



The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 11

Episode 94 – *The stories that shape us*

Katie 00:04

Welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. This is a show for people with a passion for improving the way we communicate at work. Every fortnight I invite someone to sit in my podcast hot seat, and together we explore ways to make employees feel more involved, better connected to each other and their organisations.

Katie 00:35

Now the conversation you are about to hear took me completely by surprise. My guest is Agatha Juma. And I invited her on the show to talk about storytelling. Well, Agatha did more than talk about the power of storytelling. She demonstrated it. I found Agatha's grace, her wisdom, her warmth, absolutely captivating, and I hope that you do too.

Katie 01:08

Agatha is the co-founder of Engage Kenya. I found Engage on YouTube, and was blown away by these amazingly funny, heartwarming, poignant stories that people were sharing with the world, and get ready, Agatha shares a couple of these stories with us. Anyway, back to the bio. Most recently, Agatha was head of the Private Dialogue Unit at the Kenya Private Sector Alliance. Before that, she was a Senior Consultant with the International Finance Corporation and CEO of the Kenya Tourism Federation. Agatha says she has a deep passion for developing leadership capabilities. As an accredited coach she helps people at all levels voice their brilliant ideas and share their passions. In this conversation, we talk about why we all need power over our own story. Why simple connects, and the three fundamental needs we all have as human beings. How to tell stories in service of a message, and Agatha's mission to change the world one story at a time. Without further ado, it is my absolute pleasure to bring you Agatha Juma. Agatha, welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast. It's a pleasure to have you here.

Agatha 02:48

Thank you, Katie. And thank you for having me.

Katie 02:51

This is going to be a conversation, largely, I'm guessing about storytelling. So I wonder whether a good place to start would be to ask you if you don't mind to share a story with us, Agatha. Is there a story that gives us a sense of who you are both professionally and personally?

Agatha 03:12

Oh, there's many stories. The one that comes to mind is... so I was about 30 years old, had gotten a job as the CEO of a Tourism Association... like it was many steps and ladders from where it was. And even when I was headhunted I wasn't sure they had the right person. So I joined and months later, we have a board meeting. And then the second board meeting,



and I'm thinking okay, I've got the hang of this. So in this board meeting as the youngest person by far, I give an opinion on something that was being discussed, and this caucasian gentleman who happens to be British turns to me and very slowly sense, "Girl, I've been doing this longer than you've been alive. What makes you think you can give me an opinion on how to run my business?"

Katie 04:05

Oh, my goodness.

Agatha 04:06

And I shrivelled – at first I was agrieved – then I shrivelled into a deep sleep like a really dehydrated date. And that began affecting how I felt about myself and everything else. I was six months into the job or under six months. I'm invited to a conference in London. I have my PowerPoint presentation. I am already feeling anxious. And when I get to the venue, the person speaking before me is from the Caribbean. Introduction was amazing, and then their presentation had butterflies and there was birds flying across the screen and I'm thinking "whoa, I have my cream and brown presentation." So when it's my turn, I'm introduced beautifully and I'm given the clicker thingy. So I get on stage. I've been introduced, but I introduced myself because I had the script in my head. So I go ahead and introduce myself. And then I click, I go to the intro slide, I speak to it. And then I click again. And the clicker thingy doesn't work. And now anxious, I am panicking. I'm trying to remember the next thing in my head. I'm thinking, yeah, people have been doing this longer than you've been alive. You can come to the UK to represent not just your company, but the country, and you're blowing it. And I had a full blown panic attack. Before that, I used to think panic attacks are white people things.

Agatha 05:48

So somebody jumps from the audience, they're slapping my back, someone is trying to force feed me water, I am tearing. It was, Katie it was the most embarrassing thing that has happened to me. And I've had many embarrassing things happening to me. So the moderator comes on stage and says, "We're really sorry, Agatha, it must be the cold London weather. We'll give you a few minutes to compose yourself and come back." I thought "Oh, my goodness." So I went out into the cold London weather, composed myself and came back. I finished the presentation, it wasn't my best work. But I swore this will never happen to me again. I would get so good at this, it will never happen to me again. Anyway, it is within my power, it will not happen to anyone within my circle. And that has defined my life for the last 16 years. Yeah.

Katie 06:50

An amazing way to take two really horrible experiences, but turn them into a positive in the sense that they propel you forward. Your first story reminds me of one of my favourite cartoons, which I cut out and kept. I've had it for years. And it's men mainly sitting around a boardroom table. There's one woman sat at the table. And the chair of the room is saying to this woman, "That's a great idea Miss Smith, perhaps one of the men here would like to make it."

Agatha 07:24

Which they usually do.

Katie 07:26

Which they usually do for you before you've even got to the end of a sentence.

Katie 07:31

I'm gonna pick your brains on that first story. What would happen now, if you got shut down in such a dismissive way? How would you behave, do you think, differently now?

Agatha 07:44

I wouldn't behave differently, I don't think. But I would feel very different. Ah, so the gentleman, and he really is a gentleman, I got to know him and we became friends. And I realised there was no malice in what he was saying, he genuinely... like the British do speak their minds. He meant it as "You're an upstart, you came the other day, why would you imagine that I would listen to you?" And with time I convinced him why he should listen to me. But it is how I felt about what he said that would change. I would take it at face value. I have learned to depersonalise feedback.

Katie 08:27

Yes. I've heard more than one guest say to me, when you depersonalised feedback, one, all of a sudden, you don't completely melt and freefall when you get negative feedback. But also, there are times when we do need constructive criticism, and you want to be open to that you want the other party to be able to give you that without feeling they're going to crush you. So I guess it's, it plays on two levels, really.

Agatha 08:53

We've been taught as women that you need to stand up for yourself, and you need to push back. Sometimes it's useful, sometimes it's not.

Katie 09:03

Before we start supporting others with their storytelling, I've heard you say first that we need to get comfortable with our own stories. I'm just wondering, why is that? Why start internally with our own story?

Agatha 09:20

I'll give you a quote, which plays a big part in my life because it captures this so well. And it says 'those who do not have power over the story that dominates their life, power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as time changes, are truly powerless because they cannot think new thoughts.' This is by Salman Rushdie, the author. I love it. Because there's certain stories that dominate our lives. And it's not one story. It's many stories. It's your mother saying "you look fat in that." It's a comment, it's a teacher saying you will amount to nothing. But if you do not tell yourself the story and then take over the power to retell it, to deconstruct it, you're truly powerless. So you cannot go about telling other



people's stories if you do not have power over your own stories. Those are my thoughts. I don't know what you think, Katie?

Katie 10:26

It makes perfect sense. Because do we have stories about ourselves that are unhelpful? That quote suggests that we need to revisit those stories and update them with new evidence and new information, so we don't get stuck in the mindset of the eight year old who's been told something that stays with them until they're 88, for example. It's that revisiting.

Agatha 10:51

It's revisiting, but first... Because how we interpret the world determines everything. So the example of let's call him Mr. Smith, who told me "I've been doing this longer than you've been alive." That could have defined my life, and it did for a while. But then I took over the power over this story that dominated my life to rethink it, and to return it, to rethink it by depersonalising it, as opposed to new upstarts, how dare you? Have you upstart? How dare you? Yes, you dared. And you should continue daring. So it's just a reexamining what we believe. Do you look fat in that? And why is how I look important to you? Just unpacking and then asking, why is this important? Is it because it was said by my mother? Which she didn't tell me as a very skinny kid? Or was it because fat people are viewed a certain way? Can you see us fat in 2024? I don't know.

Katie 11:59

I don't know. Okay, we just have. We will apologise to anyone who's offended.

Agatha 12:04

As an example. But then begin to question these things. How much of my value is tied to what happened to me, and why? It's hard, messy, internal work that we must do if we're to be useful members of society.

Katie 12:22

I love that thought. As someone, I think, who is probably far more comfortable asking other people questions than I am asking questions to myself, it's a deep lesson to learn so early into an interview. But thank you very much.

Katie 12:39

We're going to come on to talk about Engage Kenya which I can't wait to share with the listeners, because you've created this amazing platform for so many amazing people to tell their stories.

Agatha 12:51

Thank you.

Katie 12:52

But before we start there, I'm just wondering When did your professional interest in storytelling begin? Or how did it begin?

Agatha 13:02

So I've always had a curiosity about people, wanting to know what's beneath the surface. And I've had a love for stories. So whenever people would visit my home, and my mother is talking to our friends, I wanted to hear what they're talking about. And we more often than not call it gossip. But it's an extra layer underneath of just curiosity about people, and when we started Engage, it was to tell the social stories, because we truly believe that the things that change the world is not what is captured by the media or the President or the Prime Minister or Pilates said, it is what you hear when you're sitting with your girlfriends or when you're sitting with family. And we wanted to broaden that space. The idea started very small, distribute in Arabic, get five people who can share a story and we see where it goes. Five, six episodes in because we realise you then need to help people tell their stories. We had people coming to say I don't want to speak at that public thing. But I want to speak like XYZ. Or could you come and do that for our team? And just unpacking it I realised that most organisations, they have other people tell their stories. So to get the question answered of how do we better tell our stories? Instead of how do we get a better person to tell our story? Because ad agencies exist because they tell organisation stories better. They do it themselves. And then internally, consultants come to tell you internally your story and how you should tell it and they've been with the organisation for all of 32 days at most. And just the power of realising as we started working with people, how a leader who learns how to tell the story of the organisation and their team, how they change the world around them.

Katie 15:13

I want to dig into some of the advice that you give people when they come to you asking how to tell their story better. Before we do, let's start with a definition. And it might seem a simple or rather sort of pedestrian question, but what is a story? Because you click on a corporate website, and it will say 'our story'. And what that is the collection of very boring facts, it's definitely not a story, either, not probably even interesting facts. So yes, how do you define a story?

Agatha 15:45

So how I define a story is, it's a narration of how we interpret the world around us. And that includes experiences, facts, figures, interactions, cause and effect. This is how I see the world, and this is what it means. For an organisation, "this is our why" – I think that's the best way to say it. How it exists there's a lot of English words, which nobody really cares for. But we were founded for this reason, and this is why we exist. It is how we see the world and why we exist in this world.

Katie 16:28

Yes, for me, that's key because most organisations were founded because someone somewhere saw a problem or saw an opportunity. There was a problem, ships needed to be underwritten or insured in order to have safe passage around the world and move goods. 200 years on what's told as a story, it doesn't bring that to life because that's dramatic, that's imaginative, that's bold. But it gets lost in 'our 350 year history.' Dang, what did we do



wrong? Do you think? Is it just forgetting for a moment that we're humans, and we need to connect on a human level? Is that part of the problem?

Agatha 17:09

I've been bingeing on podcasts by Morgan Housel, the author of *The Psychology of Money*. And he talks about how because we imagine we're intelligent beings, the more complicated something is the cleverer we think it is. So you want to sound like a Harvard MBA. And even if you are, that doesn't impress people as much as how does that connect to who I am?

Katie 17:39

Yeah.

Agatha 17:40

So we of course, will go to one of the big four to write for us a mission, vision statement that even the people internally when they look at it think "So how does this tie into what I do?" We haven't been socialised to imagine that simple is stupid.

Katie 17:58

Yeah. Where the opposite is true.

Agatha 18:02

Yes, very true. When you're reading a story to a child, and let's take the Billy Gots Gruff story. When you're talking about "the small Billy goat gruff went over the bridge, trip trap trip trap..." your voice automatically changes. And that story remains with you for years as the storyteller and as the child because simple connects. It really does, yeah.

Katie 18:29

I'm gonna guess a lot of our listeners are going to completely understand the power of storytelling, but may need to convince other senior stakeholders in particular, of the benefits of bringing a storytelling approach into an organisation. You've touched on some of those, but let's hammer them home for people that need to make the case. What are those harder, more tangible business benefits of taking a storytelling approach?

Agatha 18:57

Because, again, very simply, human beings are hard wired to understand and respond to stories. That has not changed over millions of years. Because we invented stories to keep us alive. If you go out at night you will be eaten by wolves. Even in places where there are no wolves. Children learnt not to go outside. If you are a bad person, in the afterlife, you will turn into I don't know a cockroach or you will go to hell, whatever you believe. And it's inspired people to work hard at being good humans. So we are hardwired for story. In fact, we work harder to ignore our well told story, than we do to accept and understand data and abstract information. Our brains work really hard to understand them, but we have to work even harder to ignore good stories. So it just makes sense to use stories. Information is retained because we can see ourselves in the information, we can see our role in this



information. We can see how it affects me and the people I care about, or the people I aspire to be. This is why cigarette adverts and beer adverts are brilliant. So while we see them as vices, the stories told of successful young women and young men who are doing awesome things is the story that you retain, and not the WHO general surgeon's warning. We totally ignore that. So storytelling is... we are hardwired to respond to it. And as a leader, don't you want people to connect with what you're doing? Just very simply, which is why an organisation exists. You want to make your work easier as a leader to inspire people and to influence them to decision making. So why not take the easier route of being human and not AI generated data?

Katie 21:19

Yeah, it's so interesting. The way you're describing it is let the story do the heavy lifting. Yeah, which totally makes sense.

Katie 21:32

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Katie 22:28

So let's come back to those men and women in the room that have come to you because they want to tell their stories more effectively, connect more with the audience. How do you help them? What kind of steps do you take them through? What kind of advice and guidance or exercises do you give them?

Agatha 22:49

So I trained as an executive coach, I have a coaching diploma. And I was very clear, the reason I wanted to do this is to become better at helping people tell their stories, just be on executive coaching. And the thing that is true is you can't become a better storyteller if you don't know yourself, back to the stories that dominate our lives. So knowing yourself better than anyone else. Who are you? So because I was listening to the podcast with Mike Roe, who is talking about how his coaching training changed his life – the same for me! What are your drivers? What are your triggers? What are the stories that dominate your life? And what then are your decision making patterns and beliefs and biases, what do you believe about storytelling, and even just being vulnerable? 10s of leaders believes that a good leader removes themselves from the leadership equation. I am the CEO but you guys need to know nothing about me, but please, be inspired by my leadership.

Katie 24:00

Oh my goodness, what a – I can't believe that, such a light bulb moment and it is so obvious. Yeah, "really believe in my leadership abilities. I'll tell you 59 reasons why I can lead this

organisation. I'm going to tell you two things about myself. I'm married and I'm a twin, I'm not gonna tell you anything else. But really believe in me."

Agatha 24:23

Yeah. And we're all human. We want the same things. In nine years of doing storytelling curation and training and coaching, I have come to realise we are all the same person in different skin colour, in different clothes, in different genders. We want to be respected and we want to feel understood. You don't have to agree with me, but I want to feel that you've understood me and where I am coming from. And more so for leaders. I want you to understand my motivations. And the only way to do that is to then tell our stories. Telling our stories authentically gives others permission to believe in us. And also to tell their stories.

Agatha 25:12

So when we're coaching leaders, the hardest step is to convince them that your stories matter as much as where you're taking people.

Katie 25:23

Yes.

Agatha 25:24

Because human beings learn more from failure than they do from success. If you'd invited me, Katie, and I told you, "I run this amazing platform called Engage, and we've had over 500 people, and really, we didn't have any struggles, we're pushing sponsors aside, and life is awesome. I can't believe I get to do this for a living, my life is awesome." That's not as believable and learning teaching moment, as "this is where I started, and I am now fairly successful. But I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth. Or even if I was born with a silver spoon in the mouth, it hurt my gums as I was growing teeth." So that is why storytelling, and that's why leaders need to build the muscle.

Katie 26:22

I think it's probably Brene Brown has done a lot for vulnerability over the years and told us that vulnerability is a good thing. But I'm guessing there are leaders that are incredibly nervous about showing that side of themselves. You're reminding me that I had to make a difficult virtual presentation to the AB team in the middle of COVID, and got quite emotional about it, and almost burst into tears. And even now, I'm embarrassed when I think about that moment, although I know also that a lot of people reached out to me afterwards, and appreciated my openness and honesty, but I still feel uncomfortable when I think about that moment. So I guess I'm just wondering how you get people to get comfortable with being uncomfortable in that respect, if that makes sense?

Agatha 27:14

It does make perfect sense, Katie, and the first question I have, as you were speaking, and I've asked this before, why do we find tears embarrassing?

Katie 27:28

Yes, we do. We do. Because we think it's weakness? I'm not sure why we do. Yeah. Because I wouldn't think it of somebody else, and it's interesting, you're making me reflect that we hold ourselves to standards that we hold other people. Or maybe that's me. I don't know. But whereas somebody else I would think my goodness, they really care. And I'm caught up in that emotion too. I probably think more of you, not less of you. For myself, for some reason, I shouldn't show it. Sorry, this wasn't going to be all about me this show I'm so sorry.

Agatha 27:59

It's actually about all of us. And I'm sure your listeners as well, I am in the same position because I cry so easily, if I could sell tears for a living I'd be a wealthy woman. But it still embarrasses me to date. And I constantly ask myself, Why do I feel a certain way about breaking into tears? And Brene? Because you mentioned has said vulnerability is the first thing we look for in people, but it is the thing we want to show least of. But when someone is vulnerable, you're like, wow, they trusted me enough with a story. Or they care enough about this cause, just as you said, for it to emotionally connect with them. And you do more for an audience being vulnerable than being strike. But to your question of how do we get people to be comfortable with the uncomfortable. The beauty about storytelling is nobody decides for you which story you're going to tell. Only you do that. So we say and we repeat that we don't tell stories in and of themselves. We tell stories in service of a message because we want this message to land. And then you as a storyteller as the speaker decide all of the bank of stories. I have or we have as a team or an institution, I think this story will best lend itself to be the vessel for this. As an example the message is "guys, hard times are coming. We need to have cuts." You could say that and then send a memo in a 63 page document. Or, you could talk about "we started this organisation 10 years ago and we have grown, but growth has not always been in numbers. Five years ago, we had to shrink, to continue growing. And the impact of this is that people we cared about were impacted. We didn't let anyone go, but we all committed to do 1, 2, 3, 4 things and we got over this hard time. It's yet another time that we will be tested." See, nobody told you the story you're going to use, you decide. And because we are all different in how we view the world and our levels of comfort with vulnerability, nobody is telling you to talk about height Hachi when X or Z happened. We tell stories in service of a message: what story best lends itself to be the vessel for that message in a way that other human beings connect with it?

Katie 30:58

That makes total sense. I'm reminded of a quote, just coming back to what you said about emotion, and it gets attributed to Roosevelt, the American President, but I'm not sure it's him. But it's something along the lines of "people don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care." And that's exactly what you're talking about in terms of bringing the emotion in. When you're talking about a story around cuts or cost cutting, does that mean it's appropriate to be telling a story for any kind of strategic (inverted commas) message? Is that your experience?

Agatha 31:38

Yes. If you're communicating with people, you need to connect to them, and stories are how you connect with people. If anything, the problem is our definition of story. We've always

imagined story is a bedtime story, a narrative which could be sick, it's anti-theory. Storytelling is connecting to the hearts and souls of people. Simple. A story doesn't have to be a long time ago, it could be this morning, on my way to work, as I was sitting in traffic, I turned to the car next to me and I saw this man deep in thought. He was drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, and that's the same thing I was doing. And I hadn't noticed that's what I was doing until I looked at him. And I realised the level of anxiety I have is because of... that's a story! So whenever you're communicating with another human being, there always is opportunity for story, especially the internal comms, because most organisations don't take the time to remember that a team is different people with different stories. So Professor Marshall Ganz, who was a Harvard professor, came up with the public narrative, which is what we used for our coaching and training. So the story of self: who am I? What drives me? And then the story of 'us' as a team. What binds us together as a team with 20 different individuals, but what are the stories that bind us as a team? How is HR different from finance? Because each team should have its own stories that bind the people together? And then what's the story of now? What's the urgency now? Is it cost cutting? Is it's a story of celebration? And the story of now defines everything else that you're doing, because you're driving towards the urgency of now.

Katie 33:52

That's so beautifully put. And the results of that is you are telling true, authentic, transparent, open stories that people can immediately understand, they can recognise, they can feel part of, they want to contribute to. And that's when communication does beautiful things because it creates a sense of belonging and all of those things we really want it to do. I'm sold, Agatha, totally on this approach. If there's someone listening and thinking "Oh dear, we're really not doing this much at the moment. But I'd love to." What are some of the baby steps that they can start to take? Are there some first initial steps that are going to take them along this path?

Agatha 34:37

Well, one and I think for me, the most important one, which then demystifies the storytelling thing, is have a bank of stories, create a bank of stories, create a bank of stories for yourself, what are the important, life-defining moments? When my son was born, this is how I felt. This is the responsibility I felt. And I have felt that responsibility carry me through life. And it spurred me in my career, or changed my career trajectory. When I lost a parent, and it's usually around feelings and emotions, because we are emotional beings who make decisions based on emotions, and then use logic to justify our own decisions.

Katie 35:34

Isn't that true?

Agatha 35:36

So have a have a bank of personal stories that you can use to encourage, to motivate, to rebuke, to... whatever. But also, as a team, as an organisation, begin to look for stories. When did we celebrate as a team? When was there a sense of pride? Who are we as a team? We're a team that celebrate when one of our team members graduates from school

and we bring cake. That's a story! And when Susan graduated, it had taken her four years to do her Master's or six years, or whatever. And because she's a mother of four, the celebration was even bigger. That's who we are, as a team, we celebrate each other. This is who we are as a team, we are resilient. And it's not the big things, it's the human things that you hear people saying, "when I came to this organisation, I found it is different from the other one, because you guys do things in a certain way." And that comes into your bank of stories. So it's not that hard to find stories when you're looking for them, because it's an everyday thing. It's what happens every day.

Agatha 36:55

Tell your stories, but also ask questions that encourage others to share their stories. "Katie, you were dealing with client X, who everyone knows is a very difficult client. But you say when you were dealing with Mr. Smith, Mrs. Smith, how do you get him to do 123?" And Katie says, "Well, it's very simple. When you tell Mr. Smith, you'll call him on Wednesday at eight, the phone had better be ringing at two minutes to eight. And then don't ask him personal questions or ask him how his dog is doing." Those are stories. So ask questions that lend themselves to people talking about people and their impact on other people.

Katie 37:43

Yeah, I love that. I love that a lot. And it's it also makes me reflect on obviously a lot of the work we do is trying to bring company values to life. And there's lots of strategic frameworks and campaigns and lovely things around it. But actually, you're making me think about the smaller interventions around sharing stories that bring values to life, the story of us.

Katie 38:03

As the co-founder of Engage Kenya, you have established this amazing platform. And I say I can't wait to share it with people because there are some incredible stories there. How did that all start? What was the spark that created that?

Agatha 38:21

So my friend Don and I, we'd met at Toastmasters. We'd both been Toastmasters for a while. And we enjoyed listening to the little mini stories as people are working on their communication journey and learning to be better communicators. And we thought: how about bringing these stories, many other stories, outside of a club setting? So we were having coffee one day, and Don says, "How about we do a fee for stories? And we didn't even have a name, bring people together, four, five people, they tell their stories, and we see how it goes." And I say, "Okay, good idea. This was in December, and then as we're discussing when he says on Valentine's Day, and I look at him like, Valentine's Day? Who will come? People are busy doing Valentine's Day things. And he asked me "what do you and your husband do on Valentine's Day?" And I respond "I've been married to the man all my adult life of course we do nothing." And he and his wife also didn't do anything particularly fancy. For him it was an anti-Valentine's thing of 'what's love got to do with expectations on men? What's this love thing?' And so we coined it 'What's Love Got to do With it?' which remains our theme for every Anniversary Engage in February.

Katie 39:44

Oh, nice.

Agatha 39:45

And so we got four people that we knew and called, begged, pleaded, cajoled, blackmailed family and friends to come and attend in the smallest theatre we could find, 100 people, and we had 120 people coming. And then after that it was really nice. And people started asking, so when's the next one? Like, next what? And for that first one, nobody talked about romantic love. It was just love of family, love of people, just different kinds of love. And it has been amazing. I have listened to over 600 stories as we're helping people prepare for the stage, and more private ones that then don't get to make it for the platform. It's incredible. Yeah, it absolutely is incredible the stories we have had. And you realise, you see people walking around and we all look organised and put together. Again, we are the same person. We want to be respected. And we want to feel understood. Yeah.

Katie 40:59

Can you give us a sense of one or two stories that have really stayed with you out of that 600 that have really left a mark.?

Agatha 41:08

And Dr. Mary Emma Nelson remains my absolute favourite. So she passed away three or four years ago. And when she was telling her story, she says her and her sister were the first black children in the school that they were in. And they would walk in and they were escorted to school by security, and she grew up in a ground up family, and she wanted to have a proper united family. So she grows up and gets married. And then something her husband was wrong was off. But she didn't want to separate because she wanted her children to grow up in a proper, proper meaning parent mother family in her mind. Until once when her five year old daughter told her "Just, get us another Daddy, this one is broken." For your child to say that. there's a problem. Then she was in the US and so separated as they're working when they're divorcing they were co parenting. And one weekend, the husband is with the kids. And he was a good father. He was not a great man, but a really good father. And she was called and told to go to his house. Do you know XYZ? Yes. You know, where he lives? Yeah. Come. and she's wondering why. And she gets there and finds firemen and police. And this guy had committed arson, suicide murder, had burned himself and his two daughters in the house. And it she knows it wasn't an accident, because he used to volunteers a fire man. It was deliberate. And her world came undone, completely undone. And as part of healing, she moved to Kenya. USA United States International University was setting up in Kenya and they need a lecturer so she came. And when she came to Kenya as a lecturer a few months in she was hijacked and then she got cervical cancer, cervical, ovarian, can't quite remember. She got cancer. And she kept asking, God, why? Because she was a strong Christian woman serves in the church and whatever. And she said something that to date sticks with me. She said you guys know I'm doing, you think I'm dying because I have cancer. But we all are dying, you guys just don't know when or by what. And she said we pray fervently for long life. And it's like mocking God. Because it's the equivalent of having a plate of food in front of you, and you're ignoring

that plate of food and praying for food for tomorrow. Lord give me food for tomorrow, Lord I pray, which is 'I want a long life.' We aspire for long life, we pray we whatever for long life but the life we have today we do not fail.

Agatha 44:22

And for me, that was and still is transformational. What you want a long life for if you're not living fully the one you have today?

Katie 44:33

Yeah, such good advice. Yes. Such good advice. And I think the world unfortunately encourages us always to want to think ahead, to aspire the next priority the next thing that it's actually quite difficult to spend a moment in the moment. I think that's why meditation has become more popular over the years potentially. Has been hearing all these stories changed you as a person do you think?

Agatha 45:04

Oh completely. Completely, I am a very different human being. So, first I am, I am so immensely grateful for where I am, the family I have, the choices I have the latitude to make. And I am a much better human being. I am so much less judgmental because you cannot tell someone's story by just seeing them or interacting with them peripherally. It takes years to get to know someone, and unless they give you the gift of telling you their story. So everyone's struggling with something, and just the acknowledgement that you don't need to know someone's story to be kind and to be human. For me, it's changed how I view the world.

Katie 46:07

I can imagine. What's next for Engage? Have you got bigger, bolder ambitions for where you take it next?

Agatha 46:15

Yeah, we do! So we want to create the largest library of human experiences.

Katie 46:28

Whoa. I love that though.

Agatha 46:31

Of authentic human experiences. Because we learn from people we learn from what people have gone through, wants to go through will never leave down. And that's the vision for the platform. And we want to do more especially for the continent, and ignored continents and places. Africa is not just a place where a descent. There's people with real lives and enriched lives. And the same with Southeast Asia and South America. And the more we tell the stories, the more human we become. Then number two, more importantly for me, as Agatha, is I want to give people the freedom to tell their stories so that they can be better leaders. I don't want us to keep looking for people to better tell our stories. I want leaders to learn how to better tell their stories. I think it'll make workplaces a lot less toxic. Globally, workplaces are becoming a lot more toxic. And if we can humanise our workplaces, it's

Victoria Dew, in one of your earlier podcasts, she talked about human-centred workplaces. Storytelling is such a key part of that. And for me, if 10, 50 leaders can humanise themselves and give their teams permission to be human. We're changing the world one story at a time, Katie.

Katie 46:31

I'm thinking particularly of more marginalised groups as well. So that might be people of a different ethnic origin to the majority. It might be someone with some kind of disability, it might just be women in the workplace in a male dominated environment, encouraging them to share their stories, just imagining, again, we know the impact on that on the organisation must be really important as well. Have you seen that, with women particularly?

Agatha 48:39

Yes, I have seen that, and you talked about disability. So this this girl I was introduced to and the person who introduced me said "you need to listen to her and see her story makes sense and is quote unquote 'right' for the platform." I don't even know why people say that. And this girl, she he has no legs and I sat with her and she told her story. And if you allow me I'll tell you a bit of that soon because it's an amazing story. So, two year old girl living with her family. From across where they live, the grandmother had a small restaurant. And so a two year old would amble by to the grandmother's restaurants to have lunch, and between them in the restaurant that was rail crossing, but they'd lived there for years. And so girl goes for lunch, and then as she's coming back, she's crossing it was a five or seven rail crossing, and she's walking back, and there's a train in the distance, but it's happened before. And when she gets to the fifth tracks, the train is here. And she falls. And her two year old brain tells her, in the minute she's being run over, that you need to pull your leg out. And that's how she loses three of her fingers.

Agatha 49:35

By time the train finishes, she's lost both legs. One at the hip, one at the thigh and three fingers. Her father had just come home for lunch, and he watched the entire scene and got a stroke immediately. The ambulance, the car took her to hospital, to her father as well. But he didn't make it. So she was taken to the hospital, him to the morgue. A few years later, the mother dies and she says she thinks the mother died of a broken heart. And she was raised by relatives. And while she's in school, because she was small, she was little, she was given a wheelchair and she says she'd never been as happy. She could move around! So she was constantly wheezing and you know, moving around, and she was such a joyous child. She could move! And she grows and gets into wheelchair competitions. And this girl is part of Kenya's national wheelchair tennis team. I didn't even know there's a wheelchair tennis team. And as she's doing this, they're preparing for the Tokyo Olympics, and someone comes in announces that there's a sponsorship being given for anyone who wants to do rowing, training for dory. She'd never heard of para-rowing. And so they asked "would you be interested?" And she raises her hand and says "yeah, what is this rowing? I'm in for it." Remember, she has no legss.

Agatha 51:57

So she's put on a boat. And the first few seconds she capsizes. She gets out, rights it, gets in, says "and then I capsized again. And then I kept capsizing until they realised 'she is going to die.' So they told me to go home." And she got on to the Olympics team. She is now qualified for the Paris Olympics. You should see this girl. Ah. Her joie de vivre is unbelievable. In fact when she's telling her story she's saying I don't know if adolescence affects you two-legged girls the way it affected me with no legs. I wanted to be liked by boys with legs. She's a laugh a minute! She says I used to look at girls with legs and they're wearing bad shoes and I'm like "God, why give someone legs and they wear..." And then just Yeah. And for me that demystified what disability is because I just seen people with disabilities as people who need help, not people who have fully aims and dreams of being liked by two legged boys. But it humanises. Yeah, it's incredible.

Katie 53:28

I just want to go back to when you started that story, you were told that somebody said or maybe the girl had said, I'm not sure my story is worth telling. How she could have possibly thought that wasn't worth telling is odd. But that must be a thought that goes through people's mind. Wow. Thank you so much for sharing.

Katie 53:50

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 bullet 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 55:24

I'm gonna move over to those quick fire questions, if I may, Agatha. What trait or characteristic Do you possess that, above all others do you think has mostly lead to your career success?

Agatha 55:39

I'd say curiosity, curiosity.

Katie 55:44

You like asking questions?

Agatha 55:45

I like asking questions and I want to know how things work. Or how are you different from me? How are you similar to me? How are they doing this, and I'm not able to do it? Why the hell would someone bother to do that? I could never do that. Curiosity.

Katie 56:03

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

Agatha 56:11

World class internal communication is showing people why the cause matters to them.

Katie 56:21

Oh, I love that. I absolutely love that.

Katie 56:26

What one piece of bad advice or unhelpful thinking has consistently dogged the communications profession?

Agatha 56:35

That there's a certain way of doing things. Communication is not a science. It's not an absolute science. It's both a science and an art. The art is that you bring your whole self into it and it collides with your individual colours to connect with other human beings who don't want a standard template. Bring your whole self and how you see the world into communications. Because people need that.

Katie 57:04

There's a question I meant to ask you, which I'm going to shoehorn in here if you don't mind, Agatha, but it's just listening to you, and also listening to the stories on Engage, there's a lot of humour that comes across, there's a lot of laughing. I just wondering what are your reflections on the importance of finding the joy and the humour in our stories as well? I'm just curious what happens in the room when people start laughing? Does that connect people?

Agatha 57:31

Yes, it does.

Katie 57:32

Have you noticed that?

Agatha 57:34

Yes. For the longest time I admired people, and to date, who humour comes easily to them. I think comedians run the world. Because there's such a need for laughter. Life is intense. And if you've listened, we all have, but if you've been careful to listen to when a child is laughing, everyone lights up. Because that's its language, it's non verbal language. Laughter and, on the opposite spectrum, sadness. It communicates like no words can. So we need to enlighten ourselves and the ability to laugh at yourself is very important.



Katie 58:27

Yeah, yeah. How true is that? Finally, we give every guest billboard for millions to see and you can put on this billboard any message you like? What message are you going to put on your billboard Agatha?

Agatha 58:43

My Billboard says "Your story matters. Change the world one story at a time." That's a busy billboard, right?

Agatha 58:54

Yeah. Okay.

Katie 58:56

I have loved everything about this conversation, Agatha. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for sharing with us. It's been wonderful.

Agatha 59:04

Thank you. Thank you very much, Katie for having me.

Katie 59:08

That is a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. For the shownotes, including those two past episodes of this show, with Victoria Dew and Mike Roe, plus a full transcript of this episode, head over to AB's website. That's abcomm.co.uk/podcast. If you did find this episode helpful, I have a small favour to ask. Please, could you like, rate, or maybe subscribe to our show on your favourite podcast platform? This just gives the algorithms a little nudge and makes it easier for your fellow internal comms colleagues to find our show. My thanks to Agatha, my producer John Phillips, sound engineer Stuart Rolls, Content Manager Madi, and Senior Designer Rob, all of you keep the show on the road, and I am immensely grateful to you for that. And of course, my heartfelt thanks to you for choosing The Internal Comms Podcast, the show would be nothing without you. Please feel free to get in touch with me anytime via LinkedIn or Twitter. Tell me what you want more of what you want less of. I genuinely want this show to be as helpful as possible to you. So until we meet again, lovely listeners stay safe and well. And remember, it's what's inside that counts.