



The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 11

Episode 93 – *The sound of success: Why it pays to listen to employees*

Katie 00:03

Hello, and welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast. My name is Katie Macaulay, and I'm on a mission to improve the way we communicate at work. In this podcast, I ask communication practitioners, academics, authors, and consultants to share their insights and approaches for making workplace communication more productive, involving and meaningful.

Katie 00:35

Now in our personal lives, we know that the best communicators, certainly the best conversationalists, are also the best listeners. Good listeners ask smarter questions, they forge stronger connections, reach deeper levels of understanding. That is true for organisations too. More and more comms practitioners are talking to me about their listening strategies. Listening, it seems, is indeed rising up the corporate agenda.

Katie 01:13

In this show, we meet three authors of a brand new book on organisational listening, Dr. Kevin Ruck, Mike Pounsford and Howard Kraus. Their book is called *Leading the Listening Organisation: Creating Organisations that Flourish*. It looks at how organisations can listen more effectively to their employees. And in doing so, drive better decision making, innovation and performance. I was thrilled to invite Kevin, Mike and Howard into our podcast studio to have this conversation in person.

Katie 01:55

As you'll hear when they introduce themselves, they each have a wealth of experience in the employee communication field. We cover a lot of ground in this conversation. We talk about the difference between hearing and listening. We talk about today's listening age, what is actually driving the need to listen harder to employees. Innovative approaches to listening, including the impact of new digital tools for listening, how to start gently with a toe in the water approach to listening and the role and mindset of leaders in a listening organisation. So without further ado, let's meet today's guests.

Katie 02:46

Howard, Mike and Kevin, welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast. It's a pleasure to have you here! To help listeners differentiate and understand who is speaking throughout this conversation. I wonder if it might be helpful to get each of you to briefly introduce yourselves. Kevin, can we start with you?



Kevin Ruck 03:05

Well, thanks so much for inviting us all again. Katie. Yeah, my name is Kevin. I'm the co founder and director of PR Academy. And we're the largest accredited Teaching Centre for Chartered Institute of Public Relations qualifications. So we have about 500 students study with us each year, but my interest is in internal communication. I lead the internal communication diploma that we teach. But I also do research into internal communication and I'm particularly interested in listening, as we'll get onto today, but also leadership communication more generally.

Katie 03:41

Brilliant. Thank you. Let's turn to Mike.

Mike Pounsford 03:45

Thanks, Katie. My name is Mike Pouncer. I founded Couravel about 25 years ago now we're a communications and organisational change consultancy. I've been interested in listening all my career. If I go way, way back, I used to work at Willis Towers Watson and did work on listening in their nascent employee research area. I can remember actually trying to persuade people that was worth asking for employees' opinions, because when I first started that was quite a new thing for people to do. And then I went on from there to work at Alexander Consulting Group and then I did some work with WPP. I set up a big business for them called Banner McBride, which was very successful in terms of brand engagement.

Katie 04:24

Thank you, Mike and Howard?

Howard Kraiss 04:26

A slightly different path in in that I now much like Mike, co-founded a small consulting business with my partner Emery Blake called True less than a year ago, but really most of my career has been spent in house and I was at company called Johnson Matthey immediately before starting True. before that places like Ernst & Young, GSK, and I guess listening has always formed part of how I've thought about the job and in terms of the reality of how you deliver change within organisations. And within True we talk a lot around the people-centred change, actually putting people at the heart of change and part of that is giving people that space to have their say, their voice, and listening to that. And that's always formed how I've thought about the in house role and something that we were able to bring to an IABC event, actually, about five and a half years ago. That's where we this whole piece of work started, and it was great to have all of our different viewpoints because coming from different parts of the same industry, and it's come together, four reports. And now the book.



Katie 04:26

It's interesting that you've all said, you have been interested in listening throughout your career. Where are we today? You talked about us entering a listening age, I just wondered about what's driving that listening age?

Howard Kraiss 05:38

There's several factors. As companies are looking at how they change and how they get competitive advantage, recognising, as one of my favourite McKinsey stats that 70% of change programmes don't deliver, companies are saying, "we've got to do things differently," there's just a move to giving employees greater voice and recognition that people have a view which actually can help the business to change and change successfully. But I think it's more than that.

Howard Kraiss 06:05

You can see very much in the time of the pandemic, how organisations started to recognise the importance of listening to their people – that's carried on to some extent, people have gone to different hybrid models. And at the same time, you've got Generation Y Generation Z, they've come into the business, people who I think expect to have a greater say in what they're doing, more purpose-led businesses, which again, is people think about purpose or other topics such as ESG agenda, diversity and inclusion, that means that you want to hear different perspectives. It's recognition that people have a lot of expertise and passion and desire to actually contribute to their businesses. I think businesses are saying we can do more with our people. And so you're seeing more listening strategies. That may still just be a survey, but the language of listening is now being used as well. You're seeing agencies who are beginning to say, "we've got listening solutions," again, that may be largely survey-based, but again, it's the language of listening.

Howard Kraiss 07:02

So I think there's a whole series of factors that have come together.

Katie 07:05

We've always felt for this work that ever since we kicked it off, a lot of communications people have been interested, and it's resonated with a lot of people. I'm keen to call it the age of listening, and I think that we are entering into that new time.

Katie 07:19

Let's talk about what is happening in our brains when we really are listening, because I've often observed that when we think we're listening, we're missing things, or we're waiting for



that moment when we can speak and interject we're not necessarily listening properly to what's being said. Anyone wants to elaborate on why listening can be difficult?

Mike Pounsford 07:42

You've already identified one of those points, even as you were doing your question there, I was thinking about what you were saying, thinking, what's the right response, or best way to respond to it. And that's what we all do. When we're talking to each other. We're constantly thinking about what we might want to say in response to that. And, and that tendency to do that is something we need to be aware of, and be ready to guard against, especially when because our brains are meaning making machines we're constantly trying to interpret the world that's going on out there. Like the difference between hearing and listening. Yeah, because so we are here, our brains here, that is one of our major defence mechanisms is our hearing. Think of what wakes you up when you're asleep: a noise. So our brains are constantly on the lookout. But listening is quite different, in the same way that what we perceive is different from what we see. So there's a big difference in hearing and listening, I think, and the listening is the interpretation of what it is that our brains may be hearing. And our brains start trying to make that meaning quite early on when we're listening to other people and we need to guard against that if we want to listen effectively. Because effective listening is a lot about really trying to get inside somebody else's understanding of the world and their perspective. And almost becoming aware of that tendency that we have to make that meaning too early. And we need to be humble too. We need to recognise that the way we see the world might not be the way you see the world, or the way Howard sees the world, or the way Kevin sees the world. And we have a natural tendency to think that our our way of seeing the world is right. And good listening is all about guarding against that and being open to people's different perspectives.

Katie 09:14

Gosh, there is so much in that answer. And we could spend the next hour just talking about that. Thank you very much. I want to pull out though, a particular quote that I absolutely love from your book, and it's by Nancy Klein. And she writes, "good listening is the capacity to help others think for themselves." So what you've just described is exactly that. It's helping people make meaning without jumping in and making assumptions or even helping them get there. Would that be fair?

Mike Pounsford 09:46

Yeah. Her book's called 'Time to Think' and her point is that good listening is all about trying to encourage other people to think differently, to think laterally, to help them think well, and she's she comes from the world of education, that's very much where she's coming from. And I think often when people think about listening that people talk about active listening a lot, don't they, talk about nodding, and smiling and so on, and those things are important. But

it's much more than that. Good listening is about really trying to support and encourage and help other people, I think. It doesn't necessarily mean we don't challenge other people, it doesn't necessarily mean we agree with other people, we might be doing all those things, good coaches often do that. But the good coaches are helping other people to think for themselves. And I think there's a lot of that in listening to helping other people think for themselves. And that's one on one listening. And it's also, if you think about it from a leader's perspective, when it might be one on many, a good leader who's good at listening might be good at asking the right questions to help his employees or her employees think about the things that they need to be thinking about in order for the business to be more successful.

Katie 10:48

I was going to ask about leadership later. But let's jump in, as you've mentioned it. You talk about 'the parental trap'. I noticed this a lot, a leader thinking, "we can't have an open debate, an open forum, an open space where people are asked questions, because I might not know the answer to all of them, or we collectively as an organisation might not yet have the answer." And you make the point that actually you don't need to have all the answers in order to invite that debate. I don't know who wants to pick up on that. Howard?

Howard Kraiss 11:18

There are quite a few obstacles in organisations for effective listening. And this is certainly one of them. There's a lot of work these days around psychological safety. One of the things that we found quite early on in our work is that psychological safety, there's the obvious bit, which is people being afraid or not feeling they have the trust or the conditions to speak up. But it's also at the leader level or the manager level where they, as you say, where managers are nervous about what they're going to get back. And are they able, prepared to have a discussion, to entertain other viewpoints. And so therefore, as a result, what you see is managers who either feel that their role is to have all the answers, and therefore are not interested or open to people contributing and being part of the discussion. And that's in a sense, where you start thinking about this parental trap. It's that parent who knows everything he's able to say, Yeah, I guess you could call it the hero leader in some respects, who doesn't see it as their role to be able to seek other opinions or other views.

Kevin Ruck 12:17

The whole area of psychological safety is a whole area in its own right. There's a lot of work been done on that. One of the things we found in our research, which was quite surprising to me, and I think to all of us, was leaders also need to feel psychologically safe to go and talk to employees. There was a fear from leaders going and talking and opening sessions up to questions that they may get asked something they didn't know the answer to. And that's an obstacle, because they didn't want to be put in that situation. But it goes back to what Howard was saying is it links back to a mindset where leaders believe they are

all knowing and have all the answers to all possible questions. And that's almost ingrained in a lot of leaders. And we'll come on to leadership development and training later, I think, it's part of that process. They've really been trained or had education which emphasises that they don't have to have to have all the answers. But there is that fear. But the parental track also is that employees have to take responsibility, sometimes also, for the issues and problems or concerns that they're raising. So it's not like it's an employee can raise something and expect the leader to just take ownership and responsibility for sorting that issue out.

Kevin Ruck 13:38

I remember once when I was doing the listening session at BT, this was up in in Martlesham is BT's research and development site, it is a huge site, it's like a University campus 4/5000 people working. And I was doing some work with the Managing Director who had responsibility for the site, and we had a listening session, and it was one of the first that he done. And I remember an employee had this session, came up to him and said, "Phil the shower block in our building. It's been out of order for a week. And it's really annoying everyone here." So Phil was thinking, maybe we get onto some some more high level strategic discussions about what BT was doing in terms of R&D, but and he said, "have you reported it?" Because it was a Facilities Management Reporting System. And this person said, "Well, no, I thought I'd ask you." So just an example. And actually, of course, what we did is, afterwards, Phil said to me, could I make sure it was fixed. And I did. So you build trust by saying these things can be brought up and they will be fixed. But if you have a mentality from employees, that they can just raise things and expect them automatically to be fixed by leaders that that is another parental track. And there is a responsibility for leaders when you get into these listening sessions, to actually not necessarily challenge back, not being defensive, but actually opening up the discussion to a broader explanation and discussion and then a collaboration about how to fix some of the things that are being mentioned.

Katie 15:08

I suppose what you're saying is that if you're moving from kind of parent to child, because in that parental trap, that's where you are, to an adult to adult, that what you're saying is, "yes, I have an accountability, but so do you, I have responsibilities. And so do you."

Howard Kraiss 15:23

And I've seen some brilliant leaders who recognise that when they're doing, whether it's Q&A sessions or small group meetings, what they're not there to do is come away with a shopping list of actions. And I think employees understand just because they raise the point, that not everything is going to be necessarily on the leaders list of things to fix. I also think and where I've seen it work very well, particularly in times of change, is you know, that you're making good progress when employees start to say, actually, we can take some of these things



ourselves. When I'm thinking about change, there's three key questions I want people to answer, which is, what does it mean? Was does this change mean for me? What does it mean for us as a team? And then crucially, what can we start to do about it? So this is taking it to an adult to adult conversation, but you need that trust, you need leaders who can listen, but that doesn't mean they take everything away as something that they have to solve.

Katie 16:20

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 17:19

Let's circle back. Howard, you mentioned it some of the benefits of listening. I'm just imagining, I'm listening to this podcast, I like the sound of all this, but I'm not sure I'm gonna really be able to make the business case if you like. I have seen leaders really quite get excited about the power of being in a room and hearing ideas and hearing feedback. But can you share with some of the potentially unexpected benefits of listening?

Howard Kraiss 17:46

We categorised the benefits into five areas. First of all, we'd just say performance. We all grow up expecting to be listened to when we have something to say, and why our organisation is not very good at that? So we have an expectation that if we've got something to say, someone should hear it. And so I think that if you feel that you're being listened to this is a natural human behaviour, this isn't about a corporate situation but if you feel that you're being listened to, you'll feel more well disposed to those people who are doing the listening. So if you're saying something in the organisational sense, and the organisation is seen to be listening, you're gonna grow trust, you'll grow engagement, and all the things that spin off that we know. I think you mitigate risk as well, which is just, you know, fundamental. And there's so many scandals and whistleblower situations where people are not listening to what people are saying. And that sort of feeds in almost to customer service, I think, because are you listening to the people who are closest to your customers about what customers are saying about their habits changing? The conversations may be changing, if you're not listening to that some organisations are very good at that.

Howard Kraiss 18:50

Change, I think is fundamental and helping people through change. Are you listening to how people are experiencing change? As we said earlier, so many change programmes don't deliver. And we know that one of the key reasons for that is that you don't bring people with you on that journey. And so if you are actually listening to people, understanding how they go through the emotional state of change, giving them the space and the time to do that, you're more likely I think, to get to where you want to get to.

Howard Kraiss 19:18

Innovation is another area where every company wants to innovate. That's one of those words that appears on just about every value statement. But again, innovation means listening to different perspectives, encouraging different views, if you're truly going to be innovative.

Howard Kraiss 19:35

And I think the last thing I'd say is, we've used the term in the book 'social justice', and we've always felt it's the right thing to do. It feels like the human thing to do is to tap into that talent, that passion. Most people want their businesses to be successful. And businesses can be very good at actually stopping them contribute. If you did a Venn diagram, they'd all intersect, those benefits. But ultimately, in the listening organisation, you should expect to have better performance, better adoption of change and less risk, more innovation and so on.

Mike Pounsford 20:05

It's worth making the point. These are not just opinions, they are backed up by quite a lot of research. So when we were doing the book, we spoke to a lot of different organisations, and one of the things we looked at was how people felt about the extent to which their organisations use listening to improve performance. And what differentiated those people who felt that they did versus others, were those who pulled out things like innovation, change, fairness, so these performance benefits are backed up by some of the research.

Kevin Ruck 20:34

I think when organisations are looking to recruit, I think more and more people look to organisations to join that they think are good organisations to work for. And I think listening to employees is part of that perception that an organisation is a good place to be. We use the word 'flourish' in the title of the book, Creating Organisations that Flourish. It feels right to me to use that word. Organisations do flourish when they've got this listening really well organised and in place. That's the feeling you get. You work in an organisation, that just feels a good place to be. But it's also going to be performing well.



Katie 21:11

You list in the book, lots of different methods, mechanisms for listening – the annual survey being quite a rudimentary tool, I would say. Can you talk to us about some of the more interesting, innovative ways that you've found organisations doing this?

Mike Pounsford 21:28

We will talk about some of those, but it comes with a bit of a health warning as well, because I'm not gonna say everybody should be doing surveys, but the health warnings around looking for too much innovation whereas really what we need to be looking for is those things that generate insight and lead to change. But we did find some interesting things.

Mike Pounsford 21:46

So we found, for example, people who were using almost a Dragon's Den type approach, like that Dragon's Den TV programme, they use that kind of approach to find ideas from people about how we can improve the business. And these ideas, were then pitched to a panel of their colleagues, as a way of getting those ideas that that had mileage, that that would make a real difference and that worked from the point of view of their colleagues.

Mike Pounsford 22:11

We spoke to people who were going around doing video diaries of people working at the frontline, and using that to convey to the leadership, what it really felt like dealing with customers or with suppliers, and so on, what made a big difference.

Mike Pounsford 22:24

We found a company, a big Australian company, getting people to tell their stories about their families in order to impress upon people this was in the construction industry, why safety is so important.

Katie 22:35

Yes, that's a great case study in the book.

Mike Pounsford 22:37

And it transformed their the recording of the safety, so made a big difference to save to performance. But going back to that it's not just about innovation, it's really about how we use listening to make a real difference.

Katie 22:49



I need to double down on that, because that's so important. So I think you said that it isn't about the mechanism, it's about the quality of the insight you get out of the listening exercise?

Mike Pounsford 23:00

And how you then use that insight to actually lead to change.

Katie 23:03

Yes. So actually, a one way survey, it's not a conversation is it? It's feedback going one way. That's not saying that's a bad thing to do, because actually, with good insight that you then act on, it's worthwhile.

Howard Kraiss 23:18

Would love 10 minutes to sort of talk about all the bad things about the big survey. But the fact is that the survey does have or surveys do have a role to play in the listening mix. And there's nothing wrong with a, you know, well put together survey that delivers insight and action at the back end. And so I don't want ever to take a view and say surveys are bad. But many surveys become generic and become we do it because we've always done it. And we couldn't actually really look back and say because we did it, we got this improvement in our business. And I think when that's the situation which I've seen, that's a shame. But surveys in themselves, if they're done well, are just as good at all, as any other.

Katie 24:01

I know our listeners are always very keen on practical real world stories and experience. Howard can you share the case study that appears in the book from Johnson Matthey?

Howard Kraiss 24:11

Our business was changing fairly fundamentally, after about 40 years of nonstop growth and "jam today, don't worry about tomorrow." But the world was changing. We were one of the world's largest producers of catalytic converters, which is hugely exciting, but actually is very exciting in terms of the cleaner air debate. The market in terms of cars moving to electric cars, we know is one that's shifting, therefore, you're moving from technology dominating this market to a market which is going to be more around cost and efficiency and being in for the long term rather than innovation and technology, which is what sustained it for for most of the previous three or four decades. And the whole organisation was turned on its head: new leadership, moving from local to global and new processes and systems, everything was changing for pretty much everyone.

Howard Kraiss 25:02

I was lucky to work for a leader who recognised that we could only really be successful with the change if we brought our people with us and didn't just do it to them. So she gave me the scope to come up with the right plans to do that. And then in a nutshell, what we did was we created, based on certainly my beliefs around the importance of conversation, of being able to talk about change of people really working out those three key questions. What does it mean for me? What does it mean for us as a team? What we start to do about it? To give people the space to be able to do that. We created a champion network, called the pioneers, we invested in them brought them together as a community. And we were doing this through the pandemic. So we had people locally, who could both organise the conversation that people were asked to join, but at the same time became a bit of a voice of the employees. Again, when you're, in many organisations, we know that comms teams can be one or two people globally. So you can't do these big programmes on your own, you need people who can understand how they can help you and give them the skills and the tools to be able to do that. So we invested in that. Then we had mechanism of conversation. And then we would want to hear what's being said at the conversation. So we had a very simple sort of feedback form, which the champions would complete. What was then important from us at the sort of central team was to show that we were listening to what people were saying. So that listening bit was really important. So we could start say, right, these are the big things that we've collected from around our global organisation. And as we did this more, what we learned was actually feedback was coming not just globally, but locally, and increasingly within the room. And that's this third question about what can we start to do? By the time we got to the, say, the third, or the fourth iteration of what we called airtime, people were beginning to say, we can do these things. And that's when you really began to realise the change was happening, and people were coming along with you. So this was where you want to get to, it doesn't happen instantly. But by giving people the space and the time, and I think one of the challenges to listening is people say, Well, we haven't got the time to listen, it takes time to have groups and what have you. But actually, I'd argue you don't have the time not to listen. Because if you bring people with you, you're gonna get to where you need to get to much quicker, and you'll create momentum, and you'll create, buy in and belief and so on, trust, by investing in this programme. And some of the results we because we've made it we're fantastic in terms of people understanding the strategy, the pioneers being proud of their role, people coming with us on the journey, we saw some great buy in over that period of time that we were running it. And so I think giving people that space and time that they can build their understanding through conversation, really important to be listening to what they're saying. And responding to that just helped us to get to where we needed to get to.

Katie 27:51

It reminds me actually, of John Kotter, in his book *Leading Change*, where he talks about allowing people I think he uses the phrase to "kick the tyres" on the strategy. But it reminds

me of that, from what you're saying, allowing people to raise the question, have the conversation builds their trust and confidence. That's all part of this. It's not just airing questions that hopefully someone will take away and fix, but actually getting them to feel confident, comfortable with the strategy, they then start acting on it themselves. I love that.

Kevin Ruck 28:22

I think it's an interesting point to me, and a lot of the change leadership or change management models, even in the world of academia, as well as practice, I don't think yet fully emphasise the importance of listening to employees. There are elements within them. Okay, it is there. But still, the emphasis in a lot of the management models around change that I see emphasise the storytelling, narrative, leadership communication piece has been the most important thing is getting buy in via almost persuasion. And I think that's still inherent in a lot, from what I know, the Kotter model has been changed over the years, but I think if you look at his eight accelerators, you know, if I'm right, I don't think any of those eight accelerators that you say, give your people a good listening tool. So his sort of 'lead from the front' and other things, as well. Don't get me I think it's a great model. But I think all of these models are still a little bit dated. Yeah, may need to be brought up to speed. And I think this comes out of the, leadership training piece that we did in the book.

Kevin Ruck 29:31

So we asked Canadian consultant, Elizabeth Williams to do a piece of research for us, because we're interested in why is it that leaders in our research, and what people are telling us, why is it that they don't really seem to fully appreciate the importance and value of listening? Which is what we were hearing. And so Elizabeth then looked at executive development programmes and MBAs from the leading providers across the world. And she did a word search on their syllabi to see how far those syllabi were including listening. So if you go on to one of the world's leading MBA programmes, or one of the world's leading executive development programmes, what she found was that listening hardly gets a mention at all. So you as a leader of tomorrow, her conclusion was that leaders are not being trained or educated to know how to do listening not only on a personal level, but on an organisational level. And that's, for me, that's a concern. Because if half the time if we are struggling as communication managers to get buy in from our leadership team to do this listening in the way that we're saying it should be done in a book, then partly it's down to the fact that those leaders have been brought up if you like, not to value listening. So it's a hard job for us to get buy in and leadership at that senior leadership level. It's very interesting to me that we're in that situation. I'm not sure quite how we've got to that point. But it's a big problem to solve, right?

Mike Pounsford 30:12

Yeah. Because effectively, what we're saying, I think, is that you need to change your model of leadership, you need to think differently about what good leadership looks like. And you need to incorporate much more of this listening into it. People who come up with their own insights are much more likely to implement them. And that's what we're learning from things like neuroscience, we're beginning to understand what makes people work the way they work is not the traditional way that we maybe have thought to do. And if you think about how leaders get developed in most organisations, they look around at those people who are very good at getting stuff done, who are good task operators, people who are very good at getting tasks done are not necessarily good at managing people. People focus. They don't necessarily go together. So part of what we're saying in the book is we need to challenge the traditional way in which we thought about leadership.

Kevin Ruck 31:44

There is a chapter in the book where we do a quick review of some of the better known leadership models. I'm not talking about change leadership models, but leadership generally: transactional leadership, transformational leadership. I've been around for a long time, they tend to be the one way broadcast, persuade kind of thinking, although they're being updated, certainly transformational leadership is being developed to to incorporate more listening. And you have servant leadership, where it flips, said the leader is there to serve the interests of employees. But even in servant leadership models, the degree of listening to employees that is highlighted in that model is still quite hard to find. So we're saying in the book, we should be thinking about a new model of communicative leadership. And that includes a model on listening leadership. And that I think, is a big point to make. Okay, so this is a theoretical high level conceptual point, but actually has, I think, has real practical implications. Because if you get that kind of thinking embedded into leadership programmes, or training programmes, it becomes more accepted as a new way of leading, which is what we're saying we need in our listening age, then that helps us in the communication world to to put these listening plans into place. I think leaders think they're better listeners than they are. I'm sorry. I'm thinking of this phrase, you know, from leaders, "oh, my door's always open," which kind of suggests that they really are brilliant listeners. But as one person said, in our research, "that just really emphasises the point they've got an office with the doors usually shut." Yeah, this is an insight into the way that leaders think they are good listeners, which harks back to what I was saying earlier about the lack of good education and training about what it actually is.

Katie 33:28

Yeah, it's funny because I'm thinking of the age that we live in at the moment where people as we know, from the Edelman Trust Barometer have lost a lot of faith and trust in some of the traditional institutions that today should be really solving some pretty global planetary problems. And instead, they're looking to their own CEOs. They're looking to their own

organisations to help solve some of these societal and environmental problems. If that is the case, then we're going to need the total brain power of these organisations, aren't we? These are complex problems that organisations are faced with at the moment. And in order even just to have a solid, worthwhile purpose in the world, you're going to have to ask yourself as an organisation some pretty deep questions. So all of this is adding up in my head. But I've still got that internal comms manager thinking, I just don't know how to get started here. Can you talk to us about how they could get started? What are some of the practical ways? What's the role they should be playing?

Mike Pounsford 34:33

You mean, where the communications person should be starting in order to improve the way the their organisation listens to their people? So I just say "how well do we currently do it? And how well do we know how we currently do it?" That would be one of the first questions I'll be asking myself, and do we have that data? Or do we think we've got it but we actually aren't using it as o interrogating as clearly as we might be? And Kevin said a few minutes ago, leaders are feel they're listening, but the people who work for them don't necessarily feel they are listening. So there's a there's often a gap in that between those two different groups.

Kevin Ruck 35:08

I think for me, it's it harks back to what is internal communication for? Is it just to send out lots of information on a regular basis? Or is it about making the organisation a better place to be a community where there's a sense of belonging, and where everyone is treated fairly and equally? If it's the latter, internal communication is fundamental to all of that, I do think that internal communication is going down two paths. One is where it focuses 90% of its time and effort on content and channel management, which is what we call the broadcast kind of approach. And no one says that's wrong, although employees often do say that they feel sometimes organisations are spinning too much. And they're on the end of too much information at times. So getting that right is absolutely fundamental. But if that's all internal communications is there to do, just get a good information dissemination system in place, then I think it's very difficult for anyone who adopts that mindset, or believes that that is basically what internal communication is, for them to understand and value the importance of listening. Whereas if you if you believe the latter, this is a much bigger, broader, more strategic, employee centric function, which I do, then listening is fundamental to that. And you have to what I would say, in practical terms is when you're building your internal communication plan, then you have to build in as much time and resource, effort into listening as you do. Informing, is fundamental to me to internal communication to build plans that include listening as much as they do informing. And then of course, you've got defend that plan, because people will come at you from all angles, just telling you to send stuff out again, and that crowds into your time that you've built in to

listen. And so then it's becomes very much more a case of defending your philosophy, if you like, of what internal communication is, and batting back, lots of requests to just send stuff out all the time, and be more assertive about why it's important to have listening in place.

Katie 37:21

But coming back to what Mike said, if you are listening function as well as an information dissemination function, if we have the insight from that, and we're known for having that insight, and leaders and stakeholders come to us because they want a change programme, and actually we know what the barriers, obstacles might be, we know the language the front line's using that maybe, you know, the ivory tower doesn't because we're listening,

Howard Kraiss 37:48

I think there's two or three things that are worth reiterating here. One, you absolutely I think, can build credibility and trust with leadership by being seen to understand the voice of the audience or the employee and be able to say, if you do this, this is what we think will happen. And how do we know that? Because we know because we've asked, because we've listened, I think that's a really important point of difference and credibility. I think there's a really good point in terms of connecting the dots and helping employees see that listening is working, as you said, we do the wishes. bit simple. But in terms of connecting the dots, I think that builds credibility with your audience. And of course, helping leaders with their own skills and their own ways of listening, how you listen, how you go into these situations, I think it comms can play a really important role in supporting leaders to actually improve their own listening skills. One other minor point here, I think, is this is not just comms, because HR will own a good chunk of this, you will often find that the big survey, as we talk about is owned in HR rather than comms. This is a great opportunity to collaborate with other colleagues, particularly HR.

Mike Pounsford 38:52

I was working with a company during the pandemic, where I think the comms function made major progress because they, one of the things this company found, as many companies found, was that during the pandemic, suddenly things that they thought never could work, were working. People were working remotely and stuff was still happening. We all went, a lot of companies went through that experience. And so what's all that about? And what these people did was actually they went out and they spoke to a lot of people in the organisation and found out what have we learned as a result of the way in which we're working now. And they got a lot of stories back of the things that have happened in the business that have made it work, this if you'd like 'burial' of the idea that we have to be at work to get things done, told those stories back to the leadership team, and put them in the form of some principles about how we needed to work going forward, and it knocked the socks off the leadership team, because they could suddenly see actually, we can do things

differently from how we've normally done them. And that's the communication people taking real leadership in terms of changing the way the organisation works. My worry is that we were in danger of losing some of the lessons that we learned during the pandemic. We're In dangerous of slipping back to where we might have been before the pandemic. We've challenged so many assumptions.

Katie 40:07

We can't not talk about AI, digital comms in all of this. There's been an explosion, I think it's fair to say an explosion in digital technology in our space. And we live in an age now where we've got constant sentiment analysis tools. How do you feel about all of this? Is this real listening? Does it help? Does it hinder? I'm really keen to get your views on this.

Kevin Ruck 40:27

I think it's the both the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity in the listening space. We talked a lot about how organisations are using digital listening, as you say, large language model analysis is coming if you haven't already got it, it's coming your way very soon. And yeah, that solves the current problem that a lot of practitioners told us they had, which is on forum discussions, sometimes they get hundreds of comments posted on discussions. And without that technology, it was a manual, literally a manual process of cutting and pasting them and then trying to make sense of them, sometimes just through reading them. And it's just overwhelming a lot of people saying they, understandably, haven't got the time to wade through all that. AI, or perhaps better to use the term large language modelling, I think, does give you the ability to do high levels of not just sentiment analysis, you can get quite clever with predictive data analysis, which helps you to correlate and pick up early signs of risks that employees might be highlighting. Yeah, and you can be, you know, ahead of the curve in in getting on top of those. I think the potential is incredible.

Kevin Ruck 41:41

However, I think there are a number of issues that have to be overcome. And not not least the one about employee's trust the way that what they say in open forums is not ever going to be used against them. At the moment, one of the surprising findings we actually got through our research was that employees seem to be more comfortable in speaking up on digital platforms than in other settings. Now, none of us I don't think expected to get that. And of course, the issue is that it's the least used method in organisations to listen to what employees are saying. Employees are happy to use it and do use it, but organisations are way behind on actually using it to analyse what people are saying. And I think that is set to change surely, but you've got to maintain the trust. This is not monitoring what employees are up to. Talking about kind of digitally cynics is done explicitly, so that employees' contributions are sought and valued in an objective and open way. We destroy that trust at our peril, because we have here an absolute ocean of potential knowledge and information

that organisations will be able to use. But there's other things around that about the way that, if internal communication people are going to be doing all of this, then you do require or at least you need someone who's got good, good levels of data analysis skills and capabilities here that come into into play, which of course, most people in internal communication understandably have not had training on or education in. So you do need the support to do the high level statistical analysis, which is another challenge. Fascinating.

Katie 43:29

I'm also thinking of those clients I've met over the years who say, the problem is, Katie, with another survey or another pulse check or another conversation, our people have survey-itis; they've been asked too many times. I'm guessing the fault there lies with the fact that they've been asked, and no one has actually done anything with the results. That's the problem?

Mike Pounsford 43:51

Or the perception that they've done nothing with them. You're right, I think that's the very fact that in our very first session on this, in Bahrain, remember when we were talking to people about the very first piece of research we did? People broke into focus groups talk about some of the stuff. And the first thing that came out was the whole problem of the survey fatigue, nothing happens as a result of it, so it's a big issue. But often it's things might have happened, but somebody hasn't made the connection back to what we heard. So it's happening, but they're not aware that it's happening. But often it isn't happening because the management's using it as a way of keeping a score sheet of which function is doing better than another function. So we've lost sight of the whole point of why we should be listening to people in the first place.

Katie 44:35

I find that such an interesting point, because it even happens at AB and we've got a small, really small workforce, and yet we can make a change and talk about that specific change and not link it back to the fact that it is driven by feedback. Maybe it was feedback a year ago, so we've gotten why we were doing it and all of a sudden there's a new benefit that appears and we forget to say you asked us for this and we're now doing it. So if it can happen with a bunch of just 20 of us, then 20,000, how many times is that happening across an organisation? We're not proving we have actually listened when we have.

Kevin Ruck 45:10

I think that's back to processes and systems, which is something that we do talk about in the book. The book's about leadership listening, we talk about senior leaders and the role they have. Absolutely. My view is that responsibility or that senior leadership role, not only extends to their own personal listening and their own capabilities, it extends to building

systems and processes of listening across the organisation. That's their responsibility too. So I think answers the point if you've got well established systems, processes that track and monitor what's been said, what's been discussed, and then what happens, then you're less likely to forget what was said six months ago? Because it's tracked and monitored in a more formal way. I think so that, especially with large organisations, I think you have to do that, really, otherwise, there's so much stuff, you'll never be able to keep on top of it. But yeah, so I think there is there's a whole section in the book about how you do that. And we talk about multi methods: you don't rely on just a single survey, right, you have multiple methods, which involve quantitative and qualitative forms of listening. And it's by getting all of those different data points together, that you get the best insights and the best kind of ways of implementing changes that people are expressing that they want to see. But of course, going back to the role of the internal comms function, whether they've got the time or resources to actually do all of that. The capabilities to do the analysis. And of course, that comes back to the senior management team, whether they're supporting that whole process, whether they want their organisation to be like that. And so these are lots of things to bear in mind. But I think you can start with just putting better plans into place that do include processes and systems,

Howard Kraiss 46:56

I'm thinking in that traditional way of doing a survey, you know a report goes to every people manager, so you're getting, theoretically, you're getting action plans all over the place. There's actions at the company level, and at the divisional level, and the geographical level, all the way down. So you've got this inflation of actions, of which hardly any of them ever happened. And you never go back and tell people that they have happened. So I think the frustration is coming, because I'm hearing all of this stuff for about a two month period after a survey, and then it all goes away. And then you might a month before next year's survey, start coming back and saying, Oh, you said these things. And we did these things. As if you're trying to persuade us to vote for you. What it's led to is just chaos and noise. And ultimately, nothing's happening. I think that's where this survey fatigue comes from is here we go again, the big build up, nothing comes at the end of it, except for a lot of noise, but no real improvement. If you use the survey, and you said about this level, let's say a much higher level, we're gonna get one thing changed in the next six months. Yeah, we're gonna see, I always like think problem solving often comes up as a thing. We're going to solve problem solving, we're going to bring people from different parts of the business that you've told us, that's the thing. And we're going to fix that. So the next survey comes on, we said, we solved problem solving, let's see what we're going to fix this time. And if you could show that, I think you'd have a totally different reaction to the survey?

Katie 48:16

Yeah, everyone wants to break down silos in organisations. And imagine if we said, we're going to focus on one thing, and we're going to have a silo-less culture where we're going to cross collaborate across functions. Wow, I speak up next time, because I think my problem might get solved next time. So it's actually fine that my problem didn't get solved this time. But I'm believing in the process. I love that. Mike, you said that a good place to start, if I'm an internal comms person is to do an audit, to see how well we're doing as a listening organisation at the moment. Are you happy to give some hints and tips about how one might conduct that audit?

Mike Pounsford 48:51

Funnily enough, we've been talking about that quite a lot recently. I would go for a toe in the water type of process, I would do something that's pretty low key. I'd like to talk to some of the leaders, two or three of the leaders, I'd like to talk to the function and talk to some of the employees, maybe mixed groups of employees. And I'd just like to get some perspectives on to what extent is listening actually delivering some of the things that we talked about in the book in terms of performance. To what extent are we actually gaining insights from our customers, by the way we listen? To what extent are we using it to help change? And then just gather that feedback and provide a high level summary of what is or isn't working in terms of what we're currently doing. So as a sort of toe in the water approach to it, I would use an approach like that.

Katie 49:34

What's nice about that approach is it's very unique to that organisation. So you can say, Look, our business strategy is going to be more successful because we've heard that this benefit, innovation, whatever has come out of listening at the moment, or we could have more of it if we listened harder, I suppose that's...

Mike Pounsford 49:50

Yeah, the point is, it's how can we improve our performance? Because that's so in other words, this is a service to how the organisation can be more effective. Exactly. Yes, that's what it's all about.

Kevin Ruck 50:00

The thing that Mike is emphasising quite rightly is, you need to get a sense from the senior leadership team about what their mindset is, yeah, for listening, because a lot of what we've been talking about today does hinge on senior leadership team being supportive and or at least being open to understanding what we're saying here. For myself, I would do something as well as what Michael was saying was, which would be to just talk to the internal communication team or the HR team and find out what methods they're currently using, how often they use them, how far is listening embedded into their current internal

communication plan or not? What responses have been sent in the last six months to things that employees have said? And how are those responses being framed? What's the language? That would give me a bit of an insight into the systems and process piece, which I think you need to do in tandem with the mindset and understanding of the senior leadership team.

Katie 50:59

In every single channel, and it doesn't matter if it's digital face to face, even physical now, with QR codes, you can introduce a feedback element, can't you, into every single channel? I know that's not open listening. But it is at least that toe in the water that you're talking about.

Howard Kraiss 51:16

In some companies, and I think they are being seen to be quite successful, like those kiosks where you press a smiley face, in a canteen, for example, what's our service been like today? So the act of giving feedback, listening, could take a second. And how you do it doesn't have to be surveys and onerous and time consuming. We have a culture outside of our business where you can feel almost beaten down by every organisation that you interact with saying, How have we done today? How was our train journey? How was our this? How was our that? And this goes back, though, to don't ask them and not do something with it. If you can say, you know, this was the feedback and on the basis of that we've done these things, then I think you've got the mandate to do more.

Howard Kraiss 51:16

I also think timing matters a lot. I was very impressed once. I literally stepped off the BA plane got the ping, how was that for you? And I thought, You know what, yes, you're gonna get a response. That was such good timing. Learning when to ask not too soon, not too late, is potentially very important as well for that kind of feedback.

Kevin Ruck 52:21

Yeah, I think that's so true. That's why I quite like pulse surveys, if we're going to do surveys, I would go for pulse surveys at about topical points that are relevant to particular teams at that moment in time. And the beauty of a pulse survey is that usually it's quite specific. And the feedback or the response to what is said, can be done quite quick. You don't have to go through oceans of analysis. So I liked that point about touching a nerve in the organisation that points give her feedback. And I think, the role of line managers and supervisors here, we haven't really talked about that very much today, is critical here, because obviously, they're picking up stuff that's very relevant and pertinent to their team that week. And the mechanisms for them to listen and to get input to how things could be done differently, is something that I again, don't think organisations are that great at. It might be done

informally by that manager in that team. But it often relies a lot on that line manager or supervisor, even being willing to listen to employees. I've done some work where that just isn't the case. There's a whole culture of line managers being people there to tell employees what they got to do. And that's it. So that's an aspect, I think, that touches on your point about it being current, topical, you know, because things do shift quite fast at that level, and being able to offer...

Howard Kraiss 53:37

I think a lot of the platforms now that are on the market, that increasingly companies are buying into are giving the functionality to be able to be more adept at giving precise pulse surveys. Historically, you might have just had to go to Survey Monkey, but now organisations are investing in these new tools, and then training their leaders and managers to actually use these tools. They have that capability to run much quicker and much more appropriate pulse surveys to check that point, to check that: how's this thing happened? Which I think is a really good thing.

Katie 54:10

You really want to listen in today's world and give those safe spaces for people to speak up. Because you don't necessarily just want to hear that feedback externally on things like GlassDoor. That would be the worry, wouldn't it? If we closed down and didn't have those safe spaces internally, then oh my goodness me. Are you going to end up with a walkout? We have seen those over recent years because you haven't listened hard enough. And something's taken you by surprise. The other elephant in the room thought for me and all this and I don't know if this occurred to you is that you would never have an organisation think it's weird to listen to customers and clients. Everyone would say we listen harder, we're more successful. It's obvious. The more we anticipate our clients and customers needs, the more we co create products and services with blah blah blah, but they just don't see Think about that necessarily with our employees. I'm just wondering why?

Kevin Ruck 55:04

They don't think listening to employees is linked to performance. Listening to customers is obviously a very critical, you've got to get that relationship right otherwise, you're not going to get sales and so on and so forth. So it's absolutely understood and seen as a critical relationship. It just harks back to the fact that leaders do not believe or understand that same level of listening is linked to performance when we know it is. So that's the I think, maybe that's partly the reason I don't...

Mike Pounsford 55:31

I think it's really complex. Who has the knowledge? If I'm a leader of a business, I might have a very different knowledge set to some of the employees, they may have very valuable

knowledge sets about how things happen in the retail end, or on the on the shop floor or whatever, but they don't necessarily get some of the strategic perspectives that I might have. Therefore, my attitude towards listening to them might be flavoured by that a great deal. What do I listen for? And when do I listen? How do I listen to people? It's a natural tendency, I think, for people who are in leadership positions to lose sight of some of those important things about what they can learn from other people, because they're operating at a different level and in a different way.

Howard Kraiss 56:10

I think it's really interesting. We're at an interesting point, actually, in organisations, because just as you say, the customer experience, no one would argue that's a really important thing. But we're seeing the growth of employee experience. Where the sort of early, I don't know here, 18 months post pandemic, this sort of growth of EX roles, of people having EX teams which enabling people to start listening at different milestone points, moments that matter in organisation. We're going to see what happens in the next 2, 3, 5 years, how much organisations really invest in this and really recognise that they've got a chance, I think, for competitive advantage by getting the employee experience investing in it and getting it right. And I think with that comes, naturally comes greater listening, and not just greater listening, but greater quality of listening. And so I think that's, it's a really interesting time because it, the EX will be behind CX in that sense, in terms of how long it's been there. But we've got an opportunity now, and I think you're hearing different things about where organisations are, at the moment, some good, some bad. There's certainly been this big growth of the EX function over the last period. So I'm optimistic there. But that see what happens in the next 12, 24 months.

Katie 57:24

You're making me think about a leader thinking employees don't have the bigger picture. They don't have the strategic oversight, the overarching strategy in their head. So it's the act of listening and making them feel heard, as opposed to me genuinely thinking I'm going to learn something.

Mike Pounsford 57:39

It's that mindset, actually I can learn something from them.

Katie 57:43

What is it that they know that I need to know?

Mike Pounsford 57:46

Absolutely.



Katie 57:47

And that's the mindset shift.

Mike Pounsford 57:49

I think so.

Katie 57:50

I find that really interesting.

Mike Pounsford 57:52

So for me, the whole thing about listening at a leadership level is about being curious and open. That's not to say leaders don't need to make decisions. It's not we all sit around listening to each other the whole time, because they do have to make decisions, obviously. But it's having a curious and open mindset, when it comes to how's the organisation working or not working? And what can I learn from people?

Katie 58:12

You reminded me of one of the best leaders I've ever worked for, and he was doing a sort of factory site tour. It was very much sort of turn up unplugged session, I'm going to chat to you about the direction of the company and answer some of your questions. And he got through everything very much more quickly during the day than we thought and he had literally an hour spare. And he says "it's so exciting. Can I go back in?" Of course you can. And we just assumed he was going to reiterate his PowerPoint slides. And he stood there, gathered everyone around and said, "I've been told I've got an extra 60 minutes. I've got so many questions for you." And he just asked them questions. And I was like, Oh, my goodness, what an intelligent person. He realised that hour was best spent getting totally curious and learning coming away with new knowledge. I don't meet a lot of leaders like that.

Kevin Ruck 58:59

There was a case study in the book, which I think makes the same point. Which is of a national roads and motorists Association, in Australia, which we got via Sweep Analytics, and it made the some point. The leader, the CEO, did exactly the same thing, made an effort of going out and listening more. What struck me about that was one of the quotes in that case study is that that particular CEO said "you stop overthinking what you're writing." It was, oh, this is actually easier and more enjoyable than actually writing a briefing about stuff. And I found that quite interesting, really, because we do tend to still, I think in a lot of internal communication functions, spend lots of time writing and rewriting and editing and having things changed on briefings, which is quite a torturous process, I think for everyone concerned, to be honest. The actual answer to that is just to go out and listen and be prepared to ask questions and be open to what people say. We do have a model.

Katie 1:00:04

I was gonna say, that was gonna be my penultimate question, before we got to the quickfire questions. You do have a listening model. And that paints the picture of success, because I think everyone is gonna want to know, okay, this sounds great. What does it look like? What does success look like? Yes, talk us through the model.

Kevin Ruck 1:00:20

Thank you. So we've broken it down into four components, which is compassion, openness, responsiveness, and empathy. And I think Mike touched on those points. NThis came really out of what people were saying to us. Certainly openness, responsiveness, and empathy. And then during the course of writing and researching the book, we added this compassion to that model, which came from a model of leadership called Compassionate Leadership. And it's a really interesting model of leadership, by the way, to separate to this discussion. So we added it in compassion, being interested in people, and putting employees first and openness as mica said, being open to going out and he will people saying, but critically, making sure you respond, and then just being empathetic. So that's where we've landed. Like all models, it is a bit of an oversimplification. There's much more complexity to it than that. But they're the essential components of what we think listening is all about.

Mike Pounsford 1:01:18

There's some of the key principles, but also in the model, we talk about the importance of leadership and the leadership role models in the business. I can remember some time ago, going through the survey results with an organisation and being asked a question about what was the difference between how the technical and the engineering department had responded to some question. And I was being asked that question, I should have known the answer. I didn't know the answer. But the MD in the room didn't know the answer. Because he'd been through it all. And the impact he had on his colleagues, because of the example he set by being so tuned into what he was learning from the from the data, was interesting. So it's not a point about doing the surveys at all, it's just the point about the role model that the leaders can make, and the impact they as a leadership team can have on the rest of the organisation. And I've worked with some leaders who are fantastic at going out and listening, collaborating with other people, and demonstrating openness, empathy, and curiosity. But it's the example that they set that makes the difference. And if you're working in an organisation where you feel your leadership is behaving like that, if you're then a manager, you're going to be much more open and ready to listen to people and much more likely to pass some of what you hear up the organisation because you know, it's going to be received well, so you're going to increase psychological safety and increased trust within the organisation, as well.

Howard Kraiss 1:02:36

As well as principles and mindsets, the third thing is processes and systems within the organisation and the importance of the leader championing those processes and systems and not just being aware of them, but actually being hands on with them, inquisitive and supporting their growth, investing in working with the comms, the HR people to make sure they've got what they need to do the data analysis, to learn what the data analysis is telling them to do. To use the right systems, and tools so the listening can flourish in the organisation. I think that the model brings all of those three areas together. It's not one thing that you've got to have, you got to have the right principles, you got to have that mindset, but you also need the tools and systems to, to carry that out.

Mike Pounsford 1:03:23

And by doing that, you impact performance. Because when you bring all those together, it makes a difference to how the business performs.

Katie 1:03:31

Your point about having met some leaders that really do get it makes me also think there's another toe in the water type approach here, where if you do work for a very large organisation, but you've spotted a leader that really does get it, there's always an opportunity to pilot or test an approach in a specific business area and show great results and gather momentum that way as well, I imagine.

Kevin Ruck 1:03:54

That's for sure. Yeah, not every senior leader in the senior leadership group is going to immediately get this and buy into it. But if you've got one or two are open to it... I certainly found that when I was at BT doing this stuff. I worked with one particular person who was quite interested in it. And then we rolled it out and other people suddenly became interested. There's no point in trying to get a senior leader to buy in and start doing all this if they're absolutely dead set against it from the outset. And they don't have the sort of mindset that we're talking about, because that's a tough behaviour and mindset to change.

Katie 1:04:30

My cheeky question before we go to those rapid fire questions was going to be what's not in the book? Was there anything, this is maybe you can't answer this one and we can take it out of the podcast, but I was just wondering, was there something that you thought well, I'd love to have doubled down on that, I'd love to have really highlighted that potentially thought we can't go that far or it's gonna make the book too long... Was there something you had missed out or there's something you would love to have written about that you didn't get the chance to?



Mike Pounsford 1:04:58

I'm gonna say something which is only prompted by your question. I'm a big believer in mindfulness. I don't think we mentioned it anywhere in the book. But I think if you're going to do this stuff, you need to be very self aware, and you need to pay attention. It may not be mindfulness because it might not work for you. But yoga, Pilates, exercise, you need to be healthy in your mind. And we didn't really go into that at all. But I think it's an important thing.

Katie 1:05:25

I'm just going to ask a supplementary question on that. Is that because it is helpful to have gaps between your thoughts, to be able to recognise a thought as it appears in your mind, because that slows everything down? And part of good listening, is being present in the moment to truly listen?

Mike Pounsford 1:05:45

That's part of it. That awareness, and that ability to pause and reflect, and learn.

Kevin Ruck 1:05:53

i think for me, the one thing that we could have done in more depth is the data analytics side of digital listening. We talk about it briefly to give people insight into how data is going to be important. But that's a real field in its own right. So yeah, personally I'm interested in that. So I think that's something I'll certainly look into much more, and the whole way that AI is going to change things, we touch on it in the book. So we do flag and highlight certain things about it. But we could have done a more detailed chapter. And the issue is you write a chapter on that and then within six months, it could be out of date.

Katie 1:06:31

ChatGPT5 arrives. Exactly.

Katie 1:06:36

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abcomm.co.uk/Friday. And if you do choose to be a subscriber, I very much look forward to being in touch.

Katie 1:08:10

Let's hop over to those quick fire questions. What skill or trait or characteristic has most led to your career success? Do you think?

Kevin Ruck 1:08:21

For me, it's been a realisation about the importance of lifelong learning. My career has changed from being a practitioner, public relations to internal communication to becoming a tutor, researcher, perhaps part time academic, if I can call myself that. So that's how my career has developed, but it's grounded in a belief that you're always learning, and you never stop learning.

Howard Kraiss 1:08:46

I think for me, I'd say the importance of people. Organisations are made up of people, people are not AI, they're not machines. And so understanding that people are emotional beings that react in not the sort of linear way that you think they're going to, because we've done the we've done the town hall, and we've sent out the the all staff email, so therefore they've got it, and they'll just do these things. That's not how it works. So I think that recognition that people are individual and emotional, and if you can, if you can harness that and bring people on the journey with you, that's hugely powerful.

Mike Pounsford 1:09:20

I know one of my, the feedback I get is that I'm good at collaborating with people. So I know that, and I know that this book wouldn't have got written if it hadn't been for Howard and Kevin and me working together. I just know that's really important thing and not not just the book, everything, it's always about people working together.

Katie 1:09:38

My next question as I was thinking about asking this, I was thinking I wonder how many years' collective experience we have in the room. And I'm gonna guess if I include myself, we are maybe at 100 years at least. Maybe we don't want to go there. But of all the advice you've heard, what's the one piece of bad advice or unhelpful thinking that has persistently dogged the internal communication profession if you can get that specific, or the comms professional generally?

Kevin Ruck 1:10:08

I'm going to go out here, and this might be a bit controversial... And I'm going to say that people I've heard this said that academic knowledge about internal communication is a

waste of time and effort. I don't need to know what academic researchers are talking about. And whilst I can understand that to a degree, because a lot of academic writing is fairly hard to get to grips with, I do think that we can always learn from robust academic research and be open to the knowledge and that does generate.

Katie 1:10:37

Nice, thank you.

Howard Kraiss 1:10:37

Yeah, I think that there's a few things in one thought here, which is, what do you expect from your sort of comms person? And I think the expectation is something big, but yet at the same time, you often have one or two people to do all sorts of things. And actually, because you have relatively junior people, often, in their careers, dealing with very senior people very often, who are very experienced, often very forceful in the way that they think that they think they're right. So you get this situation where it's quite tough for a comms person, even if they know something's wrong, to actually say, Hold on a minute, this isn't going to work. And it's almost I've got to get stuff off my plate, just got to press publish, I've just got to get it out there. So you get this sort of situation where comms is just churning out stuff. And increasingly, where you have global organisations, you have no travel budgets... how do you get out and listen? How do you actually be able to be the voice of the the employee? And that becomes deprioritized because you've got too much to do. And you're just pleasing a manager or pleasing a boss. So your audience becomes one person rather than whatever your audience should be. So however you unpack that, I think it's, that's the biggest challenge that we have, or one of the biggest challenges that we have in comms and engagement is how do you actually create the sort of space and opportunity to to do what we're capable of doing?

Mike Pounsford 1:10:40

That's interesting. And depending upon who you might be working for, or with that might require quite a lot of courage sometimes, maybe it's linked? I'm not sure. We can get too trapped and thinking about the mechanics, and not enough about the performance of the business or the organisation, what's going on? And how does the way we communicate or don't communicate, have a big impact on that, and just focusing on that? Because I think if you do that, then it becomes a lot easier to have those difficult conversations.

Katie 1:12:32

Yes. Finally, gentleman, we are going to give you a billboard for millions to see a bit of a metaphorical billboard. And you can put on that any message you like. What are you going to put on your billboards?



Kevin Ruck 1:12:45

I'll kick off this one again. I mean, I've gone for open your ears!

Katie 1:12:54

I love it. Thank you, Kevin. Yeah,

Howard Kraiss 1:12:56

I don't want to steal Mike's but when we talked about this earlier he said you should be by the book, which I thought was a it was really well held on it. Yeah. Yeah, that wasn't my answer. So you can still have it. I think I'm torn between either something which is, 'listen up, listen now' something like that, or something which is around people, not machines. We all have emotions, something like that, I think is why message I'd like people to really get.

Mike Pounsford 1:13:24

Thank you. So mine was going to be... I don't know if it's too is too long for a billboard. But just this conversation has been really interesting. Because especially as there's all this debate about surveys and tools and process and what have you, I've been thinking, gosh, we're at a really interesting point, this listening age point that you talked about Howard earlier. We're at an interesting point where things are changing. And the way in which we listen can change a lot. Because the way technology is changing. Leadership, I think is changing too. And it's recognition of the importance of listening. And so maybe it's something around the listening age. Welcome to the listening age.

Howard Kraiss 1:14:01

Maybe that's the answer.

Katie 1:14:02

Lovely. Thank you so much, gentlemen, for appearing on the show, it's been so much fun. Thank you.

Mike Pounsford 1:14:09

Thank you, Katie.

Howard Kraiss 1:14:10

Thank you. Thank you.

Katie 1:14:13

So that is a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. For the show notes and a full transcript, head over to AB's website. That's abcomm.co.uk/podcasts. Now, if you did find this episode helpful, I have a small favour to ask. Please could you like, rate or maybe



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