



## The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 9

### Episode 81 – Charlotte Carroll, *Unilever: Inside a global success story*

#### Transcript

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#### **Katie 00:03**

The Internal Comms Podcast is brought to you by AB, the world's first specialist internal comms agency. For nearly 60 years, AB has worked hand in hand with internal comms leaders around the world to inform, inspire, and empower their workforces, building great organisations from the inside out.

#### **Katie 00:30**

If you'd like to discuss new, effective, exciting ways to connect with your people, please get in touch. Visit [abcomm.co.uk](http://abcomm.co.uk). And if you do, I look forward to meeting you. And now on with the show.

#### **Katie 00:51**

Hello, and welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me. Katie Macaulay. This show is devoted to informing, inspiring and hopefully entertaining those of us responsible for communicating inside the walls of our organisations. Every fortnight I ask a leading light from the world of communications, academia or business to sit in my podcast hot seat, and together we explore ways to make employees feel better heard, more connected, more motivated at work.

#### **Katie 01:30**

Listeners you are in for a real treat with this episode. It's estimated that 3.4 billion people use a Unilever product every single day. Established more than 100 years ago, Unilever is one of the world's largest consumer goods companies. Its 400 brands are some of the best known, most successful across the beauty, wellbeing, homecare, nutrition and ice cream sectors. It employs 130,000 people worldwide. And Charlotte Carroll is Unilever's Global Head of People Communications. Charlotte describes herself as a purpose driven, strategic and creative communications professional with deep experience of and an enduring passion for the people agenda in global businesses. She has built a 20-plus year career, helping organisations embed business strategy, build culture, and drive world class employee engagement. And although she's worked for a diverse range of organisations, from ASOS and the BBC to British Gas and Cadbury Schweppes, I think it's fair to say that Unilever is in her blood in every sense of that expression.

#### **Katie 03:02**

Just a quick word of explanation. Charlotte mentions Port Sunlight in our conversation. Port Sunlight is the remarkable model village in the northwest of England, built in 1888 by William Lever to house three and a half thousand employees. The village had 800 houses with allotments, a cottage, hospitals, schools, concert hall, even an open air swimming pool and a church. It is now an important conservation and heritage site.

#### **Katie 03:38**



Now Charlotte and I touch on many topics in this wide ranging conversation. We talk about how she's established an open dialogue within Unilever, encouraging everyone to have a voice, to contribute, to be part of the conversation, how communication has become a creed for leaders, the importance of stepping out of your comfort zone as an IC professional, Unilever's Discover Your Purpose workshops, her approach to building relationships with senior executives, three simple questions that she encourages leaders to ask in listening sessions, and much much more. Charlotte's rich experience, her clarity of thought and empathetic approach to her work, I think really shines through in this conversation. So without further ado, I bring you Charlotte Carroll. So Charlotte, welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast. Thank you so much for inviting us to Unilever house to have this conversation in person. How wonderful.

**Charlotte 04:47**

It's great to have you here with us, Katie, thanks for coming in.

**Katie 04:51**

I wonder whether we could start by talking about the role of mentors and the role they've played in your career up till now. Now I don't know if I've done my research right on this. Can you tell us about Mrs. Nicholson and Keith Wheat, for example?

**Charlotte 05:07**

Yes, I really can. Talking about Mrs. Nicholson takes me back to being eight years old at school. And she was truly an inspirational teacher, just one that you never forget. Just an amazing storyteller. Such a great communicator, as a teacher. I just remember her lessons and whatever she was talking about, whatever the subject, she was so engaging to listen to. And she was quite tough. She wasn't a sort of soft primary school teacher, she expected really high standards from her students always gave critique with her marking. So getting good marks from her really meant a lot. You knew you'd done well. I'll never forget her message to me, actually, when I left the school at age 11. I'm going back and asking her to sign my book. And she wrote two words. Aim high.

**Katie 05:57**

Wow. Yeah. Great advice. Great advice. And then Keith Wheat?

**Charlotte 06:03**

Yeah, well, Keith was somebody that I worked with quite early in my career. And Keith was very and is very visionary about communications, of course he's a very famous marketeer, was ultimately was Chief Marketing Officer here at Unilever, has a glittering career. And I worked with Keith, I was fortunate enough to work with Keith, over 20 years ago now. And Keith really understood really, almost before it was becoming, having a lot of currency and business, the role of employee communications and employee engagement. And seeing that as beyond, you know, at that time, it was posted in newsletters if you were lucky, to be very honest. And Keith really wanted to invent what employee communications was about in the part of the business that we were working in and Unilever together at the time. And actually, we hadn't had a dedicated internal communications manager in our part of Unilever, which at the time was the, what we called Lever Faberge, so the home care and



personal care side of the business in the UK. So first of all, he created that role with my boss, Emma Flack, who still works in the wonderful world of internal communications.

**Charlotte 07:11**

So he created that role, really wanted that role. And so that was my first dedicated role in this field, so both in terms of his vision for what we could do, and the strategic role that internal communications can play... very, very visionary. He also played an important part in a personal time in my life, I had come back from maternity leave, having had my eldest son, Dan, who will be 20 next month, I can't quite believe I'm saying. When Dan was eight months old, he got meningitis.

**Katie 07:37**

Oh, my goodness.

**Charlotte 07:38**

And it was very serious. Long story short, he's recovered from that, although it did leave him with some some changes, he lost his hearing in one ear, for example. So it was a very traumatic time. And coming back to work after that was a real pivot point for me. Making that decision to come back at home, could I come back? Was that something I still could bring myself to do? How did I feel about it? And it was a it was a wobbly time. And the day I came back to work, having had a few weeks off with Daniel being ill, Keith made a point of making sure he was around. We were working really closely together. And before I could even get to my desk, Keith had come up to me in the office at work, and wrapped me an enormous hug and said, "It's going to be Okay, we really need you. Thank goodness, your back." He managed to crack a joke and make me laugh. And in that moment, I knew I was going to be okay.

**Katie 08:33**

Has that influenced your style as a leader, as a team leader? And as a colleague, do you think?

**Charlotte 08:39**

I would say it really has actually had such a profound impact on me that he took that level of personal interest and care. I wasn't the most senior colleague in the team. It wasn't a seniority thing. I was a manager in the team at the time. But he took that interest. He took that care. And it made the world of difference.

**Katie 08:59**

Yeah. well, thank you for sharing. You have worked in comms throughout your career. I noticed you did a degree in English and politics, I think initially, I'm just wondering, was it always gonna be a career in comms?

**Charlotte 09:14**

No it wasn't. I wanted to be a broadcast journalist. Talking into equipment like this could well have been the day job for me. I actually applied to do a radio traineeship at the BBC, back in the mid 1990s. There weren't loads of options, actually, in terms of how to pursue a

career in this field, in communications, or even going into out and out journalism was quite niche. Yes. So having done my degree, I applied for the traineeship at the BBC and this is something that 10s of 1000s of people applied for every single year. So I applied for it honestly more in hope than expectation of getting anywhere with it. But to my surprise, I got down to the final stages of the process. I got voice tested for it. I didn't get it, but it was a great experience, actually. And it opened my eyes, I think, to starting to think more broadly about what a career in this field if not directly journalism could offer. I didn't see myself being, you know, a news hack, you know, on a local beat. I didn't see myself in the tabloids, it was more in the, probably in the broadcasting. And, you know, and obviously at the BBC held a particular appeal, I ended up doing some internal comms there later in my career. So I got there eventually, just not the way that I'd originally envisaged

#### **Katie 10:34**

You have had an incredibly impressive career. And also, am I right, three separate stints at Unilever? Would that be fair? I guess a two part question. One is, have there been very deliberate, almost strategic choices that have guided your career along the way? Or is it mainly just taking opportunities that happen to have come along? And then what has indeed drawn you back to Unilever, more than more than once?

#### **Charlotte 11:03**

So to answer the first part of that question, first, I think I wouldn't say it's necessarily been a very carefully thought through strategy, it has been somewhat opportunistic. The unifying part of it is going where the energy is, you know, where there's an opportunity where there's a role a bit like the role that Keith created, this is something I really want to drive, you know, I'd gone in to do external communications and issues management and this new role was created in internal communication. And actually talking of mentors, a mentor I had early in my professional career, when I was at Delarue said to me, "Oh, darling, don't do internal communications," you know, you know, it was almost a bit seen as the poor relation, to be very honest. And I was sort of getting advice as well, "are you sure you really want to do that?"

#### **Charlotte 11:54**

So for me, that sense of this is something where we really want to create shift, change, transformation. That's very attractive to me. That's definitely been part of it. And I think then it comes around with, you know, where are you in terms of your development in a job and in the company? And now have you reached the end of a natural arc and a chapter? And then it's about also what's around and what's next? I'm intellectually very curious, I would say. So I like to always make sure there's something in the new role that feels different from what I've done before, right? So that's whether that sectoral experience whether there's a different aspect of the challenge that comes into the role. That's something that I look for, where's the new experience in that?

#### **Charlotte 12:42**

I suppose that in terms of Unilever, you know, there's a couple of aspects to that. One is that to this day, and it has been from day one, a company that I completely love. And I have a



long family history with the company. So just to tell you the short version of a long story, but my great grandfather worked at the original factory in Port Sunlight.

**Katie 13:03**

Oh, my goodness.

**Charlotte 13:04**

My grandparents on my mom's side, so this is in the same line of the family, met and married through working at Unilever, Port Sunlight. And before I ever worked for the company, I married my husband in the church in Port Sunlight!

**Katie 13:16**

Oh, my goodness.

**Charlotte 13:17**

So to say it's kind of in the blood probably isn't putting it too strongly. Sadly, that side of my family suffered from people dying quite young. My mum died when I was young, and she'd grown up in Port Sunlight village. And so there's also a very powerful family connection there. And I do feel that I'm sort of, you know, continuing a family legacy, by continuing to work for the company today. I'd like to think my grandparents in particular would be quite proud.

**Katie 13:43**

Looking over your shoulder. Wow, that's amazing. You said you like to go where the energy is, and I love that phrase. I wouldn't mind just digging in into that just for a moment. Is that about your energy, something that you feel passionate about, that excites you? Or is that more about you seeing that there's opportunity within the role or the organisation or the division, whatever you're joining? Or is it a bit of both?

**Charlotte 14:09**

More the latter, Because I, I'm a firm believer that motivation is always intrinsic, you know, the energy comes from you. And actually, I'm, if I'm doing something, I put my all into it, people say that I'm all in and that's very much my style and my personality. And so I know that I will bring the energy and I know that whatever I'm doing, I'll give it my best shot. I think if you're in an environment, though, where there's that real pull for that, there's that desire to create, particularly shift and transformational change, do things in a better way, do things in a new way, surprise and delight people in the organisational experience by doing things differently than they've been done before. For me that's really, really appealing. And just to sort of complete the story of coming back to Unilever, working with Alan Jope, who's been CEO for the last four and a half years at Unilever and I've been here for most of that time, I initially came into work, particularly on leadership communications, that role led to a shift in terms of thinking about how we might do CEO to company communications. So to me the opportunity then to come back was not necessarily something I'd imagined happening. But then though the energy was there, right, right, that appetite where Alan's saying, "There's something we could do here, which would be really positive for the culture



and how we communicate as a company. Where could we take that journey? what could that look like, for me?" led to the third chapter of me coming back to Unilever.

**Katie 15:45**

So it was a new challenge. What did that shift look like? What was the difference?

**Katie 15:51**

I know we don't want to get terribly tactical here, but I'm guessing listeners' ears are going to pick up at that. Tell us a little bit about the tactics, if you don't mind. What platform are you using? How does it work?

**Charlotte 15:51**

Alan is very much a people person, and has put a lot of energy and focus on engaging the whole organisation, 'cause that's something that's something we're both passionate about, in terms of the company, it's something that I think was a hallmark of his roles in lots of other leadership settings as well throughout his career. So how would he bring that as CEO? So there's a couple of sort of hallmarks of that. One has been radical transparency. We've been doing a channel called 'your call' pretty much throughout Alan's leadership, something which really took flight because of the pandemic. And we created an opportunity for people to ask, it's an Ask Me Anything format, 20 minutes of talking about what's going on in the company from Alan and the co host. And then most of the time dedicated to people being able to ask questions from right around the company, being able to do that anonymously. So that there's a sense of, don't be held back thinking there might be something I don't know, or does this seem like a silly question? No sense of any silly, no silly questions, every question is a good question. And you can ask that, ask him anything. So that's been really, really powerful.

**Charlotte 17:16**

Okay, so we've kept it really simple. To be honest. We were working on a form of this before COVID happened. And we accelerated it hugely, obviously, when COVID really took a grip in March 2020. So it's broadcast by Teams. Yes, it's streamed. So we have Microsoft Stream, and Teams are the two kind of key formats for it. And then in terms of the q&a, we use a tool probably lots of people have come across called Pigeonhole. So some people use Slideshow which is quite similar, right? We use Pigeonhole, and that enables commenting, and voting. You have got the option in that to be to put your name in or to be anonymous. it's been a real journey with Pigeonhole, we do moderate, there's a kind of a code of conduct around it, to make sure that it's respectful and fair and inclusive in terms of how people utilise it. But provided people work within those rules of engagement, then they can put any question or comment they want.

**Katie 18:19**

The difficult question, and I guess it's it's one I get asked a lot is Heads of Communication in telecommunication that say, we asked for feedback, we asked for questions. And there's this just tumbleweed moment, no response at all, from the frontline. And then we have to manufacture questions and comments, right? Would you have any advice to someone who finds himself wrapped up in an organisation where there's this deathly silence?

**Charlotte 18:45**

For me, the antidote to that has been to say, recognise that it's, it's just intimidating to ask questions in a format where there's 1000s of other colleagues tuned in. Yes, actually. It's just the way we're wired. As human beings. We have an amygdala hijack. If we think about putting our name in and asking a question, what you know, you think about all the things that could go wrong, and a lot of people freeze, that's why we don't ask questions. Some people fight and ask an aggressive question. But on the whole, it's an intimidating thing to do. So actually creating the conditions in a couple of key ways that say, look, we really do want to hear the questions. We know there'll be some difficult questions in that. You need to have leaders that are really up for that. And it's really for me, the threshold is around talking through, well, what could that look like then? And how we're going to handle questions that are difficult to answer. Yes. Might be framed in a particular way that feels perhaps controversial. Yes. But actually, a lot of questions also, can be sometimes predicated on a misunderstanding, right? And so it's about having a strategy for taking questions and saying, how will we deal with that? So one of the things we always do with Pigeonhole is we almost always take the top voted questions, the top four or five most heavily voted, we make this clear to people. So it's not purely about your votes. It's about we'll take the top voted, and we'll also take a selection from elsewhere. Because sometimes things get voted and they get a head of steam, and then they're at the top and like social media, they stay at the top. Because they're at the top. Yes. So we try and have this balance. We're also very honest about, Alan's very honest in particular, and also says co-host the same about the, you know, their interpretation of the question. So if, for example, say the question might say something like that's good, let's pick an example, pay rises are below our sector. But that's not might not be factually true. It might be perceived to be true, but may not be the data may not back that up. The first thing we always do is address the factual part of the question and say, okay, well, here are the facts. But also do that in an empathic way that says, look, we understand that this is a difficult conversation, that there's something here that we made, we need to take away and have a look at. It's always doing it in a human way, and doing it with high empathy, trying to understand what's behind the question for somebody, and why it might also have got then a bit of a snowball effect in terms of questions and votes and so forth. It comes down to Alan having a philosophy that says, I'm willing to take any question. That is sort of table stakes part of it, to be very honest, because you have to be all in with that. You can't put that out there and then not deliver on that promise. Yes. You have to see it through end to end.

**Katie 21:54**

Are great leaders born or made, I suppose, is the question there? Are you able to support and control and brief anyone to get to a position where they can have those open, trusted dialogue based communication events? Or do you think there are some leaders that actually at the end of the day, you wouldn't even go there, basically?

**Charlotte 22:17**

In this company, I, we have an incredible culture of open and transparent communication. So you know, I'm talking a lot about Alan there, because this has been a signature of his leadership. But actually, he's been partnered by leaders right across the company, as his co



host. As always, it's never just him. It's him with a senior leader co host. And they've all very much operated to the same philosophy and so much so actually, that in the difference in sort of subsets of the business, this is a format that's been imitated pretty much everywhere. Yeah. So it's not only our global 'your call', as we call it, but actually most countries, most leaders in their different roles and business units have been doing something really similar.

### **Charlotte 23:04**

I think you want to keep looking at these things as of their time. There's definitely a big social media aspect to it. Pigeonhole is deliberately designed to be quite like Twitter in its format. That's one of the reasons we picked it. Because we're wanting to stimulate the conversation. We're wanting people to engage, comment, even if they're not asking a question, and to feel part of a conversation. Even if they're just observing and listening and watching and reading that, right? That there's different ways in which you can engage, either directly or more indirectly. Yeah. But you know, then it's, it was also very much in beginning very much weekly because of COVID. In a crisis like that, where also one of the big topics from well, for the probably the first year plus was, in every edition, we were talking about what was happening with the pandemic. Yes. And of course, as we've then gone into the world of hybrid working, return to the office, all of those things, it's been a great time to have a forum, as we've all been feeling our way through the realities of a changing world today, it's very, very much of its time, if I go back to things I did with Keith 20 years ago, similar philosophy, you know, he would do stand up town halls, we'd make the groups smaller deliberately. So let's say there would be 700 people in the business, he'd be happy to do the session six or seven times. So there was only somewhere between 80 and 100 people in the room rather than addressing a room once of 700, which is a philosophy that says the audience is at the centre of this solution, rather than what I want to say is at the centre of this. It's very much very much mirrored in Alan's philosophy. And we would start every session before anybody spoke. And there used to be a slide up on the on the old projector that said "what's on your mind?" and on every chair was a card and a pencil. And I just used to say to everybody, please just jot down anything that you might want to pick up in the q&a. Even if it's not a question at this point, hence the idea around commenting and so forth, then I would pick up the cards, I would give Kieth a little note that says, okay, these are the big themes that are coming out on what's on people's minds.

### **Charlotte 25:21**

So instead of just addressing a room in a town hall and say "anybody got a question?" he started the q&a by saying a bit like Alan's do with Pigeonhole. I can see what's on your mind. It's there in pigeonhole. Okay, these are the hot topics in the room today. Let me talk a bit about whatever that topic is, 'are we getting our innovation out quickly enough?' or something like that, to, you know, 'why is our forecasting, not as accurate as we'd love it to be?' typical business topics that we might say these might be things that are in the way of us performing exactly to the level that we'd wish. By doing that, he's then putting the conversation. And what we used to find, and this is similar, now with 'your call' and Pigeonhole is, then people join the conversation. They then say "yes, exactly. That's on my mind." So now we're having that conversation. "Can I just ask about..?" I think it's about understanding what the conditions are that people need to get engaged in the





conversation. And conversely, making sure that there's, you know, psychological safety in whatever way that you're engaging.

**Charlotte 26:30**

And of course, it gets a bit edgy, sometimes the questions get worded in a way that reveals there might be an unhappiness under or behind the question. We also need to take care and make sure that that doesn't put other people off from participating. So if sometimes on a topic, it gets a little bit edgy, you know, Alan will always say, "Look, you know, it's we really want to keep everybody engaged in the conversation. So just take care before you post just to think about how this might land for others." And it also enables us to talk about inclusion and thinking about how what we say and how we choose to work things. It's not only about us, each having the opportunity, it's also about recognising there's a community aspect, and how we impact those around us

**Katie 27:17**

Really powerful. Thank you. I think this might be a good time to actually talk about your role, because I don't want listeners to feel frustrated that I haven't gone back to basics. So you are Global Head of People Communication, your workforce, am I right in total globally, is around 148,000 or so?

**Charlotte 27:37**

Yeah, a little bit less than that now, but it's 130,000 people in the company. We have, of course, have an extended workforce with third parties. And we always have a big cohort of people in training roles and all sorts of things at any given point in time. The workforce, from our audience point of view, we're obviously it divided into many sub parts, but it's really in two big groups. There's our online community, those people who in some way, shape or form sit at a desk or a laptop, most of the day. And then there's our frontline colleagues who are working in manufacturing, in Field Sales and so forth. The audience that I primarily serve is our online community.

**Katie 28:19**

Is there a typical day?

**Charlotte 28:24**

There's probably a typical week. I mean, I think the certain key aspects of the job really include engaging closely with our amazing comms and corporate affairs network right around the world. And we do that in a couple of ways. We have a group of Directors, who mostly then leading the big teams. Obviously you have global colleagues who are leading communications for IT, for supply chain, for our global functions, and also for our business groups.

**Charlotte 28:53**

So Unilever today is organised, organised around five global business groups, by which I mean beauty and wellbeing, personal care, home care, nutrition, and ice cream. So that group of colleagues is meeting on a really regular basis. And we're talking about what we're doing, how we're leading, what are some of the big things coming up, and so that we're

really, really connected as a team. And we also then connect with a whole of the community who work in communications and corporate affairs in Unilever, globally, every two weeks, which is really frequent, we have something called 'comms connects'. And that's our forum together for sharing best practice, sharing key updates, and making sure everybody's really plugged in and clear about what's going on. And so that's also an opportunity then to make sure there's no big surprises in terms of you know, the air traffic control in a company of our size and scale. It really, really helps to keep us have the dots all joined up.

**Katie 29:53**

And can I check that's both internal comms and external contact me together.? And how important is that you've got both

**Charlotte 29:59**

Crucially important, crucially important, and you know, of course, I mean internal communications is relevant to all functions. And so, you know, one of the great things is that we're a, you know, an independent function of communications and corporate affairs in Unilever globally. Paul, my boss reports directly to the CEO. And that means also I think, helps prevent there being a lack of balance, I think in how then communication serves the whole organisation. My point of view on that would be that, of course, there are many obvious and natural homes for communications that can work well for other organisations. But by not ducking, say to marketing, or HR, or wherever, it means that each of those component parts of the business see communications as equally their partner, I think, I think that's also so important in how we partner the company.

**Katie 30:56**

Yeah, really interesting. Thank you. I'm going to take you back to your LinkedIn profile. If that's all right. There was one line that stood out for me, you write: "I have a deep experience of an enduring passion for the people agenda in global business." And I'm curious about that people agenda piece. Has that changed inside corporates over your career?

**Charlotte 31:21**

Without a shadow of a doubt. Yeah, for sure, when I started doing anything in the world of internal communications, like a printed newsletter, posters on notice board, I think today, employee communications is at the heart of the people agenda, how we engage with people, how we talk to people, the strategic value that's attached to that from leaders, communication has become a creed for leadership hasn't it? Very much, I think it would be not too far to say that you can't be a successful leader without paying close attention and care to how you choose to communicate. And so that people agenda if you like, communication is the oxygen that makes that live and breathe 100%. Therefore, you can't just think about the communications aspect. For me, the people agenda is all the things that affect our experience in the workplace. And that means, what kind of reputation we have externally and how we can feel connected to that and proud about that. The stories that we can tell when we go home at the end of the day, to our loved ones to our friends about what the company does and why it matters, what the company stands for our values and our strategy, where are we taking it? what does the what could the future look like? As well as those core things that are really important to all of us in terms of how does the

company match up with what we're looking to get out of the world of work? So does the company care about my well being and my safety? Are there opportunities for me to grow as a person in my career, have new opportunities, all of those things, learning, development, leadership, these are all vitally important. And I genuinely think that at This stage, I am absolutely a communications professional. But I just didn't think of myself as part of HR professional too. Because actually, to really make this agenda work, you absolutely have to be in partnership with your colleagues in HR. And if you really team up and work together, I think that's when the magic happens.

**Katie 33:31**

You talk there about the stories that we tell. And that leads me nicely into Unilever, I think is well known for being a purpose driven organisation, sustainability, particularly at the heart of, of what you do. And I've been a great admirer for years of Paul Polman, who I know has gone on to write books and all sorts of things, your past CEO, I think a CEO for almost a decade, who firmly believed that business can and should be a force for good. I am intrigued now, where you are today. What does purpose and values, what role and impact do they play in your work and how you communicate?

**Charlotte 34:10**

It's absolutely central to who we are what we do as a company, you know, sustainability or so in the broader sense of the word. Climate, wellbeing, social sustainability. These are all vitally important. And actually, I think what Paul did so brilliantly was articulate the opportunity for business and how businesses like Unilever can play their part in an ever changing world, particularly also, because in the world of politics, you mentioned that earlier obviously from my degree, that's often not that stable, and therefore they've been able to take the longer view, yes, you know, businesses like Unilever, which we're in our 10th decade as a conglomerate, we've got parts of the business that have been around well over 100 years, businesses often have the opportunity to take the longer term view. And I think that's a really vitally important role.

**Charlotte 35:05**

Also, it's about recognising that if we're, we've got more than 3 billion people a day using one of our products around the Unilever world, I think it's 3.4 billion consumers in the world each day use Unilever product of one kind, or another, it's mind boggling statistic. Taking care how we do that, how we make those products, what goes into them, how we try and tread lightly on the planet, as we're doing that, how those products at the end of their life are disposed of, how they can be reused, recycled, in terms of packaging, and all those sorts of things. it's just vitally important. And it would, I think it's not too strong to say that companies that don't take care of this, it's hard to imagine how there is going to be longevity for organisations that don't really pay attention to this aspect of their business. It's not an add on, it's not nice to do. It's absolutely vital and fundamental to how to run a modern business, in our view.

**Katie 36:10**

Yeah. And I love that phrase "tread lightly on the planet" that's really, really well put. Let's talk a little bit about change and transformation, because I know that comes under your

your remit. Do you have any golden rules for managing successful change? You must have seen so much change both local initiatives and big global ones.

### **Charlotte 36:32**

The first thing is to really get to the heart of the why. And really, actually, and then craft that story based on the why. And give you, start with that. And people can understand therefore, and you can clearly communicate the rationale. Even if people don't like it, or don't, on some level, agree with it, I think if you clearly articulate the why, and what you're trying to do with the change and the rationale for it, then I think you have a good chance of, of helping people come along that change journey. I think also to keep it simple, I think often change can become very complicated. And often those deeply involved in working on change, feel that every single detail and aspect of change has to be shared. And actually the reality is that for some people, those details are super important. And it's good to have them there when they're needed. But actually, at the most fundamental principle level keeping it simple does a lot. I think the third is to say it's actually uncertainty that we don't like, more than change. Yes, I think what we find stressful as people is the unknown, is that fear of the unknown. it's knowing what does this mean for me? If it's a tape type of change that changes an organisation and roles and responsibilities, do I have a role? Is there a role that I want? That does this mean for me? And you have to try and get to that as quickly as possible. And with as much empathy as possible, of course, you have to get the story straight. But once you put it out there recognise that everybody then will interpret the story. And it will take on new life based on the individuals concerned. And the experience of change will not be one thing to a group of people, everybody going through that change will experience it in their own way. And therefore keep the sort of human aspects of that very, very much at the centre of it, and be as open and transparent as you possibly can. You don't know, say you don't know. I think this is true of all communications. We know when people are being totally honest with us. We all just have that sixth sense of whether we're hearing the truth. And so actually, if you keep it honest, keep it simple. Keep it transparent. And if you can't say or you don't know, that's fine, but just say so. And I think when you do that, it doesn't usually go too far wrong.

### **Katie 39:04**

That is making me think about the importance of your relationship with senior leaders, though. And we've already talked a little bit about this. Do you have a particular approach when it comes to building that kind of trusting relationship? And I know you've got a new CEO waiting in the wings? You haven't yet met? So we can't say too much about that. But do you have a general approach when it comes to getting to know and building that trusted relationship with a senior leader?

### **Charlotte 39:31**

Yes, definitely. And I did English at university and so that there's a kind of a little literary reference to this for me, which always kind of keeps me in the right zone first and foremost, and that's to quote E. M. Forster who said "only connect," which is actually the words on his tombstone.

### **Katie 39:50**

Oh, I didn't know that.

**Charlotte 39:51**

Of the many quotes of E. M. Forster that's what's on his tombstone. And that's something that I passionately believe, is that power of human connection. So actually, the first thing that you know, I would look to do working with any leader or any stakeholder is to connect with that person in a human way. You know, feel like we can build some rapport, it doesn't need to take lots of time, but just showing interest, try and understand the person and see them as a person, and to connect in on that level. For me, it's vitally important, I think, it also feels funny to say this in a format where I'm doing so much talking today, Katie, but listen, double talk her. I think often when we're in situations where we're in a new relationship at work, we will often want to impress somebody, and help them have confidence in us by showing we've got everything under control and everything prepared and ready. And of course, preparation is a big part of working with a new leader, but also not being too attached to any one particular idea, or keeping an open mind, listening, thinking about them as a person, and actually tailoring your approach for actually, then what's going to help them be the best they can be. Because actually, if you do that, and help that leader be the best they can be, and that they feel, you've approached them in a way, then also, then they will show up really well in how they then engage with the audience and the organisation. And therefore everyone will feel that, and they will feel more at ease, and they will feel more themselves.

**Charlotte 41:35**

What never works is saying "what I really think you need to do is XYZ, because this has always worked before..." For me, that's just absolutely not, it's much better to go in and create something bespoke, even if some of the fundamental principles of what works continue to be there. You know, I talked about the how to get the feedback for Keith's in person town halls, versus something that was done with Alan, on an online format more than 20 years later, there's this kernel of the same idea there. But the execution of it was for it's time for that leader.

**Katie 42:14**

Yes. I think that's so smart. Because it goes back to your authenticity point, doesn't it? Finding out what makes them tick, who they are not wanting to make them a cookie cutter of every other perfect leader that doesn't exist anyway, but actually understanding their approach, what makes them feel comfortable, and as you say them being more comfortable, they communicate more comfortably, and then the audience picks up on that. And it's a more trusting relationship as a result, we sniff out as you say, insincerity within seconds.

**Charlotte 42:43**

That's right. Yes. Right. And actually, as soon as you ask leaders with with whatever level of good intention, or every good intention, to do something that doesn't feel natural to them, you're on the wrong foot. You actually have to really be, you can you can nudge you can encourage, but you need to find out where that, sort of a comfort zone. But actually, what's that sweet spot where you can give the audience what they'll be looking for, but do that in a



way that's truthful to who that leader is themselves, rather than this is what we've done before.

**Katie 43:20**

And isn't it true we live in a world now where there's a solution for every type of leader isn't there? There's a format and a style and approach and a piece of technology for every type of leader?

**Charlotte 43:31**

Yeah, the changes could be big, or they might be quite subtle, yes. But I think it's about recognising that what you're trying to do in those face to face communication formats is you're trying to help establish rapport between a leader or leaders and an audience. So if that's what you're trying– that understanding that that's what you're trying to do, and therefore build a level of trust, and transparency, then how you do that and the tactics that you deploy, could take on many different forms.

**Katie 44:04**

You describe on LinkedIn, the power of living and working from your purpose, you write, "my purpose is to shine a light where it's needed most, and help illuminate the future path." I'm curious about what that process was that you went through to define your purpose, and then how it sort of influences your day to day work.

**Charlotte 44:27**

We're so lucky at Unilever, we've had discover your purpose workshops for a few years now. And actually, I was lucky enough to be in one of the very first cohorts that went through that. I was in a leadership team where we also did some work on that as a total leadership team as well, which was really profound. And really what it asks you to do is to think about the most meaningful moments in your life and when you feel most in tune, when you're in flow, when things happen and it's like that you know, it's that intuition, hairs stand up at the back of your neck. And for me, the way I've worded my purpose statement actually harks back to my history at Port Sunlight. So this is the highlight whole idea of shining light took inspiration from Port Sunlight. One of the reasons I wrote it that away, because that story of feeling guided to work in a company or having had the opportunity to work in a company that's got such personal resonance for me, is obviously incredibly powerful. For me, also, it's a deeply personal story, but having lost my mum as a kid, Port Sunlight, for me as a child was quite a dark place, it was a place I went to visit my mum's grave, and actually transcending that, and seeing, you know, the opportunity to work for the company, connect with the company, going through a trauma like that, as a child, you know, can leave many effects on a person, for me, made me really probably hone my communication skills to be able to articulate my own story. I found myself as a child, telling my story of my situation many times, and so for me, there's very much a personal dimension to it.

**Charlotte 46:15**

From a professional dimension today, I think, what you can often do in the corporate world, and that's often where we can perhaps get into sometimes jargon and corporate speak and those sorts of things, is we can keep things at quite a surface level. And that's fine. There's

an element where nothing, it doesn't all need to get too deep. But also, actually, if we're asking people to really bring their commitment to work, to, to bring their authentic selves, to ask the difficult questions, to engage in change that might change the course of their career and to do that fully, then actually, what we need to do is confront that. And so for me, that's about shining, the shining the light thing. And so bringing some of the difficult things, if you like, which could otherwise feel difficult or awkward, or uncomfortable into the light. Because actually, by doing that, a bit like, you know, the difficult questions, don't shy away from the difficult questions, let's have the conversation. Often the reality is not as bad as we fear, is it? It's best to kind of get those difficult topics out into the light out onto the table, and say, okay, well, let's connect and let's understand that. Actually, if there's something that we need to do differently as a result, okay, good. Let's understand that, and then let's take that away and think about what that is.

**Charlotte 47:42**

So for me, that's definitely how that shows up. And also, you know, related to the ask anything questions part, it's about really listening to people, you know, listening with an intent to understand. To actually really understand where they're coming from. And I think that serves two purposes: it creates that real connection, but it also provides inspiration about where to go next.

**Charlotte 48:07**

One of the most powerful things that I've done with new leaders actually is encouraged them to spend time on listening sessions, just with three simple questions, what do you love? What frustrates you? If you could change one thing what would it be? Because then what you're doing is, is enabling people just before you get too deep into it, to say, where are things at for you? And make sure in in a small group setting, this would need to be, that you give people the opportunity to say what they think. And you get so much from that. I did that with one leader and it formed the basis of a strategy, the themes that came out of those listening sessions. Because they it was amazing how consistent they were listening to different people, although lots of different stories got told in the process of, you know, identifying those themes, and then the power of being able to say, we've heard you, and also taking care then to bring everybody into the loop on that. That's an opportunity then to create true engagement. Because then it's just it's not sort of putting leaders on a pedestal as having all the answers. It's about understanding they're in a privileged position to be able to connect with the whole company and say, actually, the answers are there with you, we just need to provide find the ways to allow those answers to come to the surface.

**Katie 49:30**

Yes, yes. It reminds me of one of my favourite sayings, which is "the smartest person in the room is the room." But it's exactly that.

**Charlotte 49:37**

Exactly. None of us is as smart as all of us.

**Katie 49:40**



Just coming back to the finding your purpose workshop. Was there one particular question you had to ask yourself or exercise that you had to do or was it mainly just working your way through what really mattered most you?

### **Charlotte 49:53**

Actually this is a workshop that other organisations can sign up to do now at Unilever's training centre so it's not it's something that we've made accessible. I know other companies are passionate about this as well. I think it got a guide you through a series of questions that really gets you to think about from a fundamental level, who you are, and what really matters to you. And when you've been at your best, I think that's also a key part of it. So for me, there's the kind of origin story, but also, when you're at your best, what does that look like? And so for me, the lighting the future part is also about thinking about innovating around things which you could say, well, these things work, let's just keep doing e-zines and town halls and the things that companies do. And for me, the lighting the future part is also about saying, how do we keep that fresh? How do we keep almost embrace the future, and think about stretching further than might even feel immediately comfortable today, and go into that just sort of slight discomfort zone of grapes to do something new? And when I've been at my best in my career, I think that's what I've been doing. I'm doing new things a bit like I was saying earlier about where the energy is. Yeah, for me, that creates the energy for creativity and inspiration, and breaking the mould.

### **Katie 51:19**

This might be a very unfair question, 'cause it's quite a high level macro question about the world and where we're going. But I see two quite distinct camps at the moment. And there's people saying, look, work shouldn't define you. We just turn up, get paid. There's so much life, and so much that's important outside work. And another viewpoint, which is actually we want to be doing work that's meaningful, that's full of purpose that matters to us. Do you have any idea of where we might end up? Because these are two quite different views of the future.

### **Charlotte 51:52**

My own view, is that I think these things can coexist, right? I think it's probably a thing is, is probably an and and situation. For me personally, feeling purposeful at work, feeling like work is a big part of fulfilment, and who I am, is important to me. But I have a nearly 20 year old son, who was get is a part of a generation who is starting maybe to see the world a little bit differently. You know, did I at his age know exactly what I wanted to do? And how I was going to do it? Could I have articulated my purpose, as I just have to you? No.

### **Charlotte 52:31**

People should feel free to pursue life in the way that works for them. I think in reality, even if we get to a worldview that says, you know, what, a four day working week is going to become more the norm over time. We've had an you know, we've got an amazing pilot running in our Australia and New Zealand business on that. I think that you still spend a lot of your time at work. And it's a big part of your life, even if your life is big. And let's hope that's true for all of us. Beyond the confines of work, there's a healthy blend, and there's sort of three big pots isn't there, there's your health, your relationships, your friends, and family,



and there's your work. And for me, all of those are important. And it's important to try and keep those things in some kind of balance. Rather than seeing work for me anyway, as stealing time. Actually living for me work is absolutely a part of, of living. So...

**Katie 53:34**

That's a lovely way of putting it "not stealing time." I like that a lot. I realised we're almost at time. There is one question I think it would be remiss of me not to ask you on behalf of listeners. You've had an incredible career, amazing amount of experience. If you were speaking directly to someone early on, or midpoint in their career at the moment thinking about, I'd love to progress. I'd love to get that kind of experience. Any particular piece of advice thought that you might impart to them?

**Charlotte 54:05**

I would say really work on your core skills. Think whatever form the career takes going forward, and I'm very conscious of Chat GPT and generative AI, but I do think that the craft of writing, storytelling and writing or writing a spoken word as well as written word, this for me absolutely sits at the heart of what we do as communicators, and feeling great confidence in that and being able to flex capability around that. So invest time in that, in whatever ways work for you. It's not about being an essay writer, but it's about that art of writing really to communicate in lots of different formats. I do think that's an absolute core skill.

**Charlotte 54:52**

The other thing I would say, I know this isn't answering with two pieces of advice rather than one, Katie, but if you'll allow me, is really remain curious and open minded. One thing I make time for no matter how busy I am, is I make time to try and read widely. And consciously beyond my own sort of social media echo chamber. Because that's also what all the algorithms now are feeding us things that they think we already like, and we're already interested in. So it actually takes effort to go outside of that. Yeah, and, you know, try and read things that you think might have a contrary viewpoint, because that's how we stretch our mind, it's how we stretch our empathy. Because if we just really subscribe to a sort of a dominant view, yes, then before you know it, you can become more closed minded than your intent.

**Katie 55:45**

Exactly right.

**Charlotte 55:46**

So really continue to push your boundaries of what you're consuming from a news thought leadership point of view. And stay curious.

**Katie 55:56**

Yeah, I love that. Thank you so much. So if that's okay with you, Charlotte, we'll head over to those quick fire questions. What trait or characteristic do you possess that you think, above all others has most led to your career success?



**Charlotte 56:14**

I would say my energy. I talked a lot about going where the energy is. And I've always worked to bring my energy to whatever it is I'm doing. There's a phrase in a book called Fish from a few years ago, that says, "wherever you are, be that."

**Katie 56:31**

Oh, lovely. Yes. We came up with a quote the other day, an author that was on the podcast, Shane Hatton, and it was from Dolly Parton: "decide who you want to be and then do it on purpose." Right?

**Charlotte 56:44**

Exactly that exactly that. I couldn't. That's an even better way of saying it. I love that.

**Katie 56:50**

How would you complete this statement? "World class internal communication is..."

**Charlotte 56:57**

Human, purposeful, accountable.

**Katie 57:00**

Ooh, and I love accountable at the end, and I wasn't expecting that. I know, it's difficult to make one book recommendation. But could there be one for our listeners should all read?

**Charlotte 57:11**

The Culture Code by Daniel Coyle. It's a great read. Lots of different diverse perspectives in there as well, which is one of the things I love about it. So I recommend that.

**Katie 57:22**

And finally, we give you a billboard, a bit of a metaphorical billboard for millions to see, you can put on that anything you like, what are you going to put on your billboard?

**Charlotte 57:31**

I'm going to quote Eleanor Roosevelt. "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams."

**Katie 57:36**

Ooh, beautiful. I love it. Charlotte, thank you so much for your time. This has been amazing.

**Charlotte 57:43**

Thank you, Katie. it's been lots of fun. Thanks for having me.

**Katie 57:50**

So that is a wrap for This episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. For the show notes and the full transcript, head over to our website. That's [abcomm.co.uk](http://abcomm.co.uk). You will find everything you need there, including our back catalogue now of more than 80 episodes I think.

**Katie 58:13**

If you did find this episode helpful, please subscribe to the show on your podcast platform. That way you'll never miss another guest. And we have some great ones lined up for this season, including Sally Sussman, the Executive Vice President and Chief Corporate Affairs Officer at Pfizer, and Bruce Daisley, author and host of the Eat, Sleep, Work, Repeat podcast.

**Katie 58:41**

My thanks to Charlotte, our producer John Phillips, sound engineer Stuart Rolls, and the fabulous team at AB for keeping the show on the road. And of course, listeners, my heartfelt thanks to you for choosing The Internal Comms Podcast, this show would be nothing without you.

**Katie 59:02**

Please feel free to get in touch via LinkedIn or Twitter. Tell me what you want more of, what you want less of, I genuinely want the show to be as helpful as possible to you. So until we meet again, lovely listeners stay safe and well. And remember, it's what's inside that counts.

**Katie 59:23**

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