



The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 11

Episode 95 – *Mastering your approach to strategic communication*

Katie 00:04

Hello and welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. This is a show dedicated to improving the quality of communication inside our organisations. Every fortnight I sit down with a leading practitioner, academic, author or consultant to explore ways to make employees feel more informed, connected, inspired at work. Sitting in my podcast hot seat today is Danielle Bond. Now, I first met Danielle, when she was the global Chair of the International Association of Business Communicators, the IABC. Danielle has what I think is quite a rare combination. She is a clear strategic thinker, but also a great collaborator. I was keen to learn more about Danielle's approach to business issues, but also after an amazing 35-year career in corporate life, what are her reflections on what it takes to succeed in our profession?

Katie 01:17

Danielle is an award-winning marketing and communications executive who has worked inhouse all of her career, largely in professional services. Most recently, Danielle led the Brand Corporate Communications and Marketing function for the consulting engineering firm Aurecon, a role she held for 14 years. She has also led the ANZ marketing team for the accountancy firm EY, and several leading Australian law firms, including Corrs Chambers Westgarth.

Katie 01:54

In this conversation, we talk about business strategy, and what to do when your organisation's strategy isn't entirely clear. We explore the traps that many fall into when thinking about most business problems. We talk about the common traits of the most successful colleagues that Danielle has worked with over the years, and much, much more. I love this conversation. I hope you do too. So without further ado, I bring you Danielle Bond.

Katie 02:31

So Danielle, welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast. Thank you for joining early morning for you, evening for me, how are you?

Danielle 02:41

I'm very well. It's great to be here, Katie. It's a warm day in Melbourne, but happy that it's not, too warm!

Katie 02:50



Excellent. We'll jump straight in because there's a big question to ask you. You recently retired from full time corporate life after 35 years, I think, if I'm reading LinkedIn correctly. The obvious question and but I'm going to ask it anyway. What particular lessons did you learn about navigating the corridors of power? Let's use that phrase. And succeeding in a corporate environment?

Danielle 03:21

It's a good question. And I have been reflecting on that. I think the most important thing I've learned is that relationships matter. And that you need to, as Stephen Covey says you need to seek to understand first, before seeking to be understood. And so you have to invest time in building relationships with people in the business so that you can support the business, so that you can get more support to be effective. And I work to build relationships wide – so across my peer group, across different functions – and deep, and that I think is essential.

The second thing I have learned, and this was really, a lesson learned early in my career, where when I first started out in professional services, most of the partnerships that I was working for didn't really understand what marketing and communications was. We were the weddings, parties and everything team. We're all familiar with that. And so you really need to figure out how you can best add value to the organisation and stay really focused on that. Because being valued is more than being seen as helpful. Being valued in a corporate context is, you're effective. You're helping the organisation be successful. And so I think you really take your time to figure that out and you navigate that carefully and with respect, but if you want to be more than the weddings, parties and everythingmar-comms or comms professional, you have have to be taken more seriously than, perhaps longer organisations get you at the start. But once you start delivering value, they absolutely get you and they will invite you in to contributing and more.

Danielle 05:13

And then the final lesson here is not all corporate environments are the same. Some are great, and great to work in and be part of, and some are less great. And I've been in both. And when I reflect back, there are some that I ought to have left earlier. I was convinced that I would influence and persuade, and perhaps I honed my enforcement skills as an outcome. But I probably wasn't as connected to the purpose or values of the organisation to be truly thriving. And so I would just encourage people, if where you are today doesn't meet that criteria, of being valued, and feeling connected to the purpose and values of the organisation, don't stick around. We've all got mortgages to pay. But go find that place for you, where you will be more effective.

Katie 06:04



I love the answer. Just one supplementary question. You talked about building relationships and connections across the business, you said wide, but you also said deep. And I'm wondering what you meant by deep. Is that finding the real hidden gems, the subject matter experts that don't often get asked, the people that are really going to give you the knowledge and insight but perhaps not necessarily the obvious ones at the pointy end of the pyramid that everyone goes to?

Danielle 06:34

It is that Katie, but it's actually also just a philosophy about people that you work with who might be in a less senior position than you, you should still value and respect. And more often than not, they're also the people that help you get stuff done. In my experience, the people that are so important, particularly if you're wanting to get access to a busy senior executive, are their executive assistants. And they know that you are genuinely there to help them when they call for assistance, can you give me some guidance here, you should do it. And I would just do that as a philosophy with everyone that I work with. But you also as a congress person, you will understand how the organisation really is. And if you just take a little peer group, and with senior leadership, you're only getting one lens of the organisation. And the more time you spend outside of that silo, bubble, whatever you want to call it, I think the better insights you'll have on how things really work.

Katie 07:32

I also like your comment, it's not just about saying yes, and being liked, it's much more around adding value and being respected for expertise. I think sometimes we think we're doing well just because we're saying yes, and we're getting stuff done for people. But that is not enough. You've spent a lot of your career inside professional services, including seven years at EY, 14 years at the engineering firm Aurecon. I'm just wondering what kept you in this sector? Are there certain challenges, or maybe also opportunities that you particularly enjoyed about this sector?

Danielle 08:10

So I first worked in legal, which was ironic, because when I was at university, I actually was doing a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Bachelor of Law degree. And it was the law that I didn't really enjoy. So when I had this opportunity to interview for a role as a marketing person in a Wolfen, it was like, oh, I'm not so sure. But what I enjoy about it, and I do enjoy it, is it's interesting issues that these professionals come across in their day job. So if you're interested in well, how business works, if you're interested in how we impact the built environment, and the broader environment, how society functions through laws, etc, etc. Professional Services is fascinating. So I liked the knowledge side, and working with smart people who are applying their intellectual property to business problems and opportunities for their clients. So that was just interesting, the subject matter was interesting. Tax

marketing was not that interesting for a period. I will confessed that was probably less interesting to me than some of the other work that I've done. But the other thing that's kept me there, I think, it's a real challenge around building a culture that's effective. Now, I've never worked in FMCG. But as a consumer of FMCG, you have much more control over the quality of the product, that it's it meets the needs of the consumer, and that you can deliver that consistently and then the marketer's job is to position and make it attractive, etc. In a professional services context. The only control you have over the quality is the quality of people that you attract, so getting the best and brightest that are aligned to how you work. And so you need to embed in your culture a way of working, that puts values and integrity at the heart of it, because you're a professional so there's duties and obligations that you must meet. And then the other side of it is, you need to really be thoughtful about how you can best serve your client, because you only exist as a professional services firm through clients. And so that's just an interesting environment, to ply your tray as a comms professional and market or brand person. And that was also a reason for staying in that sector for so long.

Katie 10:36

I remember one Managing Director, one senior partner in one firm saying to me, this matters so much to me, this whole issue around communication engagement, because my biggest asset leaves the building every single night. And I've just got to hope they come back the next morning. But those firms are nothing without their people. And you can say that of most organisations. But the knowledge really is in their heads, especially when it comes to new offerings and new services and new ideas, isn't it?

Danielle 11:03

Correct. Yeah, absolutely.

Katie 11:04

Can I ask you a little bit about partnerships? Because I think they are a slightly, I'm trying not to use the word odd. They are a slightly different culture partnerships, in my experience, would that be fair?

Danielle 11:20

I think that's true. My most recent role at Aurecon was not a partnership, because I was I could, having worked in partnerships in law and accounting, and then moving into a company environment where I was a shareholder and where you don't, just because you're a shareholder, it doesn't mean you get to make the calls on your practice – you abide by the strategy of the organisation. You get to contribute and have input to it. But it's not as free range, as legal and accounting partnerships are. I found that a much easier environment to be affected in? I do think... I'm not sure that the partnership model is that sustainable, Katie, I'm not sure. I mean, I think it works on a scale sense, skin in the game, I think, is good,

though, as you get bigger, I think it's much harder for the partnership model to be effective. And this is an outsider observing now, but I can see some of the big four firms, for instance, they had Chief of Staff roles, to their CEOs and Managing Partners, and that's kind of a political environment isn't it, that Chief of Staff is normally there, to help a minister of the crown, etc. to get stuff done. And I think that reflects the fact that it is a far more political environment, perhaps, than traditional corporate is profit, corporate sell without their politics, they know a lot. But my sense is that partnership environments is tricky. And it is free range is actually a good way of describing them. And leadership matters. Leadership matters a lot. And as a comms person working in that environment, working with leaders to be effective communicators, and able to build consensus and support around, this is where we want to go to, that's interesting. So I think it can be so be a really great environment to ply your trade, I just think that it might be harder to get through innovation happening in those environments, or scaling innovation as quickly as you might need to, to deal with the challenging environment that we're all in with AI etc. What was your experience, Katie?

Danielle 11:44

I think it's that feeling of when you're in a meeting about a meeting, or you're in a meeting about a meeting, that's about another meeting, there's this need for consensus, this need for everyone to align and agree. It's definitely not a move fast and break things culture. There is the antithesis of that. That's what it is. And you're right about skin in the game and people feeling like they've got a sense of ownership, but I share your concern that in today's world, you need to move pretty quickly, I think. And they're not built necessarily for that quickness. I think that would be my observation. Yes.

Danielle 14:14

I think that's right. Yeah. I think that's absolutely well, yeah.

Katie 14:17

When we spoke in preparation for this show, you used a brilliant phrase to describe most business problems. And I wonder if you could share that phrase with the listeners, and also its implications for how we need to work inside organisations as comms professionals.

Danielle 14:37

So I have often reflected that, when a communications professional looks at a business problem, they see a communications solution. And when an HR professional or a development professional looks at a business problem, they see leadership capability building as the solution. And IT see technology as the solution. The thing is business problems don't come in silos. At the end of the day, they will invariably require all of those things to come together and to be applied to the opportunity or the challenge. And you



need a breadth of diverse thinking and diversity of disciplines, frankly, looking at a client problem, to see different ways of solving or thinking.

Danielle 15:22

In the partnership context, how do you bring people other than the narrow subject matter expertise to find different ways to solve some of these gnarly challenges? The comms professionals, what does that say to me, it says, really make sure that you're connected into the ecosystem of the organisation, and get in as early as possible on a strategic opportunity or problem, because you bring a lot more to the table than just the crafting of communications, you bring a way of seeing issues, thinking about stakeholders, thinking about how to approach things that's really valuable. And when you're involved early, your value is actually seen, and people will seek you out to be part of their team. What I do say is leaders of professional services, or other organisations, who you also made me think about who you bring into the room to look at those challenges. And I always remember once a senior audit partner, and he was saying, the support services crew, business support services, I think was the main we were called, you've all got projects that are coming at me, seemingly in a non coordinated way, but for all of them to be successful, you've got to have some of my time, some of my team's time. Get yourself better organised. And I thought, that was a real "Aha!" moment for me, because it's so true. And that's not just about better programme management, though it is also that, but it's also about really understanding the intersections of strategy across function, and comms, again, can really help with that.

Katie 16:59

And I think at the end of the day, it just makes our jobs more interesting, if we think of it as not solving a comms problem, but solving a business problem that has got many different root causes and different solutions. It's just... it's a more interesting job, isn't it? At the end of the day?

Danielle 17:18

100%. 100%.

Katie 17:19

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 enthuse 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 18:22

I know you love a strategic challenge. And I think if there's one criticism that's levelled at internal comms professionals more than any other is that we're not strategic enough in our approach. I guess I'd love to pick your brains a bit about strategy. First, how do you actually define strategy? Because we can have action plans, and we can have timelines and we can have principals we can have all sorts of things. I'm guessing none of those things are necessarily strategy. How do you define it? And do you have a preferred methodology to actually craft a strategy?

Danielle 18:59

So it's interesting strategy, because of course, it's come out of military, US military content that is very much about a plan to execute a military tactic and how best to do it to come out the other side successfully. So me, the term that I've used more recently, is where to play and how to win, which is a business concept that many folks would be familiar with. The thing I like about it, is that it puts in a competitive advantage context. Because if every organisation has the same strategy, and they bring broadly the same composite inputs to be successful in that strategy, I don't know how they win, but if you kind of figure out where are you best able to play and compete. And you won't necessarily have everything that you need today, but we'll have enough because you probably weren't in business, unless you found some way of getting there. And you might form a view about what would advance places that you want to play in and what you need to do. It might be building capability, it might be digital transformation. It might be a different marketplace and different geography, etc. And then how do we... what are the critical elements that will help you compete and succeed?

Danielle 20:19

So that's the kind of, the broad piece for business. And then I just simply think comms has got to cascade that down. And recognise strategy, and this is Peter Drucker, strategy is a commodity, execution is an art. So in the worst case scenario where your strategy perhaps is not as differentiated or competitive as it should be, you can still out-execute the opposition. And that's where the creativity and effectiveness of really strategic communications plan really play well. And I think there have been times when I'm not been a very strategic marketer or a very strategic communicator, I've been in that 'just get stuff done' mode. And sometimes you have to be there – because you do actually have to get stuff done. But if you're there all the time, you're actually thinking about, 'am I actually working on the right things? And how do I know whether these are effective and impactful?' And you need to take time to look at all insights gained from programmes and projects to drive a continuous improvement culture. This is where I think the influencing ability is critical, because you will need to make choices about where to play and how to win. And that does mean you have to say no to some things, and the secret is to say no to the right things, and yes to the right



things. But you'll have to be able to work for it, sometimes folks who want you to work on their project. And that's where I think the alignment comes through. And I've always as a guide for my teams, in the past has been, these are the priorities for the business, let's make sure that they're our priorities. And if they're not, there's a mismatch. And we'll want to revisit that.

Katie 22:17

Such great advice. I love the point about execution. I read a quote the other day, that was something like, "without execution, strategic vision is just an hallucination." I love it. Which is so true.

Danielle 22:33

It just... it's so true. And every comms person I know who says that there's more demand than this capacity for you to meet, that's when you got to focus about your systems and processes. How do you got them working six sigma-like in terms of efficiency, and effectiveness? Like really spend some time doing that, because you shouldn't start things with a blank sheet of paper, you should have really worked out your ways of working to be as effective as you possibly can. And I know that AI as a tool will help us in some of those areas. So if the strategic things that you should be working on are still greater than your capacity to deliver, then you're going to be asking for investment. And the only way you can get investment is to show results. And so you just have to have space in your day or team's working week to think about how to demonstrate results, learn from and improve, put a business case for more. And if all of that fails, then at least get agreement that these are the five things that we're going to focus on. And that means we are going to be saying no to some things that are nice to have. But they're not as important as these five things. And they can just wait for three months, six months, next year.

Katie 23:54

Yeah, that's an interesting thing, too. Because it's hard to say, you know, I've got a senior stakeholder breathing down my neck. The internal comms team always did do this job, and now we're having to say no, and it's making us/me very unpopular. But saying, 'not at the moment. It's not necessarily a priority at the moment, we might revisit,' is a softer is a softer no for a start, if it can be done. Yeah.

Danielle 24:17

And crisis comes along to comms teams, and that just means everything has to drop. And you focus on dealing with the crisis. And the business copes with that. So it's about I think, again, it's about influencing.

Katie 24:32

What happens, and I hear this a bit from people who say, Well, we had a strategy but it's not been updated or it's not quite formulated yet, clear for whatever reason, the strategy is not clear. What do you do in a situation like that when there isn't a clear blueprint to use as that starting point?

Danielle 24:51

So in your organisation, there may not be very good place strategy to hold your marketing or comms strategy up, I think that is that's a real situation for many people. In that context I would do my very best to understand, and this is the marketer in me speaking, do my very best to understand what are the revenue targets? Because that I, in my experience, they're all... but that's usually set. So I think they might not be clear on how they're going to win, but they know what they want to win in terms of dollars. Good. So at least go and find out what the financial goals are, and where you're supposed to be earning money. And then, through discussions with those leaders responsible for those lines of business, product lines, service groups, client relationships, understand what matters most and then build your own plan. You've got a hold of something and I guess, in a corporate context is going to be for what drives revenue and growth. And then the other one is to understand who are most important stakeholders? So our people in an internal comms sense. Our customer, the business community more broadly, perhaps. Your context will differ. But you do need to understand that, and you don't need a well designed strategy to figure that out. You just need to speak to a few people.

Katie 25:06

Do you have any advice for anyone who's feeling a bit nervous, maybe not long into their career, and they know they need to go and find facts and figures about where their organisation is going and what the targets are. But they're nervous for whatever reason to go and knock on somebody's door, in a metaphorical sense these days. Any advice for overcoming that fear or that nervousness? Because it might be a while since you felt like that but early on in your career, did you ever feel like that?

Danielle 26:44

Yes, I did, you do have to be a bit bold and brave. But I think anybody in the finance function would be delighted to answer those questions. And actually, you're saying something about the value you want to bring to the organisation, by going to ask. Anyone in sales is going to be delighted to be asked about that; your HR colleague is going to be delighted to have that conversation with you. It depends if you're a solw operator, or you're a member of a bigger team. Sometimes you might need to work through your team to understand some of those things. And they might have the answers to your questions. So that's that's the right approach. I don't think you should be nervous, though. Asking questions to learn about the organisation is important. And especially if your new to an organisation it's expected. Your

first 100 days should be about going and finding out how it ticks, and asking questions and forming a view based on your experience and the conversations that were had when you were brought into the organisation.

Katie 27:46

Let's take a slight detour here, because there was an Aurecon Health and Safety Campaign that cropped up as a case study in a book I read recently on organisational listening. And I know the case study might be a few years old now. But it was such a good one. Can you share the thinking behind that particular campaign around health and safety? I hope you know the one I mean.

Danielle 28:11

I do. It's the 'because people depend on you' campaign. And yeah, very happy to chat about it. So look in the world of engineering, health and safety, like in the world of construction is a top issue for an organisation to manage their own employees and their clients, the community's health and safety. And my company at the time, Aurecon, was operating across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Australia and New Zealand. And whilst on paper as you track injury frequency it was improving year on year. So the board and the C suite might go "well it's all going swimmingly." There was a sense that leadership really felt that there was still some underlying weaknesses in their system. And it pertained to things like reporting hazards near misses. In a really strong health and safety culture that happens a lot you don't just report when the incident happens, you report near misses because that's how you learn risks and ameliorate them in a be prepared sense.

Danielle 29:12

So that was not happening consistently high across all of our geographies. We didn't see all of our leaders that we wanted to be visible safety leaders were reaching and doing that. The safety message at the start of any meetings had become a bit performative. So we wanted to really up the ante on that. And then just really a good understanding of what is health and safety risk in our organisation? Was there a really strong understanding of that? So I was asked with the Group Director for Health and Safety to revisit how we talk about health and safety. Here are a common block a lot of organisations, there's a safety manual there's procedures and guidelines, there's a lot of reporting, I would consider more compliance focus than really getting to the heart of what is it to have a really great safe work culture. And we decided that human-centred design was really what we wanted to do and make it something that will connect with a common experience of all of our employees across Asia, Africa, Middle East signs is, and that was, people depend on us, in our family life, in our friendship groups, our animals depend on us. And we want you to put health and safety first because people depend on you. And so we designed a campaign that ran over a 12 month period, and then was embedded beyond. And we put Aurecon people and the

people and animals and family and friendships, groups that depend on them, at that centre of it. And we did some beautiful photography of our people around the world taken by Aurecon people. They became our health and safety ambassadors. We featured their stories about what that meant to them, and how it made them feel about health and safety in their professional life. We engaged the broader workforce in a competition and so we invited people to share on a virtual safety wall or a physical safety wall their 'why' and write a story about that. And it's simple, some wonderful little tactics, but it gave it prominence. When you logged into the computer in the morning, I'd uploaded my photo, my why. And I had my why statement below, it was the very first thing I saw every day. So we were trying to tap into the emotional scale of things, tip that scale in favour of behavioural change. And it had a positive impact.

Danielle 31:46

And then later in the campaign, we relaunched the 10 things we must always get right. And we called them my life saving rules. And again, we used Aurecon people to be the face of those 10 rules, we had some different ways of presenting those rules. So we had a couple of territories. And we went and tested it with people, and got the report. And again, ran through again, the story about near misses in each of these 10 areas and the experiences of people that had overcome some of these challenges. And again, it became a way of thinking about a way of being around health and safety that that was effective. And we saw a really significant increase in reporting health and safety incidents, leadership around it was much more authentic with leaders sharing their own why, and then being quite vulnerable in talking about these things. It's a good example of when you really think about insights that's going to drive a communications campaign, and how you really will drive effective behavioural sales.

Katie 32:57

But you've proved that it's possible to use storytelling approach in something that could be as dry as compliance issues, health and safety issues, which I think is great, because we know that storytelling just works. It brings the message alive. But it also like the idea of because people depend on you. It's so broad, and almost everyone can take part in that. It really opens up stories that can be as diverse as the people who work for your organisation, which is lovely.

Danielle 33:29

I was looking back over some of the material in preparation for this conversation, Katie, and some of the photos, they're just beautiful. There's a photo of a woman in South Africa, sitting on the bed with her great grandmother, who was his beautiful elderly woman. And she's the person that depends on to stay safe at work. We know emotional connection is



important. It taps into our humanity. And it's true in every culture. That meaning does translate, super effectively. Yes.

Katie 34:05

We're going to take another right hand turn here and go somewhere else. Because you have worked with many senior leaders, I'm sure over the years. The very latest Edelman Trust Barometer that came out not so long ago, suggest that I think it was 62% of the 28,000 people that that survey interviewed, 62% said CEOs should manage societal change, not just changed inside their own businesses, which is a huge challenge, I think for an average CEO. I'm just wondering what your reflection is on the changing role or nature, if you like, of leaders, and how on earth do we best advise and guide them in today's incredibly complex world?

Danielle 34:53

It's certainly a changing and fast moving space. And we've all seen leaders do this well. And we've seen leaders who've come up against an unanticipated backlash to a position they take with serious consequences for them and their business. So I imagine at the moment, there's considerable trepidation in the C suite about what my company and what I will take a public position on. And I think that the the transition at a board level around stakeholders, and I'm sticking with corporate for the moment, but it used to be that your fiscal responsibility was to create profit and return profit to shareholders or investors. And that is no longer the case. So I think it's a good shift that businesses do need to float more broadly about their stakeholders. They are part of the society, they don't just owe a responsibility to their owners. They owe a responsibility to their employees, to the community at large, certainly to their customers. But it's right that they are thinking more broadly. How far does that go, though, is really the issue for me. And I think my advice would be that your organisational leaders need to talk about, does this societal issue, is it relevant to us? Does it impact our workforce in in a significant way? Then, certainly you need to look at it. Would our stakeholders expect us to have a position on this? And for most organisations, that massive climate issue is, of course, something that all stakeholders I think will expect all organisations to be addressing, their decarbonisation to contribute to the transition, the much-needed transition. There are things that are obvious that you will have a position on, and there are other things that are perhaps not so relevant, whether you take a position on that is a judgement for your leaders to take.

Danielle 36:57

But I asked the question, and I've heard other commentators say this, but an IABC World Conference in New York, Frank Shaw from Microsoft, he shared that he really sets the question before taking the position to really add anything valuable to this public conversation. Yes, this social issue? And if we can't, why would we be there just because we

could. So I think there's a series of questions you need to ask, is it relevant to our business and our stakeholders? Even if it is relevant to our business and our stakeholders? Are we adding value to the conversation or just noise and sometimes that might inform whether you're communicating or position internally, or internally and externally, I'd be guided by my organisational purpose and strategy. And then obviously, look around and see what's going on around that particular issue. As comms professionals, we can really help advise how leaders that there's an issue bubbling that we need to consider. And also an enthusiastic leader might want to go public with something and we as comms pros can see the risk around that, we'll need to bring that to their attention. It's ultimately their call, but we need to inform them, "it's an interesting idea. Let me just get you some information on what our customers are saying."

Danielle 38:14

My organisation we took a position in Australia over the Voice, the recent vote that was on sadly unsuccessful, we'd advocated for a yes vote in Australia for the Indigenous Voice to be recognised in the Constitution. And we'd already communicated that position internally because it was consistent with our Reconciliation Action Plan. And then we wondered, should we communicate it externally? So what we did, what my team did, was we looked at what our competitors were saying, what our industry groups were saying, what our major clients were saying, and got advice around that. And then our CEO tested his thinking with some trusted peers of his before we even took the public position. And I don't think we regret taking that public position, because it was true to our purpose and our values.

Katie 39:03

How much of what you're saying depends on how good you are at listening, and having that finger on the pulse? Because I'm just thinking, when I see activism, employee activism and walkouts, my first thought is what were you not paying attention to? This did not come out of nowhere. There must have been things you weren't paying attention to. Would that be fair?

Danielle 39:28

Absolutely. I've never worked in a unionised workforce. So I imagine that context is significant for default to I experienced this idea and she'll really be able to advise on you. If you have good listening in an organisation, you absolutely understand what are the pain points for your people, your clients? Yes. And your risk radar that you should be part of with your legal team and quality team, your people team should be highly tuned and you should be well ahead of the curve. Because there is no excuse, frankly, for some of these issues, not all. But for many of these issues, you knew it was bubbling, you just hoped it would go away.

Katie 40:15

Yes, saying nothing and putting your hands over your ears is funnily enough, not not a strategy that works. I love asking this question. It's probably a little bit unfair. But there are certain people and you're one of them, I'm sure where, because of your wealth of experience inside so many different organisations, you must have had countless people either report to you work, or you've been part of larger communication teams. When you reflect on the most talented, the most successful individuals you've encountered you've worked with or you've managed, do they share any common traits or characteristics?

Danielle 40:57

It's part of our jobs really, isn't it, working with great people seeing people thrive and grow in their careers, it's a wonderful thing. And I'm very fortunate, I've worked with some terrific people, and quite a few of them are now in CMO roles. And that's been great to see and play a small part in it, when people develop their potential. I think there are a couple of things those folks have in common. All of them have very good people skills. Yes, Poland issue. So they call it that relationships piece. They listen well, but they can also influence because they've got good EQ. And smart. They have ambition. You have to want to go there. But in a good way. Healthy ambition. Because you want to take people with them, not just from the rice. Humour. I think you have to be pretty resilient in any corporate role. And having a sense of humour really helps, yes, how and to bounce back, and how, maybe not the same day as the disappointment, but within a reasonable period of time, learning from that parallel and not dwelling on those four rooms. And humour absolutely helps. So they're really human characteristics. Along the core skills like smart people who have the requisite domain expertise, always valuable. And some people just stand out as just being excellent at that. But those that really, I know, will they want it will have significant career, bring those human skills to the table.

Katie 42:40

I'd love to ask you a bit of a personal question around resilience. What did you find yourself doing to decompress and or just find the energy to bounce back? Was there something that you enjoyed doing or found yourself doing, when you knew you just needed to take a beat? Because resilience just doesn't come naturally, we have to work at being resilient. I'm just wondering what your what your personal strategy was.

Danielle 43:09

I like to swim. And I think swimming is a very good exercise for destressing. So that's I think that is important that people talk about regular exercise helping with resilience. And it's, it is absolutely true and good eating, absolutely true, lots of sleep, absolutely true. But I like to read and I will go to science fiction, fantasy, something that totally takes me out of the real world, crime... I don't know why a lot of us like crime of course it is something that really just takes me away from the work and I can get immersed in I think having a partner in life helps,

a glass of red wine doesn't go astray in this context, having someone that will listen to you just so that you can unload and get it off your chest, and then move on.

Katie 44:00

Great life lessons there. Thank you, Danielle. How do we know that it's time to move on in our careers? You mentioned very early in this conversation that if you're not really connected to the purpose or the values of the organisation, your life's a bit too short to stay there. There's another job waiting for you. But I'm just wondering what prompted your final decision to leave Aurecon into semi retirement I know officially probably retired. Still got lots to do. But yeah, how do we know when it's time?

Danielle 44:33

I always had in mind that 60 would be a pivotal time for me to make a shift. So that was always in the back of my mind here that I've no power. So I'm 61 but as that year was coming up, I did start to think about what I wanted to do. And I always wanted to be the person that made the decision about when and what and how I would move. I could have gone to another organisation, this 14 years was just wonderful, I loved my job. And I love the company the people that I worked with, but truthfully, I would need to have made a change. And the organisation needs to change. But for me as well, I wanted to hang out with my husband, and not have meetings from morning till night, and so I did want to make a shift. And I was in the fortunate position of being able to say, I can leave my full time job, not everyone's in that position. So I'm I know, I'm very grateful to have had that choice. And I wanted to do a bit of consulting. I'm joining a board and Age Care board in April. So I want to do some giving back. And to do that, as well. And it's having a healthy balance, humour life.

Danielle 45:52

So that's how I knew, it's different for everybody. But there was one thing I wanted to share that I thought was marvellous, and I would love to see more organisations do this. I'd made the decision and my CEO knew, and can you a year house. And then I got an invitation to go on a legacy leadership workshop for three days with a group of senior folks in the company. And obviously, post called up most essence book, I asked, "Why am I being invited?" And he goes, why I want you to be set up to think about the legacy you want to leave the organisation and your profession, and how to make that transition in a way that's good for you. And they had 15, 20 leaders at this retreat, and I just thought it was fantastic. And in a professional services context, in particular, I've often observed how these very senior and experienced lawyers and economists and engineers and accountants, when they get to the point when they're no longer wanting to be out there wanting to work, etc, feeding their teams, etc. they leave. And it's just such a waste to not think about how we can leverage that experience and Aurecon had and continues to have really senior engineers who might

just pop in one day a week, a 17 year old bridge engineer, but boy, what a rich coach and mentor to a young bridge engineer, to work with someone that's got decades and decades of knowledge. And so I'd love to see us do a much better job as corporates of thinking about our ageing workforce, and how to make it a better transition for them and for the organisation.

Katie 47:34

I've often thought that alumni are one of the most wrongly ignored audiences we have, and and as you say, as we have this ageing population, and a real talent gap, then there I think alumni are going to become more semi alumni can become even more important. So I couldn't agree more. Can you think about your legacy early on? Is it possible? Is it sensible to think about your legacy 20 years out, maybe? Do you think?

Danielle 48:05

Why not? I mean, I think a lot of people think about their purpose, and your purpose becomes your legacy. What do I want to do and achieve? How can I best do that? I think the whole world needs to think about legacy in a climate contexts. So why not think about it, and you can change your mind. Yeah. And things will happen that take you in another direction. But I think that that is something you shouldn't leave to the year of your retirement, I think you should really be thinking about it earlier. And if you think of things in a more finite context, you might make other choices about where you want to spend your time as well.

Katie 48:47

Yes. I also want to just comment on something else you've said, Because built into your answer was that thought that you are taking control, you are in charge, you are making the decision. So rather than let things slide, and have it happen to you, you're in control. And I think that's true, again, for whatever stage you are in your career. You don't have to be the victim of circumstance.

Danielle 49:16

I agree, fully agree. I think it's just a mindset that's helpful. And how you think about your working life, probably your personal life as well, right? You have agency, you should have agency, make the most of it. You can be a bit brave, if you can. See, I've never regretted some of the braver decisions I've made in life. You know, they've been frightening at times and culture of places where you know, you're well regarded and doing well and moving to somewhere new.

Katie 49:48

That's a neat segue! When you were the chair not that long ago of the International Association of Business Communicators, the IABC, because I imagine that was one of those things the volunteer position, no one forced you into it, but you said, Yes. I've got loads of questions that I could ask. And I'm mindful of the time that we have together. There's something I did want to ask you about the international dimension of that association. Because I think what's very special about it, from my experience of it and sitting on the board with you, is that it really does touch the four corners of the planet. Was there anything unexpected that you learnt, through that experience with the organisation about the universal principles of effective communication? Or did you see the opposite, that we should be more mindful of the noticeable differences in practice globally? Sorry that's a very long question. But hopefully it makes a little bit of sense.

Danielle 50:50

Here, look, it does. I do think there is some universality and approaches to how you do strategic communication well, and I wasn't surprised that that was reinforced. And what perhaps didn't surprise me, but really, it really reminded me that context is everything, in communication. And there are definitely cultural differences. And different business environments and values in society that are truly different, and nuanced. And one size does not fit all. So I might make an assumption, through conversations at the IABC, that we've often we have different committees on the board, etc. and realise through listening to others, ah, my shorthand way of thinking about an issue is not the same. They're seeing it quite differently. It gets back to different business environments, which are embedded in different societies. Those things are important, particularly if you're working for an organisation that's doing business internationally. And that kind of head office macro, corporate communication might feel like it's more efficient, what was the you're told? And same story everywhere. But actually, it's landing very differently in different countries. And you really ought to spend more time thinking about that cultural context.

Katie 52:17

Yes. What are your reflections now on having been involved with your IABC? I suppose my thought is, if anyone is considering volunteering, not just for IABC, but a professional association, what are some of the benefits? What's your reflection on that experience?

Danielle 52:39

I've always been a bit of a joiner. Like I, throughout throughout my career, I've been a member of different professional associations, and I've volunteered with them. I think you get the most out of those associations by volunteering. And I absolutely recommend it to everybody. It builds your network, which is really important. And you create experiences that you might not get in a day job, you're running a business in some ways yourself, just the comms folks, you're running your business, you're on the board, you're setting strategy,



you're overseeing all the functions, and so that's a really good experience. And you, you have a bit of fun as well, I would recommend it. I thoroughly enjoy it. In fact, a little later today on during an IABC webinar with my chapter here in Victoria. And we're having a conversation about careers. And again, I've met a lot of people through IABC around the world, I value all those relationships, I've learned a lot because when I came into my role at Aurecon, I had been a marketer at EY. And back in those days, it's not true now, but back in those days, the comms function was not part of the marketing function, it was separate, and now connected. So I came into a world where I was running brand marketing and comms and BD at the time, and I felt like I had a gap in my recent experience, and IABC became that channel and community that helped me close that gap. I exist best practice from around the world, and it's really helped me in my career.

Katie 54:20

Thank you, Danielle. 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.

Let's hop over to those quick fire questions if that's okay. What's the most important trait or skill, do you think, that all comms professionals they're going to need over the course of the next decade?

Danielle 56:14

I think we're going to need to let go of some thinking that this is the way things get done best because this whole AI space and transformation of how organisation work and the Bissell swats of many organisations are going to shift fundamentally. So I think we're going to have to be very curious, and had a real working mindset. Because we're going to have to change the way things are. I mean, Katie, I'm of a certain age that I remember being a marketer when there was no websites, or the worldwide web. Universities had access to a site, it wasn't out there for the rest of us to play with. That was a massive personal learning transformation for me the time to become adept in understanding that. Fundamental



question will still apply, but I was completely new, all born. So I think that ability to be open to learning new ways of doing.

Katie 57:13

Yeah, I'm recognising that it's all a little bit up for grabs at the moment, it could change fundamentally, I'm sure it will. I know internal communication wasn't your sort of core discipline in the sense that you looked after every facet, every discipline of communication in your roles. But if you had to complete this statement, how would you? World class internal communication is...

Danielle 57:36

what creates value, for leaders and organisations. To me internal comms is mission critical for any organisation that wants to be effective and successful. I've been working with some organisations more recently that don't have well established internal comms, and you can see the opportunity for them to similarly we can lift their organisational performance through world class, internal comms. So I'm a fan.

Katie 58:07

What piece of bad advice or unhelpful thinking do you think has consistently dogged the communication profession?

Danielle 58:15

Worrying about getting a seat at the table. That just does my head in. I get it, right? But then I'm of the time you'll earn the right to get a seat at the table. You should worry less about being given that and actually push your way in through the value you create.

Katie 58:33

Yes. I couldn't agree more. That was actually Shel's answer to and he said, I don't need to be at the table. I want to be the person that the leader speaks to before he goes to the table. Very smart, very smart. So finally Danielle, we give you a billboard for millions to see. And you can put on that any message you like. What would you like on your billboard?

Danielle 58:59

Oh, I was just like, could anyone be John Lennon, 'Make love, not war'? It just, it should be the billboard for all of us. But I guess given my reflections and having left corporate lives, and getting older, it will be that 'Getting old is a lot more fun than the alternative. So find the joy in every day.'

Katie 59:29



I love that. I love that. Thank you so much. This has been packed full of hugely helpful advice and wisdom. Danielle, thank you so much for your time.

Danielle 59:40

Thank you, Katie, and thank you for this amazing Internal Comms Podcast, that really is an absolute must listen to for anyone who wants to practice internal communications well, you're a great thought leader for all of us.

Katie 59:56

Thank you. That's very, very kind Danielle. Thank you.

Katie 1:00:01

So that is a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. For the show notes, links and a downloadable transcript of the show, head over to our website. That's abcomm.co.uk/podcasts. I am thrilled to say we have now passed over 350,000 plays of this show in more than 50 countries worldwide. This I think is a testament to the growing interest in and importance of effective internal communication. I met another loyal listener of the show last week, and yet again, I was blown away by this incredibly smart, dynamic, curious comms professional. I really do believe, you know, that I have the best audience in the world. Please continue to reach out to me via LinkedIn or Twitter, or by email at icpodcast@abcomm.co.uk. Feel free to suggest guests or topics for future episodes. 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.