are. It's not where we are today.

Jennifer 51:59

But I try and bridge from that to a bit more hope than probably I had a few years ago. Because, you know, I, again, I have the pleasure of sitting at some of those tables and those conversations, and I can see firsthand how the conversations are evolving and the kinds of conversations we're having today at very senior high levels, board levels, exec levels, that I know, was not happening years ago, would never even enter those rooms. So that is encouraging to me. And I have to I really have to latch on to that hope and encouragement some some days. I think the phase that just needs accelerating is the actions right, we've we've had, right, we've had some really meaningful conversations, I think, you know, whether that's from those those that are the majority hearing from those of us that are a minority and the experience we have and really understanding what it is like, but it's how do you bridge from that to some tangible actions and impactful change, right? Because that that's where it gets tricky. That's the hard bit. That's where the investment of time, money, resource, comms. And so I you know, I sit here and I say, organise, organise organisations need to still do a lot more is my message. There's a lot more to do. I often talk about, you know, I talk about it here at L-SEG. But I've also talked about it previous organisations I've worked in, at an organisational level, having what I call that real mirror moment. And what do I mean by a mirror moment where the organisation can literally look at its own reflection, and have an honest conversation about where they are. And I'm a true believer that until that happens, meaningful action and change won't happen. Because if you can't have an honest assessment and reflection on where you are, it's really hard to define where you should be going.

Katie 54:08

Yes.

Jennifer 54:09

Let alone defining what success looks like.

Katie 54:13

It's so interesting to me this answer, Jennifer, because it's exactly the same answer in some ways that you gave around your personal career. You've got to be honest about where you want to be wherever that is, and however long that takes, but until you know what success for you on a personal level looks like you're not going to even know if you get there or whether you turn left or right. So really interesting.

Jennifer 54:36

Exactly. Exactly. And in a space like DEI, again, you've got you're dealing with human beings. These are human beings and real emotions and real experiences. This this is this is

human equity we're dealing with right. It's not just a business decision. That brings another level of complexity. to it, but it doesn't mean because it's complex that is unachievable. Businesses tackle complexity every single day of the week. And again, I would argue the same rigour that goes into a business strategy that goes into transactions deals, big set pieces, businesses do this all day long. Why wouldn't you apply the same principles to your human equity?

Katie 55:30

Really good thought.

Jennifer 55:31

I'll leave that there.

Katie 55:32

Yeah, no, I love it. I love it. So let's head over to those quickfire questions. And the first one I have for you is what trait or characteristic do you possess that, above all others has most led to your career success?

Jennifer 55:50

Ooh. I think relationships, relationship management, it's easier to put the technical term on it. I am all about people and connecting with people. And I really think that helps me do my job in a much better way.

Katie 56:09

I wondered, though, when asked that question, whether you'd say anything from your professional sporting life, because I know you're an England 400 metre hurdler sort of champion, and I, I almost can't think of anything more scary than looking down a very short track full of hurdles. And not only have I got to get over them, but I've got to get over them faster than anyone else. And I just thought you must have some kind of steely determination too.

Jennifer 56:39

Yeah, I mean, look, we all know, the buzz term at the moment is resilience. Resilience and focus that that's pretty much sport, whatever sport, you do, definitely have to have those two things. And I think it's ironic that those are the terms that are turning up in the working world now. Right? And also in schools, schools are always talking about resilience, focus, determination, you know, value sets on walls. You're right, there is a huge synergy from those qualities, that the skill sets that I picked up in sport, because there's lots of literally picking yourself back up, sometimes literally, back. But you know, with, even when things are going well in sport, and for all intents purposes, you were performing well, there was a constant raising of the bar. So a solid and excellent performance today will not be a solid and excellent performance tomorrow. That's the nature of sports. So that's why you train, again, in its simplest form, right? So you're doing this training session today, you smash it out the park, you have to raise the bar, because that's the only way you win. Because if you don't raise the bar, the competition leapfrogs over you, that is exactly the same at work.

And I use those principles every day. And actually, when I was trying to keep sort of my sporting life, and my work life separate, for whatever reason that I felt I needed to so in my early days, I never used to talk about sport. And now I talk about it in the way, you know, I'm not afraid to be competitive. I lean into high performance, I encourage my team to be competitive and high performing. Because that's what enables us to continually raise the bar. You cannot settle. Businesses don't settle. So why would we settle in comms? You just wouldn't. So yes, resilience, that determination, that focus definitely has to put me in good stead over the year.

Katie 58:46

I love that. So how would you complete this sentence? World class communication is...

Jennifer 58:56

World class communication is truly understanding. I'm gonna call it your trade. And being able to take that knowledge and apply it to your discipline, which is communications.

Katie 59:17

Is there a book, it could be even a website or a film or report that you would recommend to someone who wants to be a better communications professional?

Jennifer 59:31

This one's difficult because I'm always a bit wary of recommending one thing, because I think we all learn and absorb in different ways. So I'm going to cheat on this question a little bit, if I may. I think it's important I'd be being disingenuous to myself if I just picked one. I think my advice would be actually look at a compilation of things. So I think there are lots of almost like your 'how to write, how to be a good communicator, how to communicate in businesses, how to engage your audiences.' For me, that is your technical learning. And actually, a lot of the time, it doesn't necessarily turn up in a book, I think because communication professionals, there's a myriad of courses that really helped with that, whatever your membership alliances, whether you know, that's the IPI, whether that's the IOIC, you know, whatever your membership affiliation is, don't don't underestimate the power, I'm doing a bit of plug for them, but, but don't underestimate the power of those courses. So I would definitely explore that. And that's what I call like, almost like your classroom learning.

Jennifer 1:00:42

But where I think there's a real gem, I'm a real absorber of other communicators, because I think we can really, really learn from. Stating the obvious TED talks are amazing. And the essence of the brand TED Talk, is everything we try and do when we go to work every day as communicators. Right. And not everyone's brilliant at their said TED talk, but the premise of tech tools I think are absorbing that content, I think is valuable. And that I Do I Do I have my favourite. So this is getting to my own personal favourites. So. So in terms of writers and creative thinkers, I am an avid lover of Maya Angelou, actually, Maya is my, she definitely feeds my soul. And again, she feeds my soul in ways how to she help me clearly I'm not

communicating in that way in this corporate environment. But but that piece that I talked about, which is the emotional connection, helps me with that learning.

Jennifer 1:01:50

In the sort of TV presenter space, I am a massive Oprah fan. And I'm also a mass... And I am massive Michelle Obama and Barack, and Barack, but the the Obamas, you know, not just from the political side, but if you observe them as communicators, oh, yes, you can learn so much. And I'm not saying you know, the people who I can to necessarily what would work for everybody, but my point there is, look for other communicators and look in places that you, you might not traditionally be looking. So anything I absorb, I look at it with a communications lens, whether I don't know whether that's a reality TV programme, whether it's the news, whether it's also, I'm always looking at it from a communications lens, and I learn so much I genuinely do. And some of that is subconscious. And some of its very deliberate and consciously. So. Again, that's that's all about how we grow as we're ever learning you can be ever learning. But the thing that I think probably, and it's not obviously just TV traditional, because we have social channels now, but the thing that I think TV and social brings today, is how the how the power of communication is changing real time, which some of those other traditional ways of learning might be lagging. And that's why I'm saying I think you need a little bit of both, or combination all of those together. Sorry, a really long answer, but I just thought it isn't just one thing.

Katie 1:03:33

That's a fantastic answer. Thank you. And finally, we give you a billboard, a bit of a metaphorical billboard, I guess for millions to see. And you can put any message you like on that billboard. What's your message going to be?

Jennifer 1:03:49

Know who you are, trust in your capability.

Katie 1:03:52

Oh, what a lovely message to end the programme but also end the year. You're the final show of 2022, Jennifer, I couldn't have asked for a better guest, thank you so much for your time and your wisdom and your insights. It's been wonderful speaking with you,

Jennifer 1:04:09

Katie, I've loved it. You know, as I started, I said, I love connecting. And although Katie and I haven't physically met in person, and hopefully one one day we will. I think we had an instant connection. So it's been an absolute pleasure. And thank you for having me as a guest.

Katie 1:04:27

So that's 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. And as I sign off for another year, I can report that we are just about to hit 300,000 plays of this show in more than 50 countries worldwide, and that number continues to rise each week. Plays are up 550% on last year. So my heartfelt thanks to you for being on this



podcast journey with me. Whenever I meet listeners, I do feel this instant connection, I can immediately sense their passion for comms, their curiosity and also the rigour they apply to their thinking and their work.

Katie 1:05:27

Join me in 2023 for more inspiring, informative conversations, and don't be shy, if you have a story to share, or you know, a colleague or business leader who'd make a great guest, please get in touch. You can reach me by email anytime at ICpodcast@abcomm.co.uk. That's ICpodcast@abcomm.co.uk. My thanks to Jennifer, our producer John Phillips, our sound engineer Stuart Rolls and my lovely colleagues that AB all of you keep the show on the road and I am immensely grateful to you. Until we meet again, lovely listeners. I wish you and your loved ones a wonderful end to the year and a fabulous start to 2023. Stay safe and well and remember, it's what's inside that counts.