



The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 10

Episode 91 – Emily Hecker, *How to build a one-person IC powerhouse*

Katie 00:04

Hello, and welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. I'm on a mission to help organisations better inform, inspire, and involve their employees. I know from industry research and meeting many internal comms folks over the years that many people working in our field are teams of one. So when I saw that Emily Hecker had written a book on this very subject, I immediately reached out to her to invite her on the show. Then I was thrilled to discover that Emily is actually a loyal listener. And she immediately said yes. Emily's book is entitled *Me, Myself, and IC*, a guide to building internal communication as a team of one.

Katie 00:58

Now, I should say at this point, even if you are not a team of one, this is still a great listen, because it's also about building an IC function from the ground up, and ensuring that it is perceived not as the 'copy paste and send' factory, as Emily says, but a truly strategic advisory function within a business. A little bit about Emily: she is an internal communications strategist, author, and certified Communication Management Professional, with over a decade of experience. Her specialism is creating tailored, calm solution that elevate what we do, and which drive concrete business results. As you'll hear, Emily is very articulate, very clear sighted. Yes, her approach is highly strategic, but it's also very practical. It's based on her real world experience working inside a diverse range of organisations and serving an equally diverse range of stakeholders. So without further ado, I am thrilled to bring you Emily Hecker. So, Emily, welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast.

Emily 02:23

Thank you, Katie. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm very excited to be on the podcast as a longtime listener.

Katie 02:27

Let's start near the beginning. Emily, when did you know you wanted to write for a living?

Emily 02:35

I think that like any child growing up, I had a lot of possible careers. I wanted to be a doctor, I wanted to be an artist. And for a very long time, I wanted to be a fashion designer. And as you can see, none of those careers worked out for me. Throughout all of those different potential career paths, I was always an avid reader and an avid writer. I found myself writing plays and stories for my dolls and my stuffed animals,

and I just loved the power of the written word. Then as I got older, I had the opportunity to take a journalism class when I was in high school, and I just fell in love with the profession. It was very much a light bulb moment for me, where I thought, "Okay, this is a place where I can unleash my curiosity, and my love for storytelling." I was also quite introverted and shy as a child. So journalism was really a great space for me to just push myself out of my comfort zone. Because in journalism, you listen more than you speak. So it is just a matter of leading conversations with purpose. And then of course, after I was in high school, I thought, I want to make journalism a career for me. So how can I get there? And I thought, I need to study at university, which I did. And then that took me into publishing for few years. And then later on, I took all of those skills and applied them now to a career in corporate communication.

Emily 02:37

I love that phrase 'conversations with purpose'. I'm going to use that from now on, fantastic phrase. Many guests on this show started out in journalism. And I'm wondering, are there any particular experiences or lessons that journalism taught you that you still draw on today?

Emily 04:12

Oh, there are, honestly quite a few of them. I'm sure you'll remember the inverted pyramid from your time in journalism as well, too. And this is a big one for me that I end up using every single day in my career. And for anyone who's not familiar with the approach, it's about putting the most important information right at the beginning of your piece. And then you have the lesser important information in the middle and the least important information at the bottom. And it's about removing that idea of a scavenger hunt from your content. You want it to be very straightforward for your audience so they know what they're getting and why it matters to them right at the outset. So that's a big one for me.

Emily 04:46

Asking the 'five w' questions is huge too: the who the what the when the where, the why, and for good measure the H – the how – that is so huge because you get all of the information that you need for your audit. So right at the outset, so again, avoiding that scavenger hunt, you've answered all the questions before the audience has an opportunity to ask it. And of course, understanding your audience is a core tenet of journalism too. You have to meet your audience where they are. So you have to know what they care about, what their routines and behaviours look like. Because the better you know who they are, the better you can communicate with them.

Emily 05:22

And accessibility is a big concept in journalism, too. In my undergraduate degree, we talked about writing at an eighth grade level. So that's about age 14, for anyone who has a different grade level system than we do in the US. And that just is meant to enhance your accessibility and just make sure that you're saving your two fours and your three or fours for your English clubs, and your book clubs, and instead just focusing on core accessible language.

Emily 05:46

But I'd say the most important lesson I've learned in journalism beyond all of that is something I learned in my first ever news writing course. On day one of this class, I had a professor who said to us, okay, all of you who were straight A students up until this point, consider yourself warned, because your first assignment may not come back with an A on it, we're going to really push you here, we want you to be the best that you can be. So remember, all the red lines that you see are not a critique on you personally, they're a critique on the work, and you are not your work. And that's the line that has always stuck with me throughout my career, is going through journalism school, and then going into publishing, you just develop this thick skin. When it comes to your work, your work becomes less precious, because we know that our editors will just tear it up. I have had so many pieces in my career come back and the only thing that is recognisable, is my name on it, quite honestly. But that's such a great lesson to remember that edits aren't personal. They're just about making the work stronger.

Katie 06:50

Yes, yes, I think I completely agree with you. I always say to my Creative Director, if the words aren't right, don't worry, I've got lots more of them. As you say, these are just words, we can put them in a different order, we can choose different ones. This whole point about editors is so funny, because you started off talking about the inverted pyramid. And of course, it comes from the days long before computers and desktop publishing, when physically sub editors would cut from the bottom of the page, wouldn't they? So you had to make sure your most important stuff was at the top, because they would be cutting from the bottom to make it fit on the page. So all of that massively chimes with me. And I think creating that slightly, that almost psychological gap between you and your work, it builds resilience, but also, it's much, much more helpful for your boss, your stakeholders, your editor, anyone, because I think we learn more from our mistakes. But if someone is a bit hesitant to give you constructive feedback, because they think you're going to take it "personally", in inverted commas, then they won't give it so much. So actually developing that warts and all, tell me what you don't like, it's fine, I won't crumble, is quite a skill to learn. And it's really helpful, I think professionally.

Emily 08:09

Oh, absolutely. And I've had leaders that I've actually had to coach when they're giving me a critique on a piece for the first time. And they're just, you can just see the fear in their eyes that they think, "Oh, I'm just going to crumble", as you were saying. And I actually have to say, "Look, I know that this conversation is going to be about the work, not about you critiquing me personally, let's just level set those expectations and come to this as equals and know that you can say whatever you want about the piece, and I will not take it personally, and we will still come out of this having a great relationship."

Katie 08:38

Brilliant, brilliant advice. Let's talk about your book. First of all, let's start with your motivation for writing it because it's a big undertaking to write a book, what inspired you?

Emily 08:53

So the short answer to that question is really that it's the book that I would have loved to have had much earlier in my internal communication career. Anyone who's already explored my book has probably seen that when I was 26, I took on my first role leading internal communication as a team of one. And that wasn't the role that I thought I was taking out at the time. Like many communication professionals, I said yes to a job description that had a few line items about internal communication, but it was very much a jumble of just generic communication activities. Because the organisation, like so many others, had a fledgling communication function, so they didn't really have a clear idea of where the team needed to go yet. Then as I was digging in, I realised the internal communication function is quite a mess. They had a weekly newsletter, they had an intranet, they had a shared email inbox, and that was essentially it. That was the landscape. So their success was very much "we sent an email and therefore we effectively communicated" because at that point in my career, I hadn't been the sole person responsible for internal communication. I've worked with plenty of talented individuals in that space, I had written many a piece of internal communication at that point, so I knew that there was a better way of doing things. And I raised my hand and I said, "I would like to do this," and I just jumped in. And then within three years, I ended up taking the company's perception of this very important function, which they saw as a copy, paste, send factory into a much more trusted strategic partner. And for me, personally, that was an incredibly transformative experience where I had the opportunity to put all of my communication skills to the test, I got very scrappy, and I self taught a lot of what I needed to know. And then as I mentioned earlier, what I would have loved to have had is a guidebook for how do you build an internal communication function as a team of one? Like many of my peers in this space, I've been at conferences where so many people in the audience have been asked to describe their teams. And the common answer is, it's just



nonexistent, and we've seen research from Gallagher too the talks about just how prevalent the small to non-existent communication teams are in organisations of all sizes, from 100 employees to hundreds of 1000s employees. So we know that it's so common, and I thought, we're all experiencing this or have experienced it in our career at some point. So why aren't we talking about it more? And that's really where the inspiration came from. I thought, I've had this experience, I've learned a lot of hard lessons, I've got a lot of tips that I would be happy to share with others in similar situations. So I thought, I will sit down and put this together in the hopes that someone else can learn from this and have a much smoother experience than I did.

Katie 11:29

Yeah, it's a great book. And I would say that even if you're not a team of one, your comprehensive, logical approach to the work is useful for everyone, I think, so I would encourage people to buy it. I was just wondering whether there's one chapter of the book that was potentially harder to write than the others?

Emily 11:52

Yeah, this is such an interesting question that I quite honestly haven't contemplated before. If I had to narrow it down I'd say probably the first chapter in section four of the book, which is all about mindset. And that first chapter is about finding your why and internal communication. And quite honestly, when I sat down to write this chapter, I did not have a clear clue why. I knew that I cared deeply about people and ensuring that they felt connected to the organisation. But I personally didn't have a formalised 'why' statement yet. I have this kind of giant statement, if you will, I hadn't distilled it down yet. So this section really forced me to sit down and have a deeper think and decide how do I take this big jumble of my why into one comprehensive sentence. Ultimately, I came back with my why is 'to inspire, engage and inform people through effective internal communication.' Because when people are inspired, they're engaged, and they're informed, they're more satisfied, they're more productive, and they feel connected to something bigger than themselves. And then my work in internal communication can hopefully help them achieve all of that.

Emily 12:58

And no one's typically asking you for your purpose statement, or team of one, you have to be self-motivated enough to say, I need to define what drives me in this role. And then in this career profession.

Katie 12:58

I love that, because we talk a lot about team charters in internal comms and helping IC teams together, collaborate on a purpose statement. But obviously, if you're a



team of one, that's got to be personal, you've still got to do that. In fact, in some ways, it probably matters even more.

Katie 13:26

We can imagine, I'm sure, the downsides to being a team of one. So you've got this office lack of your resource, no matter what demands are coming at you, you've only got 24 hours in your day, and you can't make up more unfortunately. But there must be some upsides here. Let's talk about the upsides of being a team of one.

Emily 13:44

There's absolutely some upsides for anyone who's like me, and who is very self motivated. It's a really exciting challenge, you're essentially raising your hand and saying, "Yep, throw me in the deep end. And I will take on the responsibility of an entire business function by myself." And that means there's a lot of autonomy. So if you thrive in that environment, where you largely get to choose your own adventure, for internal communication, you'll do fine here, because you are essentially building your own empire, which means you're establishing its value, you're proving its value. And it's also really hard for someone to take credit for your work, because you are literally the only person in the organisation who is in this area. So they cannot raise their hand, say "I did this." And particularly if you've been the first hire in a new internal communication function, or you're restarting the function, you have a lot of room to play. And that having that roadmap can be really exciting. And it can be really energising, you are the one who was doing the internal communication audit, you're identifying the problems, and then you're starting to work your way through all of those resolutions to those problems you've identified. So it can be such an incredibly rewarding experience to see the impact that you're making and the power that you do have as a team of one. You're also getting a lot of face time with leaders, particularly senior leaders, because they don't have any other resource to turn to when it comes to internal communication. And that means you can coach your leaders to be more effective communicators, while you're also influencing the organization's direction.

Katie 13:56

And also, I think when I reflect on it just spending time with leaders, listening to their concerns, their frustrations, what keeps them up at night, it's just great education for running a business, isn't it? You get that personal close insight into the everyday stresses and strains. I think it's just really helpful to see that, isn't it?

Emily 15:37

Oh, it certainly is. And one of the things I love about communication is that you just have an oversight into so many different areas of an organisation that you normally wouldn't have in a different function, you would typically be quite siloed, maybe



you'd have some overlap with operations or HR or maybe it but it wouldn't be in the way that you have it as communication.

Katie 15:59

In finance, give me the numbers for this quarter, please, is possibly the conversation – in IC, it's so much more than that. It's so much deeper every time.

Katie 16:09

A quick word from our sponsor. AB is the world's most experienced internal comms agency. For 60 years, our brilliant consultants and fearless creatives have been helping organisations around the world inform, inspire, and infuse their employees, building great organisations from the inside out. There is a lot of pressure on internal comms folks just now. To help you plan, prioritise and deliver astonishingly effective communications, arrange a friendly, informal chat with us today. Simply email hello@abcomm.co.uk. And if you do, I look forward to meeting you.

Katie 17:08

Early on in the book, you encourage readers to conduct an audit of internal comms as one of their sort of early steps. And I love that because I think it's so important, particularly when you rock up inside a new organisation, to get an idea of the landscape. Where am I on what's working, what's not working? It's fascinating. It's useful when you reflect on your audits that you have undertaken in the past. Are there any particular factors, things that you did, that helped guarantee success?

Emily 17:39

So there are three things. One, curiosity, two, perseverance and three, stakeholder buy in. And I think a combination, those have been really the key factors for me and finding success. And when you're digging into what's working well, and what's not within an organisation, you have to be incredibly curious, you have to want the answers. And you have to be willing to search for those answers. And you have to keep asking questions. So this is something that is drilled into you as a journalism student, you have to ask more questions and more questions after that to really determine what problems exist, and how they might shape your approach to IC. And it takes perseverance to run an audit, you're going to have to find the right people that you want to talk to, you're going to have to take the time to speak with them, you're going to be sifting through a tonne of data, both qualitative and quantitative, you're gonna be reading a lot, writing a lot, listening a lot. And the amount of information that you're digging up may very well be daunting at times, you're going to surface all of this frustration, this confusion, this energy, this excitement from people, as you ask them about their feedback. And if you're a team of one, that's an interesting challenge, because you're not only running this audit, you're also keeping the lights on with your day to day routine. And if you're not

persevering through all of this, you probably won't reach the finish line. And then of course, there's stakeholder buy in too. To do this audit, you'll need to talk to employees at all levels in an organisation, you have to explain what this is, why you're doing it, and then what you expect to be the outcomes of this work. And if this is the first time that an organisation has heard of an internal communication audit, you really have to lay the foundation for what you're doing, and then have a very clearly outlined set of next steps for this. Because that will build your buy in that you need, not only for the audit itself, but then for your ongoing work as an IC changemaker.

Katie 19:28

It's very interesting what you say, though, because I think also, by the questions that you ask, you can help people understand the breadth and the depth of internal communication, because I can see in your book, you're asking a lot more questions than just about communication output. What goes where on the intranet, can things be found? Can they not be found? What channels? You're asking questions about the business and what's going to help drive the business forward. So I think that helps early on, particularly with senior stakeholders who might be thinking, as you say, it's all about pressing the send button. No, I need to know as your senior adviser when it comes to comms, I need to know a lot more than that about this business. Absolutely.

Emily 20:14

So much of what we do in internal communication is explaining why we exist and then proving the value beyond just we're a postbox.

Katie 20:23

Let's talk about 'taking the show on the road.' I love this whole section, I have to say, I suppose what made me reflect on over the years, the most successful IC people, I think, genuinely have been the ones that have probably sat behind their own desk less than others, because they've been out in the business. But can you just talk us through how you do that road show? Why you're doing it? What does it actually look like in practice?

Emily 20:52

The road show is so important for a number of different reasons. With internal communication, you can often fade into the woodwork. So you have to not only be the spokesperson of the function, but you also have to be its salesperson, it is so important to get yourself front and centre, as you were just saying, Get yourself out from behind your desk. And yes, it may seem a little ridiculous that you have to go out and essentially explain to your organisation, that what you do matters and the value behind it, they've hired you for the role. So it should seem very obvious. But in

my experience, it isn't obvious. There are a lot of people who still don't understand what the function is because they may not know what they don't know. And they've never seen it done in quite the way that I approach it. So the roadshow is so critical to building awareness, understanding and buy in for the function.

Emily 21:40

I typically run my roadshows for corporate desk workers who will maybe have current or future communication needs, because they really need to be the ones who understand who you are, and then how to work with you to make sure that we're partnering together to achieve their objectives. Frontline, deskless workers, they are a very key workforce, but they don't really need to know the nuts and bolts of what we're doing in internal communication. They just need to know essentially the punch line. So how and where they can get organisational news and information, so I typically skip them in my roadshow.

Emily 22:10

When I'm doing these roadshows, I will include a few different things. First of all, who is on the team, if it's me and the team of one, that's a very short part of the conversation, when I'll talk through who I am, what my background is, what my areas of expertise are, if there is someone else on my team, I will do the same for them and just elevate ourselves as subject matter experts. I'll talk about what people can expect from me. So what I want internal communication to be known for, and then I'll talk through a high level channel overview too. And it never ceases to amaze me how few people in an organisation truly understand what channels are at play, where to go, how they work, and how to use them. I will always run through, okay, this is what we have in the current landscape that may not be the landscape we're looking at tomorrow, but it's the current one today. Then I'll talk through how to work with me. So that service model that I've established, again, there's a lot of confusion about what internal communication does and doesn't do. So I like to very clearly lay it out. These are the buckets that we can help you with. And these are the buckets that we are going to just step to the side because they're not in our purview.

Emily 23:11

I'll talk through what audiences can do to help me further my work. So I can't be everywhere at all times. I would love to be an angel on everyone's shoulder whispering about internal communication and advising. But that technology doesn't exist yet. So instead, I have to very clearly outline to them that we need to be proactive in partnering with each other. If you have stories within the internal communication space, let me know – I want to know what else is going on in the organisation that I haven't seen. And if you've got questions about how can I personally be a more effective communicator, let's have those conversations. We're here as an educational resource, as well as a strategic and tactical resource. And

then I'll close with just simply the practical: how do you get in touch with me? If there is a request intake form, I will talk through that. If it's a little less formalised, and it's a much more casual, send me a message or send me an email preference. We'll talk through that as well just so it's very clear how to get in touch and most importantly, stay in touch.

Katie 24:06

Just coming back to what you do and what you don't do. As a team of one, I'm guessing you've got to be pretty strict with yourself. There must be times when you think well, I'd love to help with that, but strictly I shouldn't. And I haven't got time for it. And I'm probably not going to do a great job because I haven't got enough time. So the sensible thing for me is to say no. How do you say no? Is there a way that you can help people to actually decline? Say no to someone, especially someone senior.

Emily 24:33

For me, it is so important to create boundaries, not just boundaries that are arbitrary, but that are very much in line with my vision for internal communication. So some of the requests I've gotten over the years have been completely outside of our purview. Emily, can you arrange this meeting invitation for my meeting with my five people? Emily, can you be the voice of self checkout at our 400 stores? And these are very clearly outside of my scope as communication. And those requests are very easy to say no to because they are very clearly outside of your scope of work. Where it gets a little tricky is when it is technically in that grey area of your scope of work. So typically, when I have to say no to those types of requests, I'll point to the service model that I have as step one. And if it's in a kind of weird grey area, perhaps this is something that I need to add to the service model. Like, you have to say, No, I've confirmed that this is absolutely nothing, I don't have the bandwidth for this, I will say no and give a reason and then say what I can do instead. So perhaps it's a 'not today,' if this is a last minute request, we get so many of those fire drills, some of which are real, some of which are fake. And I will explain okay, this is why I'm saying no. And this is what we can do instead. So maybe someone has said, I would like this email to go out Emily. And then you always have to think, Okay, does this actually need to be an email? Why do you think this needs to be an email? So I'll say, No, this is not going to be an email. Instead, this is going to be a mention in the biweekly email newsletter, and here's the copy that I will use, I will reconnect on Tuesday when it goes live. We very clearly said, this is what we can do for you. I've explained that this is not appropriate for an email audience, I could point to those channel guidelines. And again, it's just having that documentation of your service model, these channel guidelines and really anything that you can point to that says this is what we do. And this is what we don't do. Because then it's less of this arbitrary no. And instead, it's a very calculated no.

Katie 26:27

it's so vital that documentation, and if people putting their hand on their heart, it probably doesn't exist as much as it should do inside internal teams. Obviously, as an agency owner, you've always got the SLA, you're always being assessed against KPIs, key performance indicators, you never forget them. But actually internally, do you have a service level agreement? Do you have the objective for each channel? What goes out when it goes out? What's appropriate? Why it even exists? And then when you're saying no, or at least you're saying, not that but this, it's not your, as you say, it's not your opinion, it's based on what's been agreed. So I think that's so helpful.

Katie 27:08

You mentioned it earlier, taking this perception of IC inside a company to I think you said this 'copy and paste send it out' function to something that was very much the strategic trusted partner with senior leadership advocates, really quite an accomplishment. When you look back on that achievement, was there one thing that made the biggest difference, do you think?

Emily 27:34

In a way as many that became one, so I would say, where I found a lot of success came down to the fact that I established a very firm foundation for internal communication. So obviously, a foundation is one thing that is made up of many different components. And what I found so interesting is that I was stepping into a role that no one had a foundation for, it was just this as describing it earlier, the copy paste send factory, and no one had taken the time to conduct an IC audit before and really, truly dig into what was and wasn't working in the organisation. So they hadn't clearly established a vision for internal communication that was anything other than that postbox. And when I came in and defined what I wanted internal communication to be known for, that made a huge difference in the organisation's perception of the function. I wanted internal communication to be known for strategic communication, collaborative partnership, executive counsel, and storytelling. And then I established a service model, we were just talking about a minute ago, for what we do and don't do in an internal communication. And that all helped really change the narrative and create an identity for internal communication that went beyond that copy, paste, send factory, even getting the tactical basics right, like having general guidelines, measurement tools, content, focus areas, and solidified campaign plans all made a huge difference to, again, this wasn't something that the organisation had before. Having that formalised strategy and those tactics to support it seemed very basic and rudimentary to me. But for the organisation, it was just revolutionary, quite honestly. And by bringing that structure and the vision to the function, I could then educate the organisation about it through the roadshows that we were just talking about. Again, they've

never seen anything like this before. So that helped me create advocates and allies, who saw the function as a strategic partner and then treated it as such.

Katie 29:23

You're make me think of that whole Eisenhower matrix of urgent and important because actually, a lot of the things you're talking about in terms of laying the foundations, what are we here to do? What's our core purpose? What's our service level agreement? What are our channels? It's never a stakeholder's urgent request, is it, any of that stuff? That stuff that we know is terribly important, but there's probably not a deadline of tomorrow attached to it. So I suppose my question in all of this is this something that you go through to say, look, I've really got to make sure, the beginning of my working week, the beginning of my working year whenever it is, that I'm making what I know to be really important urgent.

Emily 30:06

For me, it's about carving this time out to think big picture, particularly if you're a team of one. And I've been a team of one multiple times now in my career, it can be so easy to just get sucked in by those tactics that I have to keep the lights on. And I can just be 100% reactionary all the time. And my direct leader will think that successful and I will know in the back of my mind, no, that's not successful, because we're forgetting the big picture. So when you're a small team, you have to just hold yourself accountable to carve out that time. So if I'm new to a role, I'll send myself these 30, 60, 90 Day deadlines. If those haven't been set out for me, that I want to have my internal communication audit wrapped up by day 30, day 45. And then the next few weeks, I want to focus on creating my strategy. And then you want to do your internal communication audit, at least every other year, ideally, once a year. But again, if you're a team of one, I should say, then you don't have sometimes the luxury to do an annual internal communication audit. But at the start of every year, you do need to sit down and just have a chat with yourself, and ideally your manager as well, about what does success look like for my strategic objectives this year? When you work in internal communication, you work with so many other stakeholders, and sometimes their objectives will define your objectives for the year, and particularly the organisational objectives as a whole, you have to be thinking about, what is my work as an internal communication professional doing to support the organisational objectives? So every year whenever the organisation releases their objectives, I'll sit down and have a think with myself or my team, whoever else is a key stakeholder in my little world. What do we want to achieve for this year to support the organisational objectives? And that goes back to what do we say no to? So if we have defined that we are going to support the organization's objectives in this way, shape, or form, and someone comes to us with a large request that is completely unrelated to any of those objectives, Again, that gives us opportunity to say no to things because we can clearly say, we're going to put this on the



backburner or we're just going to flat out say no to this because our focus is on these core objectives.

Katie 32:08

I love the idea of having 60 day 90 day objectives. I think often we think about to do lists, action plans, in the space of often a year, and a having a more regular touchpoint with yourself, with your team, with your boss to say, what have we just achieved over the last few weeks? What worked really well? What didn't work so well? And then doing that forward planning on a more regular basis is a really sound idea.

Emily 32:35

When you're stepping into a new role or a restarted function with internal communication, quite often I found that no one is asking for this, because they don't know they should be asking for it. So you have to come in as the professional and say, there's a better way to do things. And I'm going to show you how it's supposed to be. And then, of course demonstrate it.

Katie 32:55

As you say it's part of the education aspect of our role. I think that's really important. You have a whole section in your book, entitled 'deciding to cascade or not cascade', and that caught my eye as someone who has written a whole book about cascades. But you do something I've not seen before. And it's really simple, but really effective, you create a checklist of messages that are potentially effective for cascades. I just wonder if you could share your thinking around that for us.

Emily 33:27

Sure. And quite transparently, I have very mixed feelings about cascading messages to employees. It reminds me so much of this childhood game called telephone, I don't know if everyone in the world has this. So if you're not familiar with it, what happens in the game is that you have a group of children line up in some way shape or form and the first child in the line has a message that they then pass to the second child in the line and they go on down until the final child has the message then says it out loud. And what the joke is of this game is that the message that you start out with quite often is radically different than the message that you end with. And that to me is so much like cascading. So I would very much stamp cascading as a 'Use with caution' method.

Emily 34:12

For me, I found cascading is most effective when a message is very simple. It isn't time sensitive. It doesn't have to be passed through more than maybe one tier of employees. And there is no other way of reaching that intended audience. And by

keeping that message simple, you reduce that likelihood that your managers or whoever is disseminating the message interpreted incorrectly, or they're adding a lot of their own commentary. And time sensitive messages I found are so tricky with cascading because you're relying on someone to first of all, get the notice that they need to cascade something and then do that cascade. And as your deadlines are very time sensitive as in the company has just been acquired, the information is going public in 60 minutes. We want everyone in our workforce to know about this before they see it hitting the Wall Street Journal or wherever the news has been posted, then it becomes an important matter of are you tracking completion? Are you following up with voicemails, emails, text messages? Are you physically going on site if there is the option to go on site? Because if this message is not cascaded correctly, and it is indeed business critical, it gets tricky and can get lost in the shuffle. If you're adding more players, if you will, the game of telephone, there's so much risk that the managers can change the message. Someone could mishear something, they can add their own interpretation. Or if they're a little unhappy with how things are, they might be adding in some misinformation, because they are genuinely want to add in that misinformation to confuse the message. So it's so important to mitigate the risk there of getting lost. And the issue I find with cascading is the only option is when there is no other way to reach audiences. And typically those audiences are frontline and deskless. Because they are typically unreachable by email messages, text messages, phone calls intranets, whatever it is, they're typically disconnected. So their only connection with the greater organisation may be their frontline manager, who is running that five minute 10 minute start up shift huddle. So it gets tricky. And again, that's why I would call cascading as a use with caution method.

Katie 36:22

Yeah. Team briefs, you often see organisations where they'll have a senior management team meeting. And then the senior managers or the executives are supposed to inform the next level down who are supposed to inform the level down after that. And there may be some slides that accompany that or not, you've probably seen those kinds of Team briefs go out, particularly as you say, for the deathless workforce, have you got a view on that and what makes them effective and not effective?

Emily 36:52

Personally, my preference is always to communicate directly to our frontline workforce. Yeah, because managers are often some of the busiest people, particularly line managers, and they may not have the inclination to share this information as you – keywords in your lead up to this – was 'supposed to', and supposed to is very different than 'must', or, you will be disciplined in some way shape or form. If you are a good manager and you are an effective communicator,

then yes, you will absolutely do this. But as we know, there is a variety of different types of managers out there. Some are absolutely naturally effective communicators, they do all of the right things without a lot of coaching, then there's the opposite end of the spectrum where managers don't do all the right things. And then you have everybody in between. So my preference is always how can I, as a communication professional, get the information in the hands of the workforce directly? That being said, we know that's not always an option. There's sorts of different modalities that you have to work around. So then I would say adhere to those things that I outlined earlier. First, cascading keep it simple. Don't pass it through more than one line of people. And if it's use this or use nothing, then okay, we're gonna have to bite the bullet and just cascade but my preference will always be how can we get the information in the hands, because it'll be also alleviates the burden on managers to make this a part of their daily routine.

Katie 38:19

I was listening to an episode of this show, and I listened because I think it's just good practice for me to work out where I'm going wrong and where I might be going right. With Dr. Kevin Ruck, I think he is possibly one of the few doctors of internal communication in the world. And his view on this having done some research with employees, was that actually frontline deskless employees, or maybe all frontline employees, for that matter, don't really want or expect their line managers to be positioning corporate news with them, and transferring that news on. Which I thought was really interesting. They know their managers, and they start to think, Oh, this is something easy to being told to say that that he doesn't really understand or she's been asked to relay to us that she's not got a firm handle on. It's more helpful, I think, when I reflect on this, to give line managers their own communication, that sets potentially the background, the context to strategic decisions, so that if someone is having a conversation with them, they've probably got slightly more depth of knowledge about the subject that they can draw on. But that's possibly a better way of helping them in the communication process than it is asking them to actually deliver the strategy, if that makes sense.

Emily 39:37

Absolutely. Because the question they'll get asked as soon as they deliver a message is, what's the background story here? What's the why? Tell me more? And a staff answer is I don't have any more information. That's a very short conversation. So to your point Katie, the line managers probably do need a little bit of extra information even if it's just a couple extra sentences about the why or the background. But again, we have to make sure that we're educating and prepping them on and making sure that they have this in their hands before the message hits. Because if you've timed this message to go out to the large audience too close to when the preview is going out to your line managers, the message may still hit the frontline

audience and your line managers may be in that exact same situation, even though in theory, they have gotten this deeper information, sooner.

Katie 40:22

Timing there is critical. I always sense that people enjoy hearing more from mistakes and mishaps. We quote the perfect case study and people switch off immediately. But quote something where it didn't quite go to plan and all of a sudden people are pricking up their ears. You do this brilliantly in your book, can you tell us the story about developing an IC app and your boss's reaction to that?

Emily 40:47

Oh, absolutely. And I'm definitely one of those people who believes that we can learn just as much from our failure as we can from our successes, perhaps even more so. So to set the stage for this, years ago, I was working for an organisation that was predominantly a workforce of frontline employees. And we were in the process of rolling out an employee app to help close the communication gap to those frontliners. So we're several months into this, we had probably vetted about 20 different potential vendor partners for this employee app solution, we've narrowed it down to four. And then now one. And throughout all of this journey, my boss had been invited to all of the core team meeting conversations, and he chose not to attend, leaving me to be the communication lead, which I was happily ready to do. When I would give him updates, he would give me a little wave of the hand and say, I'm not worried about it, you've got this, you've got this. And yes, I did have it covered. Where it got a little interesting was when we were in the final stages of this rollout. And my boss finally attended one of the training sessions. Of course, there were probably two dozen people on this call, we had the entire project team, we had leaders who had more than 20 years of experience with the organisation. And we also had our vendor partner on the call too. And there was my boss attending one of his first meetings for this. And the first comment he made, as we were on this call was, why are we even rolling out this app? How is that helping our employees. And I could just see the faces of the people on this call. And we all had this collective sigh. Because the objectives are so clear to those of us who have been on this whole journey, or at least they were clear in our heads. So we knew that we wanted to connect the disconnected workforce, we were providing them with valuable information to help them navigate their roles. And then we were looking to make them feel a part of something bigger. So when my boss made this comment, I just had that collective sigh too, and in partnership with my team, and I personally felt this sense of failure because I hadn't transformed my boss from a detractor to an advocate in this process. So then I was like okay, we have to do a little bit of backpedalling here. Yeah, following that conversation, I had to set aside some time with him and just do a little course correction, and ensure that he understood what our strategic plan was and why we're doing this. And to make sure that he also felt a

sense of ownership and buyin to this. And then by making him a part of this, he becomes that advocate versus that detractor. So that's my tale of well of an opportunity missed, but we've all had those. And in terms of mistakes, I have to say this was probably one that was very easy to recover from. He became an advocate, he did, we didn't have a repeat of those conversations where after it launched, and he saw the metrics and the success rates of it, and he, it definitely became a feather in his cap as well, because his team had played a key role in rolling it out.

Katie 43:32

When we were talking in preparation for this conversation, we talked a little bit about the job market in internal comms at the moment. And you talked about two perspectives on this, the perspective of the candidate who is asked for an interview, and potentially what questions they should be asking to make sure they make the right decision about the role about the organisation. And then on the flip side, for someone looking to hire a really good IC professional. How do you go about that? How do you find a good one?

Emily 44:04

Navigating the job market as an IC professional is so challenging. It's so interesting, because our profession often gets put in this box of soft skill, non value-add roles. And in my career, I've gotten job offers for internal communication roles, only to have them rescinded days later because the organisation had a deeper think about where they wanted to take the organisation and they decided we don't need internal communication, so we're just going to eliminate this position. And that says a lot about what organisations think about internal comms when you have taken the time to interview candidates, you've put offers on the table. And then when you're in the acceptance phase, they suddenly know we're gonna want to move on. So it's hard out there to be an internal comms job seeker. And if anyone is finding themselves in those situations, I'd recommend asking a few different questions. First of all, what value does the organisation place on internal communication? And this question can really reveal whether internal communication is genuinely valued, it's just tolerated or it's treated as a very tactical function. So listen very carefully to the responses here, because that will indicate whether the organisation really appreciates the strategic impact of internal communication. The second thing I'd recommend asking is, why do you think you need this role? And this question really helps you gauge the hiring manager's understanding of the role's purpose, they may have this very vague idea of what they think it is, they may think it is just a purely administrative function. And you really want to make sure their vision aligns with your career aspirations. Because if they've just said, we just need someone to send emails and you want to do something a lot more than that's a no for you. Another thing I'd ask is, where does this role report into? Internal communication is often a homeless function, if you will, we're moved into human resources, we're moved into

marketing, maybe we have our own corporate communications arm, I've met people who have worked in finance and completely disconnected functions. So find out what level of support you're going to have in the organisation. Are you going to have any other professionals in your world? Are you going to be a team of one? Or if you're in a global matrix organisation, is there someone in a different country or different region that might be appear to you? So just understand how we all fit into this reporting chain. What challenges are you looking to address with this role? Because I always want to know, what are you looking to solve? So pay attention to those responses, because as you're thinking about the challenges they're trying to address, you can start thinking about one of the key projects and the potential areas of improvement that I could leverage my expertise to solve. The last question I'd ask as a candidate is what does success look like for this role? If it's, we send an email, therefore, we communicated, personally, that would be a pest for me, which is your adventure here, we all have different end goals here. So really just have a clear vision of what the organisation's expectation is for success. Because that can help you understand, do their goals align with mine? And if they have very unclear or undefined objectives for this, they may not have a lot of direction for the role, which could mean great things for you, it could be a choose your own adventure narrative. Or it could be well, we just have a perception of internal communication that we're not going to share with you. So don't be afraid as the candidate to dig deeper and ask these pointed questions, because this is the sneak peek that you're going to get of an organisation before you are on their payroll.

Emily 47:26

So then if we think on the flip side about those who are hiring for the internal communication roles, I would recommend looking for three things. First of all, education and professional credentials. There are so many differences between communication practitioners and professionals. And the key one is training and education in the field. So if a candidate has a completely unrelated degree, maybe they've got a degree in dance, theology, geology, and there's no certification or anything from an organisation like the Global Communication Certification Council, then I would approach that candidate with caution, even if they have 15 years of communication experience. Effective communication isn't just a matter of chance, it takes the right training and the right insight. So let's say you do have that great candidate with 15 years of experience in the field. Ask them how they develop professionally in the communication world, and about mentorships they've had because if you have had great professional development and mentorship that can take the place of the education and training and accreditation.

Emily 48:26

The second thing I'd recommend hiring managers look for is what the candidate's approach to communication strategy is. If you ask a candidate a question about

strategy, and you see fear versus excitement in their eyes, then that is a potential red flag for you as a hiring manager, because a skilled communication professional will get excited to talk about strategy, they'll discuss it with passion, they'll have a very clear plan for their initiatives that they want to take on and their objectives. So it might be a sign for you that they're missing the strategic finesse. If they're not getting excited to talk to you about strategy. Instead, they just crumble internally. And you can see that they're not that comfortable. Yeah, the last thing I'd say to look for is adaptability and continuous learning. We know as professionals in this space that the world of communication is dynamic. There are new tools, technologies and trends emerging pretty much daily. And a true professional in this space will recognise that we have to stay nimble, we have to be committed to ongoing learning. So ask the candidates questions about how do you stay current? Do you go to different conferences? Do you engage with professional networks, do you attend industry events? What are you doing to stay current? And just gauge their level of value and growth and learning more to see what their foundation is for how they navigate the changing landscape that is communication.

Katie 49:45

In terms of professional development, how do you do it? Do you have a kind of intentional practice for it that you set out to do certain things? How does it work for you?

Emily 49:59

I love attending at least one in person conference every year with internal communication. Because it's different than being on your LinkedIn network where you're still sitting at home. Or even if you're on a webinar, or you're in the virtual conference, it's different because you don't get to have those side conversations and follow up with someone in the moment, you can follow up on your LinkedIn messaging and all of that. But it's so interesting to be in a room with other professionals chatting during lunch or during break time to ask what problems are you seeing, or I've got this problem in my organisation, we're struggling with frontliners, what are you doing to address frontliners effectively? Tell me more. So I always love to have some sort of in person conference every year. And then I love reading as much as I can from other thought leaders listening to this podcast has definitely been on that list of things to do. And I've got others in my wheelhouse, too. And I love engaging with fellow professionals on LinkedIn, attending webinars when I can, engaging in professional organisations, I have an accreditation from the GCCC, that requires you to have certain levels of training every year. So you have to be attending conferences, attending trainings, reading books, reading articles, contributing pieces as well. All of that, it keeps me sharp, when I'm talking with smart professionals who have a different perspective or maybe in a different industry or have different years of experience than I do. I'm very transparent in

saying that I don't know everything there is to know about internal communication, I'm striving for mastery, I don't have a full roadmap of what I need to do to professionally develop. Obviously, I have a certain number of hours that I have to engage with to keep my accreditation. I try to do a mixed approach to ensure that I'm engaging as much as I can.

Katie 51:35

You're incredibly clear sighted and articulate in the way that you approach your work and clearly had a lot of great experience. I'm just curious what's next for Emily?

Emily 51:48

That's the question that I'm asking myself too. I am, probably everyday, very much like my peers, I always think about how do I keep myself burning with passion for the function? Because there are days when I am certainly fatigued by having to run my roadshow for the 100th time or having to have the same 'no' conversation with someone I've had this no conversation before about something that's outside of my scope. So I try to find the challenges that energise me and increase those in my day, my week, as much as I can, and balance those from the tasks that are less energising, they're more draining. And what I've often found is what energises me most is that education and that moment of moving someone from a detractor or someone who doesn't know what the function is to that level of understanding and advocacy, and just having them transform in front of your very eyes from this detractor to an advocate. Or for me educating people who have also found themselves in internal communication through an interesting career path and are looking to elevate the function within their organisation. So having educational conversations with them about here's what I've learned, this might be helpful for you, take it or leave it, but these are lessons that I would have loved to have had too.

Emily 53:03

The short answer to your question is Katie, I think it's just a matter of leaning into what energises me, finding more of it, continuing to educate. And then who knows, we'll see what happens. There could be another book in the future. We'll see.

Katie 53:16

That would be great. This idea of moving someone from a potential – not necessarily a detractor, but someone who comes to internal comms with not much knowledge, maybe not much of an interest, if I'm being really honest. I'm remembering as part of an audit, a one to one structured interview with the chief executive in the financial services arena. And he was very clear, obviously told his executive assistant to book in 10 minutes, 15 minutes to answer my questions that needed an hour, but I was going to take any time I could get. And I knew I had interesting questions for him. But he didn't know this. He thought he was being asked questions about the

intranet, I think. And it took it to an hour, easily an hour. And then there was a knock on the door. And he said, I really do have to get to my next meeting. Can you come back at the end of the day? And we were back at 5:30, 6 o'clock carrying on. And that was transformative, because all of a sudden, he was making a connection between internal communications and business performance. And I don't think he'd actually, in his mind made that connection. And it's a lovely feeling, isn't it? And it can happen in the space of one conversation. You must have seen that happen?

Emily 54:29

Oh, absolutely. For me, it's just about shifting that narrative because a lot of organisations and leaders that I've worked with, they have worked with these communication practitioners. So these are people who may be very well intentioned, but they have been tossed into communication roles. Maybe they were at the organisation, and someone said, "We need someone to run communication, that's you." And their background and training is completely unrelated. Maybe they were the office manager and all of a sudden they're the communication manager and they don't know what to do. That would be like someone saying to me, Emily, you're gonna go work in IT now. Yeah, I can use a computer. And that's the extent of my IT knowledge. So not the role for me.

Emily 55:05

So I can just understand when you have these conversations with people who aren't used to the expertise that we bring as professionals, it is incredibly eye opening. And to your point, it takes about 10 minutes for them to realise this conversation is different than asking about objectives. They're talking about something beyond just a tactical, what do you like to see on the intranet question. It's a much deeper conversation and you're changing that narrative. And you've proven in just a matter of minutes that, yes, we are and can be more than just tacticians, we can be strategic partners. But you have to have the right people sitting in the chair for communication to do that. And there are a lot of people out there who have communication experience, practically. But they don't have the right training. They haven't had the right professional development, they haven't had the right mentorship, so they are just running the function as a purely tactical reactionary function. But that's not the sweet spot. That's not how you prove the power of communication to increase productivity, increase performance, reduce turnover. And those hard bottom line things that will have the finance people smiling and nodding say yes, I love internal communication, we need to finance more of them.

Katie 56:10

No, you're absolutely right. And coming back to those questions that you should ask at your job interview about: what value do you place on turning communication? What does success look like for internal communication? What challenges do we



need to solve from a comms point of view? Those are all fantastic questions to ask the chief executive actually, listen really hard to her answers. And then if you've got the opportunity to ask those exact same questions of whoever reports to her around to the executive committee, one on one individually, and then you can start to see where the gaps are, whether they're aligned around it. Yeah, all really fantastic questions. Thank you.

Katie 56:49

This episode of The Internal Comms Podcast is brought to you by my very own Friday Update. Would you like a short email from me, never more than five, but it points long, giving you my take on the week's news from across the world of communications. This might be the latest reports, books, podcasts, conferences, campaigns that have caught my eye during the week, I always limit myself to just five nuggets of news, so you can read it in record time, but still feel a little bit more informed, hopefully a little uplifted as you end your week. Now, this is subscriber-only content, which was initially intended just for AB 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, we just need your email address. And it's equally easy to unsubscribe at any time. So give it a go, that sign up page again, abcomm.co.uk/Friday. And if you do choose to be a subscriber, I very much look forward to being in touch.

Katie 58:24

So Emily, let's hop over to those quick fire questions, if we may. What trait or characteristic do you possess, do you think that, above all others has most led to your career success?

Emily 58:38

I would say it's probably that I don't accept the status quo. Throughout my career, I've always looked for ways to elevate the communication function that I've been working in. What we did yesterday, or even today, for that matter, or how we did it may not be the best move for the future. So I'm always thinking about how can I push myself closer toward mastery of my profession? And that's really motivated me to take on new roles, new challenges and find solutions to problems that I've identified. Anyone who's familiar with StrengthsFinder, and that assessment will probably not be surprised to learn that my number one strength is consistently achiever. And what that means is that I have this constant need for attainment, I always have this burning fire to achieve something every single day. And that really has driven me to push past the status quo throughout my career.

Katie 59:28

I'm not familiar with StrengthsFinder. So that sounds very interesting. Is this like an online tool where you can ask a series of questions and it will identify what your particular strengths are. There

Emily 59:39

can be so it's the I believe it's the Clifton Strengths Finder. And there's a physical book that goes with it. So typically, you might be working for an employer that will give you a copy of the book. And back in the day when I first did this, there was a whole code in the back I'm sure it's much more sophisticated now where there's a QR code or something. But you would go into this website after you had got in the book, gotten your code, and then you would sit through that assessment. And once you had done that assessment, it would feed the results back to your employer. And then you would typically sit down as a team to see how each person on the team came out with their results. If you have very similar strengths, if you have different strengths, you can talk about how they work together. And it's really, for me, I love learning more about how my mind works and how I work. So I've taken this several different times, it's been probably close to almost probably 10 years since I've taken this for the last time, but it's been very consistently 'achiever' for me. And then there's five strengths that it pulls out for you. So my top two have always been 'achiever' and 'maximizer'. And in the last three have shifted around, but those first two that are consistent are very much I have a lot of hunger and drive to constantly achieve and make things better. So if you can ask anyone who has taken this multiple times, and they probably have similarly differing results from year to year, depending on where you are in your career, what's happening in your personal life, and that all influences it, but it's definitely a fascinating assessment, I highly recommend it.

Katie 1:01:01

We will put links in the show notes as ever, listeners. How would you complete this statement world class employee communication is...

Emily 1:01:12

For me, it would probably be world class employee communication is based on strategy. Because the function is meant to be a strategic partner, not just a tactician. And what I see happening so often in organisations, is that they just want to go straight to the execution, and they just forget about the bigger picture. That's what we should be striving for. Good employee communication should have clearly defined objectives. What do I want my audience to know, feel and do as a result of my communication? So it's not just about sending that email or posting that intranet article. It's about taking action that's very purposeful, and strategically designed to inspire, engage and inform.



Katie 1:01:47

Perfect, thank you. If you had to make one book recommendation to our listeners, what would it be?

Emily 1:01:55

I've read so many incredible books. But the one career and life advice book that I keep referring back to every few years in my life is *The Discomfort Zone* by Farrah Storr. And I had first found out about this book from Farrah's appearance on the podcast, *Ctrl, Alt Delete*. And Farrah is a journalist as well. She has a journalism degree and has been working in publishing for a number of years. And I am a sucker for stories, books by journalists, because I know they're such good writers and good storytellers. And then when I picked up this book, I found that I was just going wild with my sticky notes, because I found so much of it impactful. And the book focuses on how we grow, improve and realise our full potential by leaning into our discomfort zone. So taking out in these brief moments of discomfort that will end up helping us grow like saying yes to being a guest on a podcast and I really pushing ourselves in ways that serve us and move us closer to reaching our full potential.

Katie 1:02:51

So finally, a bit of an internal comms podcast tradition, we are going to give you a billboard, potentially for millions to see, and you can put on that billboard, any message you like. Emily, what are you going to put on your billboard?

Emily 1:03:06

I would say 'connect human to human' and simply that, 'connect human to human'. Because in today's highly digital polarised world, I see a lot of people forgetting that there is a person across the table, across the world, on the other side of the computer, who is human just like they are. And by remembering that we're all human. We all have this need for safety, love and connection. We can all more effectively communicate with each other.

Katie 1:03:33

Absolutely love that answer. Emily, this has been such a wonderful conversation. Thank you so much for your advice, and just sharing so much wisdom with us. This has been fantastic. Thank you.

Emily 1:03:46

Oh, it is a pleasure to be here. Katie. As I said before, I have been listening to this podcast and it's a privilege to be invited as a guest myself.

Katie 1:03:55



So that is a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. For the show notes and a transcript, head over to our website. That's abcomm.co.uk. And indeed, you will find there our entire back catalogue of over 90 episodes. Stay tuned listeners, because we have coming up the IC legend himself, Shel Holtz, telling us everything we need to know about artificial intelligence. Indeed, you may want to hit that subscribe button today. If you are enjoying the show, I would be immensely grateful if you could give the algorithms a little notch by liking or rating us on Apple Podcasts, that just helps other IC folk out there find our show. My thanks to Emily, to Stu, our sound engineer, John our producer, Madi all things content, and the entire AB crew that keep the show on the road. But most importantly, my thanks to you for choosing The internal comms podcast. Until we meet again, stay safe and well listeners and remember, it's what's inside that counts.