



The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 9

Season 8: In the rear view mirror

Transcript

Katie 00:09

Hello, and welcome to this special compilation episode of the internal comms podcast with me. Katie Macaulay. When I started this show back in January 2019, of all the comms disciplines; marketing, media relations, investor relations, corporate affairs - internal communications was often the poor relation. We seem to get less management airtime, less budget, and certainly less kudos. But goodness me, how that has changed. Now there are many reasons why communicating and connecting with employees has been pushed up the corporate agenda, winning the war for talent, understanding and meeting employees, changing needs and expectations. And above all, I think, a final dawning realisation that employees really are an organisation's primary audience, the stakeholder group that essentially looks after all the other ones. In short, we all now know that great organisations are built from the inside out.

And on the flip side, a common component of almost every business problem I've witnessed over the years, from major catastrophic disasters to those minor yet disruptive skirmishes, is poor communication. So, in this show, I sit down with leading lights from the world of business, communication, and academia to explore how we can continue to improve communication in the workplace. How do we best inform, motivate and involve our people?

The curtain is about to go up on season nine of the show. But before it does to whet your appetite, here are a few highlights from our last season.

One of the joys of hosting this show is learning about people's secret passions and how these inform and inspire people's work. After substantial corporate experience, Kristin Hancock is perhaps now best known for running the peer-led community ICology with her partner in life and work, Chuck Gose. But what I didn't know before my research for this interview was her deep interest in astrology. Here's a clip from Episode 66, where I'm trying to understand the essence of astrology. And in doing so, uncover how Kristen's passion has helped her reach a better understanding of herself and others. So is the idea that the moment that you are born into this world tells you and how the stars are aligning, the planets are aligning at that moment tells you something quite deep about yourself? Is that? Am I barking up the right tree?

Kristin 03:21

Yes, that's a great way of describing it. Yeah. So, your birth chart is a snapshot of the sky at the moment that you took your first breath. And from that snapshot, we can see parts of your personality; we can see some challenges that are inherent to who you are, we can see the gifts that you have. And we can also see the narration of a story that will unfold throughout your life and some of the opportunities that might be presented to you.



Katie 03:47

You said you were going through a difficult time. What made astrology help was being I guess, clearer about who you really were and what the future might look like, again, am I, would that be fair?

Kristin 04:03

Yes. And I would say it's, it was two things. Part of it was, like I said, this radical self-acceptance where the woman that I met with pointed things out about myself, some of which were a little uncomfortable. As we all know, we have parts of ourselves that are a little uncomfortable to acknowledge. But it was a way of looking at myself that wasn't critical. It was a way of looking at myself in an exploratory way. And in a way, that reminded me that that's who I am. And so some of these challenges that I've beat myself up for can be superpowers if I look at them in a certain way, and if I work with that energy, and if I know that it's there. The other part that I find validating about astrology is that everything comes in time, and everything is cyclical. And so when something is really challenging, and when you're in the middle of an absolute storm, it's not going to be forever, and that's part of what I find reassuring about looking at astrology as I can look at, okay, this is you're in the middle of something right now. And I'm, I'm telling you that because I'm validating for you that what you're experiencing is very real. This is very challenging right now. And you've gone through challenging things before. And you will get through this challenging thing as well.

Katie 05:19

It's that thought, isn't it? This too, will pass.

Kristin 05:22

Absolutely.

Katie 05:23

There's a perspective that's so helpful. I really like that. And knowing yourself really does help when it comes to things like professional development as well because we don't want cookie-cutter comms professionals, do we?

Kristin 05:38

Absolutely not.

Katie 05:39

We want people to explore their unique traits.

Kristin 05:41

And we want people who are moving into leadership who are very self-aware; we want people who are emotionally intelligent, who know themselves, who, in as many as much as they can, can see the blind spots. I know that's an oxymoron. But you know, to know your strengths and to know the challenges and to be able to work with people who complement



that or to be able to acknowledge when you're experiencing conflict at work - what your role in that conflict is.

Katie 06:09

In 2022, I was fortunate enough to attend the IABC World Conference (International Association of Business Communicators), and within minutes of Mari Lee taking to the stage, I knew I wanted her as a guest on my show. Mari has extraordinary experience of qualitative research. She really does understand its power to give us that insight we need to connect with people and to change attitudes and behaviours. What I didn't know before my research for the interview, was the work that she had done as head of the social mobilisation campaign to tackle the AIDS epidemic in South Africa. Here's Mari in Episode 67, explaining why qualitative research asking people open questions without any kind of agenda is so powerful. She's speaking here about a particular research project in a manufacturing environment.

Mari 07:18

There's something very interesting that happens when we ask people questions. And they start thinking, and what we observe in more than one environment, but specifically in a motor vehicle manufacturing plant. We were tracking their quality and production figures from before we started doing the research, during the research after the research, and then through solution development, and implementation. And we already saw an increase in production and an increase in the number of quick flags on quality issues. Just after the research, we haven't even implemented anything, but just asking the questions around communication in that environment. And why? Why do you think it takes us so long to identify quality issues? Just asking those questions and asking it throughout the organisation from all levels of the organisation really created a common language and a common thinking process? And they were self-solutioning? And I think that's the beauty of qualitative research. The answer is usually inside the organisation. You don't need to bring in external consultants to find answers. If you bring them in as a facilitator to look for the solutions bottom up in your organisation, you are going to find people in your organisation who, because of a number of barriers, we know authority is a barrier for authentic communication. We also know in a lot of these environments, these manufacturing environments, between the guy who bolts, who puts the screw in your car, who is on the line and the quality manager who makes the decisions - there is seven layers of management. So, it's very, very difficult for that guy to get his message and intention and solution to the boardroom. And if we create the channel through organisational listening or qualitative research, then usually we can find those solutions internally and people respond, people want to be heroes, listened to. We are wired for connection and and if I see you implementing my results, I will keep those ideas coming. It's when we don't see, I always use this example, if you give a two-year-old, no matter what race, no matter what tribe, no matter what. If you give a two-year-old laptop, and it is on, and they start pressing buttons, and they see something happening, they're going to continue, and they're going to investigate this laptop, and that will probably keep them busy for quite some time. If you give that same two-year-old a laptop that is switched off, and they press the buttons, and nothing happens, they disengage. And that's just human behaviour, right? So as long as we show people, what should we do with their ideas, or get back to them and say, that's a great



idea, but you know what, here's a bit of context you and I didn't have. And that idea, unfortunately, is not going to work for reason XYZ, then you keep them engaged. And that's dialogue. Qualitative research is usually just the first step in a conversation that needs to be ongoing.

Katie 08:44

Yes. In Episode 69, we invited Mike Klein back on the show. Mike is a leading voice in our profession. I've long been a fan of his sharp thinking and writing, his business acumen, and his laser-like focus on ensuring internal comms makes a demonstrable impact on the performance of our organisations. Here's my explaining how, in a world of finite business resources, when cost-cutting is never far from the corporate agenda. We can fight to retain or even grow our budgets.

Mike 11:52

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

Katie 12:48

The question, I guess, is, if you want me to cut my budget, what do you not want me to do? And what value do you place on everything else that is being paid for? But perhaps also, a bigger question to ask, well, the starting question might be, because I don't know if you see this Mike, but I see internal communications in particular meaning very different things inside different organisations. A good question to ask off the bat might be, what role does IC play here? What value which you'd like it to deliver here? What does it look like inside this organisation? And actually, write that down. Get that agreed to before you do anything else. Because you've really got to know, what's the game plan here?

Mike 13:31

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

Katie 14:11



Yeah, absolutely.

Mike 14:12

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

Katie 14:36

In Episode 70, I interviewed Shelby Scarborough, author of a new book, *Civility Rules! Creating a Purposeful Practice of Civility*. Shelby has a wealth of experience in complex high stakes communication through working at the White House. Here's Shelby talking about how to earn the trust of your leader. Or in this example, the wife of the leader of the free world. All of that work must have involved building a really close, trusting relationship with some incredibly important people, both your own people, your senior politicians in the US. But then, dignitaries from abroad, do you have any thoughts or advice on how we can all build more trusting, strong relationships? Perhaps with a senior leader or senior stakeholder?

Shelby 15:36

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

Katie 17:07

In its 100-year history, the Irish National Police Force had never had a head of internal communications. So, when Joanna Parsons took on the role, there were plenty of hurdles to overcome, not least explaining what she was actually there to do. And then, within a year of her appointment, the pandemic hit. During our conversation, Joanna said COVID affected every organisation. But it was so much more extreme in the police. It didn't just affect our business; it became our business. Joanna had already developed a digital newsletter, and



throughout the pandemic she published it every single day. This became the single source of truth for the entire organisation on what to do and how to do it during the pandemic. Here's a clip from that episode number 71.

Joanna 18:07

Do 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.

Katie 18:25

Wow.

Joanna 18:26

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.

Katie 19:30

Yeah.

Joanna 19:31

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 source. 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 the points make it relevant, and 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 under 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 court, so they are 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 (undetectable), and I also introduced some humour, which

was completely alien to the police force. So, in this newsletter, I used memes, cartoons, infographics, puns - 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. It 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 22:01

Adrian Copley is widely recognised as one of the world's foremost experts in strategic communication. In 2015, Adrian founded the Centre for Strategic Communication Excellence, which builds comms capabilities within organisations working to improve the skills of executives, and leaders. In this clip from Episode 72, I asked Adrian to give us the inside track on how he coaches leaders to become better communicators. I'd like to ask you about your executive coaching practice. And again, I'm just really curious about this. Is there a sort of common impact that coaching has on executives? Are there patterns that you've seen now that you've been doing it for some time?

Adrian 22:55

You know, there is. I mean, even though every individual is different, and when you go into the discussion with an executive and say, look we're leading you down a path of coaching. To me the common theme is about insight on self. And this is why recently, you know, I've just gotten got accredited to deliver emotional intelligence reports. And I'm using that in my toolkit with executives, because what they're really looking for, and they don't know what at the time, is, because often they come along; "I need to communicate better, I need a coach on this one." Actually, you need to understand yourself better, the people that you lead better, and then how you make that connection through communication. You know, there's there's that whole gap that we talk about; knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and that's the gap we're filling in organisations. I've just applied that in the executive coaching, is what's the knowledge that you need to communicate better? What attitudes do you need to have around it? And that attitude of being open, and transparent and listening and all of those sorts of things? And what actions do you need to take? So how do we close that gap for leaders between what they say and what they do? And if I focus on those three things with executives, that works really well for them to gain that insight. So, the rest is all about the tools. So, whether it's an emotional intelligence report, or a DISS report or a Myers Briggs, I'll use those tools to bring that out. So, I guess you know, what I've learned is that commonality in leaders is that they come into it not quite knowing what they want. But actually, what they want to do is connect with people better. And that's what they get out of it. And you suddenly go, ah, there we go. And then I've had executives come back to me like four years later, and "Oh, my God Adrian, I still reflect on that conversation when we did that coaching. And I have such great relationships at work now, because of that journey that I took." And it wasn't me, it was their journey, I was just teasing it out.

Katie 25:02

You were sort of facilitating it. I'm wondering though, is it possible to make every leader no matter what their style is, a better communicator? I'm also assuming in that question that we're not actually changing fundamentally, who somebody is because that would be impossible. I'm guessing.

Adrian 25:23

Impossible. Absolutely impossible. It is working with the style that somebody has. So, there's an, and I think a lot of people have spent a lot of time trying to change people through training and development over years and says, right, this is the way you do it. I think we've learned these days to go, let's work with somebody's style, and then how they communicate better, because just looking at themselves and their interactions and their skills and abilities, and the needs of others. And, by some sort of miracle, we kind of look at the audience. And that's what we're teaching them, look at the audience. It's the audience that controls everything, not you. So, if you're an ego-driven leader. And you know, that's who you are as a personality; the more you're aware of that, what the need is for the people that you are leading - the better that connection comes. So absolutely. And in fact, Dr Newman, who developed the Roche model of emotional intelligence, said that emotional intelligence can be taught.

Katie 26:33

Wow.

Adrian 26:34

It actually, it says it's not, this adage of they're a born leader. Yeah, there's born skills of leadership, but it appeals to a certain group of people. So that inspirational leader that will always get on board because they're super friendly and all of that. That doesn't mean that's always the perfect leader for the different audiences. Right? So, we've got to work within the understanding that needs what people want, and how do we fill that gap by understanding self?

Katie 27:06

You're making me think of that George Bernard Shaw quote, which is something like the problem with communication is the illusion that it's taken place.

Adrian 27:16

Yeah. That's it.

Katie 27:17

But that's the leader's problem, isn't it?

Adrian 27:20

It is absolutely.

Katie 27:24



We ended season eight of the show with Jennifer Thomas. Jennifer is a senior in-house comms practitioner, currently at the London Stock Exchange group, where she is Head of Communications for its data and analytics business. In this wide-ranging conversation, we talk about; the progress organisations are making around diversity and inclusion, the importance of comms both developing their business acumen, and why we need to make sure we're sitting at the right tables. In this clip from Episode 73, we're talking about what's unique and special about the internal comms audience, and how the needs and expectations of employees have radically changed in recent years. 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 28:29

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 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. 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 play 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 and exec to really hone in on that.

Katie 30:52

Yeah.

Jennifer 30:53

Because 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.

Katie 31:04

Yes.

Jennifer 31:05

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 mindset around that engagement and connection piece with applying calls.

Katie 31:35

I'm always very appreciative when guests really open up and share not only their successes, but a few of the bumps in the road. Here's a clip from Jennifer, on how she has approached managing her career, and the importance of not comparing your journey to that of others. 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 32:16

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. That's the way we are definitely not the case. So, I haven't had a linear career, a good friend, former Ford colleague of mine, she has 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 build our development against a linear career, and it feels like a knockback.

Katie 32:52

Right. Interesting.

Jennifer 32:54

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 is nice. 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, not a textbook, not HR - it's your definition of 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 of 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 about what that is, and I always encourage people to take 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 a knockback, going back to your own personal vision is what keeps momentum and keeps you going.

Katie 35:12

Season nine of the Internal Comms Podcast kicks off next Wednesday, the eighth of February with fortnightly episodes. If you are already a fan of the show, I would be really grateful. If you could leave us a review on Apple podcasts. We have nearly 70 reviews so far. It would be great to get this number to 100. It just helps the algorithms, gives them a little nudge. It will mean more IC professionals around the world can find the show. So, my lovely, lovely listeners until we meet again for season nine of the show. Stay safe and well. And remember, it's what's inside that counts.