



The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 11

Episode 102 – *The sound of success: IC at Spotify, Mastercard and beyond*

Katie 00:04

Hello and welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. I'm on a mission to find new ways to improve the way organisations inform, involve and inspire their primary audience: their employees. Every fortnight I asked a comms practitioner, author, consultant, or academic to sit in my podcast seat. And together, our goal is to uncover fresh insight and inspiration for those who are responsible for crafting and delivering internal communication.

Katie 00:44

My guest today is Kerri Warner a senior internal comms practitioner, with an impressive career spanning the consulting, agency and corporate world. Until recently, Kerri was the Global Head of Internal Communications at Spotify. Before that, she spent six years at MasterCard, where she led leadership development and was the Global Head of Employee Communications. Kerri has also held senior positions at the Communication Group, Publicis, American Express, and the global PR firm Edelman. But as she explains, she began her career in a field that on the surface, at least, would seem to be very different. I really enjoyed this conversation. Kerri's infectious passion for internal comms, and her real world experience and insights are evident throughout.

Katie 01:46

Listen out for Kerri explaining her 'five s' strategy for internal comms at Spotify, how she built an employee advocacy programme at MasterCard, how she handles tricky stakeholder relationships, the traits and habits of the most successful comms professionals that she's met over the years, and the table stakes skills all good comms pros need, plus much, much more. So without further ado, it is my great pleasure to bring you a insightful, wide ranging and fun conversation with Kerri Warner. So Kerri, a very warm welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast.

Kerri 02:37

Thank you, Katie, I'm so delighted to be here. I can't wait to have this conversation with you.

Katie 02:43

When we met previously, to prepare for this show, you said to me that you had moved from a career in micro change to one in macro change. And I just wondered, could you tell us about that journey as a context and background to who you are and what you do?

Kerri 03:03

Absolutely. So I graduated college with a degree in psychology, and was just fascinated by how people thought and how the mind worked. I got my then masters in clinical social work. So I started out working with adolescents to help them meet and navigate some pretty significant life challenges, that was all about really helping them see some possibilities for themselves beyond what they could after a course acknowledging and validating all the feelings and so forth. And I began to see that building trust and connection was always step one. And that required of course some deep presence, generous listening and compassion. And then I could challenge them long term for longer held beliefs. And what I saw through that was that change was happening. And sometimes it was slow and steady. And sometimes it wasn't. And it was often one on one, then I began to work more with families and groups and saw the power of systemic change.

Kerri 04:05

At the time, it was very early in my career, and I began to get hungry for change at a faster speed. And of course, when you're dealing with people who are grappling with some really significant challenges, you have to be respectful with the pace at which people can and are willing to make change. And so I thought how could I take these skills and understanding that I have and move from working one on one and in small groups to maybe more of a broader organisational systems change. And I was really curious to see what that could look like. Lo and behold, I was able to influence the leaders at PwC to hire me into the strategic change practice and taking again those skills that I had acquired in helping to facilitate change individually and bring that to more of a systems and organisational approach. And that became where I then moved into that macro change as I mentioned, but within that portfolio of change are things like leadership development, team performance, talent management, and of course change management and communications. And once I really dug into the communications I was off and running, I just fell in love with it, working with individuals, as well as from an organisational perspective, communications is where I ended up taking off.

Katie 05:22

I just want to go back to one thing you said that you were talking about working with adolescents early on in your career, that micro change bit, who were going through a tough time. And you talked about generous listening and building the connection and that comes first. I'm guessing that is exactly the same if you're working with a leader, for example, the connection bit, the generous listening before you can offer any kind of advice or counselling.

Kerri 05:48

100%, Katie, you just nailed it. That is job one for all of us. Because think about what happens not just being an active listener, which is a tuning to everything that people are saying, but to be a generous listener, and to ask more expansive questions can help build relationship, trust, connection. And after that happens, then you can take bold risks, then people understand that you have a shared intent. But for me, good things happen by being a really generous listener, and there are some specific questions that I asked that try to get to that.

Katie 06:23

Is the one question in particular, that's one of your favourites that springs to mind? That's putting you on the spot, I know, but...

Kerri 06:30

I'll give you two examples. One is one that I use practically. And the other is just that general more expansive questions. So a more expansive question might be something like, you ask a question, somebody gives you an answer, and then as a communicator, what you can do is go deeper, ask them and what else? And what more? Because often there is more, and then pause, embrace that pause, because within that, that more will come out from someone. And that will lead you down a path of discovery that you might have missed otherwise.

Kerri 07:08

Another kind of question I would ask and the when I had a brief stint for about a little over a year, looking after Leadership Development at MasterCard, we were as many companies were in that process of trying to have folks come back to the office when the world was safer. And we wanted to instil some more community and connection by having people come back to the office. But of course, people had concerns about that. So instead of leaders asking questions, like, how do you feel about coming back to the office and then going down the path of having those conversations, I suggested they say, What do you feel about coming back to the office? Then you uncover some things that could be really interesting to talk about. What do I feel? I feel ambivalent.

Kerri 07:52

I should preface this by saying also that during the course of my career also became a coach and as a yoga instructor. And while those things might seem very different from comms, the kinds of things that I've learned through immersing myself in those worlds, as well have informed how I think about communications.

Katie 08:10

I've heard this phrase a few times, let the silence do the heavy lifting. You're so right, by not jumping in... it's a powerful thing, silence, sometimes.



Kerri 08:22

It's such a practice, especially for me, I'm an Aries, I want to say I'm a recovering type A, it's a hard thing to do, but it not only helps you professionally, I think, and actually differentiates people, but it helps you personally. It builds relationships at every level and who doesn't want that? So sometimes you have to slow down to then move fast because when you slow down and you pause and you listen more generously, and you ask really, you know, expansive questions, you build something and then when you want to move fast with something, you've got the trust, you've got the connection, and there's a higher tolerance I think for risk taking.

Katie 09:02

Lovely fantastic thank you.

Katie 09:07

This episode is brought to you by my IC Masterclass, this is an on demand, self paced learning journey for internal comms professionals looking to turbocharge their career. It draws on my 30 years of experience, and includes many insights from the wonderful guests that I've had on this show. The IC Masterclass launches later this summer, but you can sign up today to get updates on the launch and exclusive early bird discounts, simply visit icmasterclass.com This is a comprehensive programme, eight workstreams, more than six hours of content, all designed to give you competence capability and inspiration. Register your interest today, that website again, icmasterclass.com.

Katie 10:09

Kerri, you recently moved on from your role at Spotify, but let's talk about internal comms there. First of all, I think a lot of listeners will know Spotify from listening to content on the platform. But can we share a little bit about what Spotify is like under the lid? And also a little bit about the internal audience you have there, too?

Kerri 10:30

Absolutely. So I joined Spotify shortly after significant changes were made to the operating model, and a significant headcount reduction had been made. I mention that because it really influenced how employees were feeling at the time when I got there, and a little bit of the tenor of the company. So if you think about a company that had started out, as most do, very small, and was on this path of accelerated growth and investment in development, and products and services to one that, wow, we are now really thinking about what should this model look like? How do we set ourselves up for long term sustainable success? And now we're accountable to shareholders, that's a different kind of mindset than the company had historically been used to. And that influenced what I walked into at the time.



Kerri 11:19

So Spotify has this phenomenal product, of course, and products that serve creators and consumers, this great, strong, desirable brand and passionate, playful culture. The culture had been extremely open and transparent and as a publicly traded company, there was now this responsibility, and there had been for a little while, right, to deliver returns for shareholders, and operate in a way that was going to build a business for the long term, which is good for everyone. It's good for creators, it's good for employees, because we can then continue to invest and build that trust in the investor community, so that they would continue to invest in us. But there were many Spotify-ers that had been there for years. And all of a sudden information was no longer something that could be shared as openly with as many people because it really could impact the company's competitive position. And that risk was very real. So we needed to reexamine what transparency meant for this company that was now nearly 10,000, globally versus just a few 1000. The CHRO Katrina Berg would say we're not an either or, it's both, and she was absolutely right. So how do we retain this entrepreneurial, playful, open spirit, and at the same time, we do have to change and we do have to evolve and one of the assets of me was coming, help us think about how we can use communications, right, as a tool to help the company move along and evolve. And the company comprise really, we call them bandmates, yes, always musical metaphors for pretty much everything. And there were a very high population, the lion's share of the population we're engineers. Yeah. And so when you think about engineers, and the corporate comms remit was really to be the company's storytellers. So first, our channels weren't really fit for being storytelling. And secondly, because of who our population was, sometimes the stories didn't really resonate with them, they wanted a more Axios style communications, they might actually get a little bit sometimes lost or disinterested in stories as interesting as we think they are. Sometimes people just want the 123, or give me the headlines and know where to go for more. And so I learned that through the many conversations that I had, as well as the data that I saw. And so if we really wanted to break through and connect with the internal audiences, we needed to really understand what was going to grab them and work from that point. And so most often, I think, when communication isn't successful, it's generally a failure to connect. And so whether it's content or channels, or people, whatever else it is, there's this failure to connect. And when you can break through and solve for that, all good things can happen.

Katie 14:08

I believe you had a five pronged strategy. Do you mind sharing that with us getting into some of the detail for us?

Kerri 14:15

After we did a channels audit with the team, it was very clear that the channels weren't really fit for storytelling. And when I went around, and I talked to people at all levels all over the globe, I heard the same thing, which was too much content and too many channels. I think something that's quite familiar to communicators everywhere. And what we needed to do was really say, Okay, we've got all of these different channels, many of them were siloed. And we wanted to bring people again on this journey to grow up a bit as a company and understand how can we build a long term sustainable business. And so that's sort of a 'one Spotify' imperative. And around that, if you think about kind of spokes on a wheel with a first job was really solving for that content and channel effectiveness, so this is the this five s comm strategy. Solve for content and channel effectiveness so that we could break through that second one was steer the narrative instead of having too many disparate things, how can we bring people along and have a core narrative from which everybody could see themselves a part of this, so comms team needed to, second 's', steer the narrative. The third one was to secure diverse storytellers. The way that the channels had worked there at the time where it was often, executives outside of the Slack channel where everybody could join in and speak as community. communications were generally top down. But when you want to tell a story, what better place to start than with the person whose story it was, who built this product, who overcame this challenge? You want to drive collaboration, tell the stories from the people from different functions and geographies who came together to collaborate. So we needed to find those storytellers. And that's what I mean by that third s of securing diverse storytellers.

Kerri 16:06

The fourth one was soliciting meaningful feedback. Of course, we had feedback and metrics on things like how many people joined calls, how many clicks, etc. But that's very tactical, that doesn't help you do what I think communication can really do and where the value really is for communicators, which is what action can we inspire or drive? And so what was the kind of meaningful feedback we were looking forward? It was will you do something differently? And again, it's not an easy thing in comms to really measure behaviour change. So to ask people, you know, was this better than the last one? Why? And beginning to again, kind of going back to that expansive questions. So the fourth was soliciting meaningful feedback, 'Would you recommend this?' that kind of classic NPS Net Promoter Score question always there. And then the fifth one was sharing the impact, sharing the impact with our stakeholders. For example, at Spotify, again, the musical metaphors, but we had on monthly town halls, unplugged sessions, and I'm guessing that they still do, where the CEO would speak for a bit, generally, sometimes the full executive team and then the majority of the time would be for employees, bandmates, to ask questions, and we had not as many folks join those calls as we wanted. And part of it, of course, was timezone related, we would as many companies do have replays, but the number of people

who listen to replays was not as much as we wanted. Here you have people speaking about really critical company matters. And we weren't cutting through. Who really listens to a full hour replay? Some people do. But often, there's a lot of things that you can skip over. So I said, Let's be super respectful of our audience, and say, let's do this in 10 minutes or less. And the team did a wonderful job of taking a one hour session, and creating something that we called unplugged in 10 minutes or less. Within 24 hours of quick turnaround, you would hear the key points from the CEO, and then some of the bigger questions and for the full replay, you could go here, but that led to an incredible jump in engagement of listenership and positive qualitative feedback from bandmates that said, hey, I really appreciate this. Make it easy for people to do what it is that you want them to do. If you want them to engage with your content. Make it fun, make it easy, make it simple.

Katie 18:25

Such good advice. culturally speaking, as you explained, Spotify, relatively young business, founder led, how did that impact your approach when you walked through the doors? Because looking at your CV, you've been at some very well known established organisations, was there a little bit of a culture shock when you walked in? Did you think, Oh, this looks and feels quite different? I'm gonna have to change my approach a bit here.

Kerri 18:49

So that's such a fun question. So two things that were a little bit new to me. One was, yes, it was my first founder led company, although in other roles that I've had in my career, I have worked with founders. And so I understood a bit of founder mentality. So when I got to Spotify, I knew I needed to quickly understand what was it about the business and the culture that Daniel Eck, the founder and CEO, held in highest regard, right? And how could I focus my team's work on honouring that, while at the same time, taking small steps to evolve how things were done? Because again, the company was changing and needed to change. And it wasn't the same company, as it was when Daniel had started it. And then I needed to really understand who the employees were and what they cared about, and what they needed in order to sort of bring all of these things together. Now that I don't think is so different from what I would do in other companies, but are there as quote unquote, sacred cows here that, look, I was in great and enamelled great admiration of what you know what Spotify is, is incredible and so it didn't get there from making so many mistakes. So one of the things that we wanted to keep doing, and that was very fortunate. Daniel was really open and very receptive to change and wanting to think about how can we do things better? So I knew what were his preferences? What can we not touch? And where were their opportunities to make things even better and go further.



Katie 20:22

You mentioned MasterCard, where you were before. When we spoke previously, you talked about a very successful employee ambassador programme at MasterCard. I think a lot of people liked the idea of Ambassador programme, they struggled to actually launch an initiative like that, can you talk a little bit about how you launched that and the secrets of its success?

Kerri 20:44

So when I got to MasterCard, there was an existing employee advocacy platform. At the time, it was dynamic signal that years later, right dynamic signal and social course merged to become First off, but it was dynamic signal at the time. And it was a channel that employees could use to share content socially, on their own social channels. And we wanted them to be ambassadors of the company and what the company was doing. But behind that, MasterCard was often viewed as like a credit card company, because that's where people see the logo, MasterCard, right? But MasterCard actually can't issue credit cards. And so there was this whole, like, people needing to understand a little bit about more about what MasterCard was, and MasterCard, was really looking to say, hey, we're a technology company in the payment space.

Kerri 21:32

So here was this opportunity to help influence how people saw the company. But when I got there, this platform was rather lacklustre a bit untended, it was more running because they had purchased it. But it really is only as good as the content and the value that people see in it. And many people weren't even aware of this platform. So while we provided content for people to share, there was not such great tracking or anything done with that. So as I got with the team, we went on this journey of discovery and wanting to understand what were the greatest sources of pride for employees? What are the stories that you want to tell to your friends? What are the sources of pride that they felt, and it turned out that there were five. First was the CEO and the things that he was speaking about, and where he showed up externally at the time, it was RJ Bonga, who was the CEO there. The second, were anything related to how MasterCard was a force for good through the products and services that would bring more people into the financial mainstream. How are we doing interesting things with, whether it be garment workers or with farmers, things people didn't even know about? Third thing was culture itself, and how that showed up through the practices, the programmes, and the policies that reflected this culture of care and decency. Fourth, was anything related to the company's brand priceless, was also a source of tremendous excitement and pride, whether it was sponsoring the Champions League, or launching the company as a symbol or Sonic brand. And so those were things that people were really jazzed about. And then fifth, the work employees themselves were doing was a source of

pride. If they were launching new products and reaching new customers, they were excited about that work. This became the content compass for the platform. With that in mind, we needed to then drive awareness that this thing even existed. So when are people most excited in their employee journey about a company and feeling really good, it's often on their orientation, day one. And so what we did was my team came in and gave them an orientation to this way of becoming a spokesperson for the company, but in a very authentic way. So we will make it back to that make it simple and easy for people to do what you want them to do. We made it very simple to get them up and running as employee ambassadors on this platform. And we did it by joining orientation sessions. And they became ambassadors. We then approached product teams, so existing teams, because again, we knew that they were very excited about their own work, launching new products. And so what we wanted to do was have them share learnings and triumphs along the way to that product launch. And as the team work in unison, to then amplify content, those are the two ways that we went in. And from that we made it really easy and relevant and fun for employees to share what they told us that they wanted to, we served up that content to them, they could then edit it, some of that as they saw fit. And then we acknowledged those who did the most sharing so we have global digital screens around the world and we would have essentially a leader board that would amplify for people. And then the last thing we did was we had their own C suite leader sent a note of appreciation just acknowledging what they had done and thanking them for being such strong vocal company advocates. But what I what really made it work was that it was very authentic, they already told us what they wanted to share. And then that became something that as again, it grew even more grassroots. We went in with product teams, and we went into orientation. But as more people saw it, heard about it, experienced it, they then came into the fold. And so then we began to run monthly sessions for people who wanted to be on boarded. And we of course empowered our regional communicators, to make sure that the content that they were providing was very hyper relevant to the regions.

Katie 21:45

Just coming back to that very first question you asked about pride, I think that's such a super smart question to ask. First of all, I've always had a slight problem with the word engagement. Because when we leave work, at the end of the day, we never go back to our significant others and say, My goodness, man, I feel so engaged today, unless someone has actually proposed to you we're not feeling particularly engaged. I don't think that's another word that we would use. But pride. I know what I mean, I know what that feels like. I know why I get that sense of pride. And the list of things that you suggested that you found out how interesting that they cross silos, I can't think of a client at the moment that doesn't want to break down silos, but those seem to be pan global, pan company things. They don't have to happen in

my area for me to feel pride. Precisely. I've heard you say you don't want simply to be an order taker in comms. This comes up quite a lot of times on my show, you need to be asking, often a better question than the question you're asking at the moment. If I'm seeking to understand a business's strategy, its goals where it's going, what kind of questions do I need to be asking?

Kerri 26:50

When you ask the question about an order taker, it harkens me back to when I first got to MasterCard, I was there for about six years. And I had two roles there, looking after internal comms and looking after leadership development. And when I got to MasterCard, I asked the team, how they were feeling about the work that they were doing. And I consistently heard that they felt like deli counter ticket takers: "I'll have some salami, a little provolone, put it on rye add the mustard..." which meant in translation to communications, I'd like a blog, I'd like a story, please put this on the digital screens. And they didn't like this feeling because they knew they could add more value. I have wonderful team of people who were ex journalists and so had that journalist mindset people who are really strong in technology, and every employee experiences, all those kinds of things. But they didn't know how to get from where they were to where they could be in providing value. And that kind of comes back to questions. So we need to start with defining our own purpose as a team. Why did IC even exist? And what was the job that we were really there to do? And where we landed, which I think is true, and the tactics are different. But what I have found to be true in various internal comms roles that I've had, which is really to drive business performance, and winning cultures, through communications that engage, inspire, educate, and connect employees, to the business, to each other, and to the world. And then all your content and channels feeds back up into that, and the tactics will change. But that's sort of the essence of it. But that was our purpose, then we needed to go out and proactively roadshow and back to questions, instead of just asking for feedback. We said, what would make this even better? Instead of what kind of communication do you want? Or what do you need is what are you hoping communications will do for you, your product, your team, your initiative, your challenge, then we're getting into some interesting material, then I have some things to work with. Because the answer might not always be internal communication, believe it or not, yeah, often that was a component of it. But sometimes it was a leadership challenge or a policy or programme and things that we couldn't necessarily influence but we needed to tease out otherwise communication, we would be set up to maybe even fail, right? And so ask these questions, then you begin to engage with your business leader from her or his perspective, which is meeting you for a reason, I have a business challenge, I have an opportunity be an enabler for me, if we could understand what they were really trying to drive, or what resistance they had or obstacles, then we could think really creatively about how to address that through communications, that could be

of real service to them. So dig a little deeper, what's the real concern or what's the real opportunity? And I borrow that from Michael Bungay, staggered book, the Coaching Habit, the power in that word real? Because it's just again, getting a little bit deeper into that? And then who was already a proponent? What can we learn from them? Who isn't? Who might resist this? What can we learn from them? Can we talk to them? And so these are questions that often business leaders know or have a sense of, and we become more like investigative reporters so that we can then come in with content that's really going to be both hard hitting and go right to the core of what's needed from the audience in order to move things forward. And I'm a big fan of the just one thing kind of questions, it forces people to figure out find discover that most important thing. So I would say, Look, if everyone who read this or listen to this, whatever it might be, if it were a speaking engagement, if it were an article, a short video, if everyone who read this could do just one thing to support it, what would it be? How would that change things? What would be different, right? That would make it faster for us to get to market. Okay, so that that gives us all the information we need to add a lot of value to what it is that they're looking for from us, and probably more than what they thought of when they thought of communications walking in the door. And so that took the team from feeling like deli counter ticket takers, to truly and the term is overused, but still so relevant to me, which is really strategic business advisors using the tool of communications, we can become better at our craft, when we listen and ask different questions.

Katie 31:20

Two things fall out of that approach. One is it is so much easier to prioritise, because in effect, your stakeholders are telling you the biggest change you can make to me and my business, my team, is this. So that's super, super helpful. And that question about, well, how would that feel? How would it be different? Makes it so much more tangible. When we talk about engagement and awareness, we're at that kind of slightly esoteric, intangible level. But when it's, 'We'll have shorter product cycles, better quality assurance,' whatever it is, then it becomes, as you say, super real. And that's so helpful, isn't it?

Kerri 31:58

I think it is, and it's not rocket science, but it is discipline, it is rigour, it is creativity, and it is consistency. For the most part, you generally need to do three things: you need to drive some awareness, you want to inspire action, and you want to create advocacy. Yeah, awareness, action and advocacy, what is it we're talking about? So give them some awareness and understanding. And then is there a To Do in there? Is there, you know, make your voice heard, join this, learn more about this, what's the action, there's always should be an action of some sort in there. And then at the end of the day, you want advocacy, whether it's for the brand, the product, the company, the town hall was great and I would recommend it, I'm an advocate for it



for someone else to listen... whatever that thing is. Because when you have a company of advocates, you have people who are inspired, who do feel pride, and to bring in more talent to the organisation, and off you go, yes.

Katie 32:56

I love your three A's: awareness, action, advocacy. You've just given us the title for the show as well, what more can I ask for?

Kerri 33:05

And they are all measurable. That's the beauty of it, too. You know, very clearly, you can ask people through surveys, through focus groups, through conversations, and to action. You can measure how many people did X, Y, and Z? Get Data on it? And advocacy? Are people using your platform to advocate as people who have listened to a replay? What made you decide to listen to this replay? Somebody else told me it was a really great one, and I shouldn't miss it. There's many tools now that give you enough information to know, are we moving in the right direction? Are we making progress with these things? It goes back to that five s strategy at Spotify around so setting meaningful feedback and sharing the impact. The impact is around that awareness, action and advocacy. There were two podcasts that we did, we had a wonderful story lab within the communications actually within the headquarters, there was a story lab where all kinds of wonderful things were done. But one of them was these employee podcasts. And we had two: one was called What's Next In? and that was all about the business and new products, new services, new offerings that the company was doing, that really positioned MasterCard, rightfully so as a forward thinking forward doing innovative company, and things that people wouldn't even know about probably otherwise, that we were doing to make cities more connected and all kinds of other things. So we would bring in business leaders and have them talk about that. And it did a couple of things, but one of them was humanise our executives, it also helped us go back to that objective of positioning MasterCard as a technology company in the payments space but showing that influence were the proof points of that. So future thinking. And then we had one called Inside the Circles again always plays on the MasterCard circles and so it was called right inside the circles and that was much more about the culture of MasterCard or how culture shows up, anything from personal branding into new joiners and their experience there, how people could grow their career there, and so forth.

Katie 35:06

Nice. Thank you for that. So Kerri, you've supported many C suite leaders and executives over the years, have you experienced any particularly tricky or difficult stakeholder relationships? And if so, what's been your approach?



Kerri 35:21

For sure, I suspect I'd be an anomaly if I hadn't. So, your step approach, first thing I do, Katie is assume positive intent. And by that, we certainly have something in common if we're both working for the same company, we want what's best for the company, we want what's best for the culture. And that's been I found where things can get tricky and disagreements happen is more often over tactics. What I'll do even before the conversation, my second step is to gather some data, I'm as vested in the situation or the issue as they are, and prepared. As it relates to influencing, we all know, it's easier to disagree with an individual's subjective point of view, but less so with data. Thirdly, I approach the conversations with an open mind. And listen, really listen for what the real concern or need is, and the values, the hopes or other forces in play that might have shaped the stakeholder's perspective, instead of reacting to counter in the moment, when I am bumping up against some disagreement, I'll ask another question to go deeper. And that helps people feel heard. And then I'm really making a genuine effort to understand, then I'll recap that our mutual objective is indeed shared, and confirm my understanding of what's most concerning to him or her, and then I'll bring in something that they've offered to me, which might be a little divergent from my solution, I'll start small, keep it low risk, we don't have to go in big and bold out of the gate. But rather, we can test and learn, I have found that start small, low risk is a really helpful way of getting stakeholder buy in and managing difficult stakeholders.

Katie 37:08

Have you got an example of that start small approach?

Kerri 37:11

I do have an example of something we did at MasterCard, this was really January of 2020. And we had been hearing from employees about transparency. And there were different points of views on certain things that either the company could impact or the company was impacted by what we did was say, what if we addressed this by bringing employees together, inviting them optional, to come together in a forum where the objective was not necessarily to change someone else's mind. But to share a perspective, perhaps, influence or change someone's point of view on it? But really, to learn something? And could we do that in a way that fostered connection, openness and transparency, I brought this idea to the head of HR there, Michael for Caro and the head of employee relations, because I had built trust and had that relationship for a long time. And because I had suggested starting small, and just doing a pilot, they were very receptive to it and supportive. Michael said, let's bring it to our HR executive leadership team, which I did I anticipated that there would be not as much enthusiasm for the idea, as Michael and the head of Employee Relations had and even the head of employee relations was a bit sceptical, but she was willing to give it a try. And certainly he was right. And when I

brought it to this larger group, pretty much everyone thought it was a terrible idea. What were we doing, we're opening Pandora's box. But lo and behold, it was a way to really say, hey, the values that we have, we've got to take some real steps to demonstrate them. Let's try it out. Low risk, we'll start small, we'll test and learn. We did that. Fast forward, the feedback was quite positive, we planned on expanding it. And then four months later, was the murder of George Floyd here in the US. And that certainly sparked a lot of emotion, and a call right at least for companies to do more to combat racism and inequality. All of a sudden, these open circle forums became the place where employees could share their point of view and now executives joined in to listen. And it was the basis for the actions that the company took, which became their in solidarity commitments to support black communities in the US and address internal opportunities as well. There you have it.

Katie 39:42

Yeah, great example. Kerri, thank you. The other super smart thing about that is I'm hearing a lot more about the importance of listening channels inside organisations. Something that in our desire to connect and to share and to all the rest of it. We sometimes forget that we can and just have these channels that are for listening. And it always strikes me that yes, you might open Pandora's Box. Although you did say that these are issues you were talking about that were relevant to the companies, they weren't just apropos of nothing at all. They were irrelevant. They were on the agenda, so to speak. But you're much less likely to come a scupper from something that suddenly comes in at left field that you weren't expecting. If you have always got at least a degree of listening going on, you can see it can't be with those walkouts that have happened in a few companies, there must have been quite a shock to those organisations, if they've ever had something like this, would they have kept a better finger on the pulse of the mood and sentiment of their organisation like to think they probably would have done?

Kerri 40:46

I completely agree, the fear that perhaps some leaders have is that they're going to ask for things or demand things that we are not prepared to deliver on, or we can't share all of the wise. But what you can do is acknowledge those kinds of things upfront that you can say, Look, we can listen, but we won't always act and not hide behind that. But to have some confidence that there's going to be disagreement, we want to make sure that we are weighing pros and cons and hearing all voices, but that at the end of the day, decisions will be based on these principles, if you will. And when people sign up to join a company. Those are the principles that they fly into. So it's that balance of listen and respond even if you're going to listen and not take the specific action or position that employees want. It's being able to let people know why that can do really good things in terms of building trust and retention and advocacy for a company. Yeah,

Katie 41:47

love it. There's a question that I quite like asking people in your position who have had senior roles inside many companies, you have met, you've led comms teams over the years. Are there many common characteristics of the most successful comms professionals that you've met over the years? Yes,

Kerri 42:07

I would identify five. First one, is there generally Wayfinders? By Wayfinders? I mean, they'll say not, can we do this? Or can we help? Can we communicate? But they are thinking about how can we? And how might we that kind of a spirit? So how do you tackle challenge with an opportunity mindset versus an opposition mindset. Second one is they build before they break. So they are building connections they're building trust, don't ask people for something, when you need it, build a relationship, first, just get to know people just understand what drives them what needs to they have what props they saw, because then you come from a different place when you do need to call in something. So build trust, build relationships, then go in and say, let's do this a different way. Or let's try this. So that's the second piece. Third one, I would say people who own their expertise, and what they aren't so great at, it's great when I hear, hey, Kerri, I'm really good at doing this. I'm less great at doing this. That's okay, sure, there's table stakes skills that all communicators should have. But to go deep in an area, just like a winning sports team, where you have defenders, you have offensive players, you can have a whole team full of defenders, my most successful teams, I've seen someone who's really good at long form and storytelling, somebody who can get right to the heart of the matter against somebody who's great at thinking about creative employee event experiences, someone who's strong an employer brand, someone who's great with technology, analytics, all of those things are good. So that would be the third one is owning your own expertise. And then related to that, I guess it would say fostering and embracing team learning and collaboration. So I may not become an expert in your thing, but help me become a little more dangerous than it helped me know enough or what can I learn from you? And even better yet, how might we collaborate to deliver something that's even better than any of us could do with our own area of expertise? So people who really have that learning and that that mindset of collaboration. And then lastly, I would say having a sense of humour, when we're able to find just a little bit of levity. As a team. We build connection cohesion, we were able to weather the ups and downs of the work that we do. Every day. There should be a little humour if we can find it, a successful team as a team that also can have some fun together and laugh at ourselves.

Katie 44:40

I'm going to pin you down a little bit. Kerri, you said at the beginning of that answer, that there are some table stake skills. Do you want to give me one or two that you think are table stakes in our profession? Yes,

Kerri 44:55

I would say and it's funny because we talked so much about AI. But I say, good writing, everybody doesn't have to be an amazing writer. But if you are a communicator, there is a writing standard that I do believe all communicators should have, I think it's a lost art. Increasingly, I also think that it reflects a clearer mind. So if you have a clearer mind, you can often bring someone along in your writing, whether it is a bit of a story arc, or whether it's a kind of a 123 Axio style, but is your writing good. The other table stake skill of a communicator is to be bold, or sometimes I think we play a little small and a little safe. And there is a place for that for sure. I think that the most successful communicators, just like the most successful people in business, are willing to push to the end sometimes beyond and acknowledge when a mistake is made, learn from it and move on.

Katie 46:01

It's often been a conundrum for me, I think, our friends in external communications in advertising and marketing, can make an absolutely appalling error and throw up their hands and say, Oh, campaign didn't work, did it? I'll do it differently next time, hey, ho. We just don't feel able, I don't think to take that cut those kinds of errors and mistakes and failures in our stride. And I don't know why that is that may be because our work is so visible across an organisation, maybe everyone thinks that they can do our job. I don't know if you've got any reflection on why the external world seems to be able to do this. And we find it so difficult to be bold and brave.

Kerri 46:41

Yes, it is interesting, perhaps it has something to do with the external role. And this is actually why hola internal, because my customers, my consumers, our audience is right in front of me, I can touch them, I can easily call them I can slack that right? Whatever it is, they're right in front of me, I can bring them together in a focus group. So it's quite visible when you make a mistake. In the external world, it's a little more impersonal. It's more transactional. It's almost like you're okay to disappoint people that you don't know as well. But people don't want to disappoint the family members that they care about. And I'm not saying your company or people that you necessarily love. But you are part of that community while you are there. And the visibility of that might be challenging. I remember very early in my career, I sent something out it had a mistake on it. And it was a big mistake was in the financial report, it was like a chart. And to try to be fancy and communications, I was going to make this chart lovely. And in the course of doing that messed up the numbers. And so I sent out a note to correct it. And the headline was, oops, mistake, corrected

numbers, something like that. And what that does, it's another form of connection. Oh, like me, you make mistakes, if you can be vulnerable, maybe I can to know some of that just humanity. That's some of the joy and the love of internal communications that I have, is because of that community building off that ability to really show up as you are because at the end of the day, when we talk about things that connect us all, we're all human, we all make mistakes, we all do things that we wish maybe we hadn't done. And we all have a path to growth and re-inventing. And we can do that. The third thing I would just say, focusing on impact over activity. And this is something that communicators all the time can get tripped up by the intent is good. They want to provide value going back to that MasterCard, example, what communication do you need, they want to do something that is going to be helpful. But if you focus only on the activity and not on the impact, then you're operating at a lower level than you need to. And if you really want to do something, and be taken seriously and be given the freedom to take more risks. Think about the impact you want. You want to drive business performance, you want to make sure that a product is well understood. You want to engage a new customer segment, you want to have people embodying the culture, certain cultural behaviours more than focus on the impact you want to drive instead of the activity that you're doing. That is a distinguishing factor if really great communicators.

Katie 49:22

Yeah, it's the difference, I guess, between being busy and effective. Exactly.

Kerri 49:27

Yeah. And when people are so busy, I would say, hey, really take a look at that, like, hit your pause button. What are the things that is sometimes like you just need to do things? There's no doubt about that. But oftentimes, if you step back and say, Is this really driving an impact? I remember sharing monthly dashboards, but it was about cliques and all of these other things. It wasn't showing impact. It was showing activity. And I said one is anyone reading this and if so what are they doing with the information and we stopped doing it because it wasn't having the desired effect. It wasn't effective, and helping people to communicate better. So we needed to just change our our tactics but but changing our tactics without thinking about what impact we wanted to make would have been just some other tactic and the one to make was helping people to be, as you said, more effective and communicating.

Katie 50:21

You mentioned AI briefly there. I'm just wondering, of all the advancements you've seen in technology, obviously, AI is probably the biggest we've seen in recent years. How are you expecting that to impact internal communications or the word of comms more generally, do you think?

Kerri 50:41

Such an interesting question. I mean, right now, it feels a bit to me that AI is everyone's saying ai ai. So get in there and make sure that if you're a comms team, you're using AI. But to be really intentional in the use of this technology is going to be something that I think over time becomes more predominant and important. Sure, there's a usefulness to AI today, first drafts of comps, all those kinds of things. I think as we get more surgical and think about the work that comms needs to do to add value, and how it can truly help professionals become better at their jobs, not just more efficient. That's where AI will aid us as a tool. And you think about this comms journey, from understanding audiences to even more deeply, being able to mind stories of think about AI as a tool. Okay, what are people really talking about here that they would want others to know, we do focus groups and things like that now, but could AI be a tool in helping us and again, this is right now an efficiency play? But beyond that efficiency? Can we think about how can it really help professionals become better at their jobs, not just more efficient, we talk so much about the value and benefits of storytelling, which is the practice that's been in place since the dawn of time, it seems and yet never more relevant. And you look at World Health Organisation statistics about trends and social isolation and loneliness. Yeah, so as we become much more tech, advanced, internal comms has a role to play in keeping the humanity in comms because you also can't talk about authenticity, and have something that's completely AI generated from soup to nuts.

Katie 52:22

I love that phrase keeping the humanity in communication. I absolutely love that. This is the kind of concluding question, I guess, before we get to those quick fire questions. But you've obviously had an amazing career, some very successful, prestigious organisations. When you reflect back on your career journey. Are there any particular insights or lessons learned that you would share with others? I

Kerri 52:49

would approach everything with a what can I learn from this mindset? What can I learn about my craft? What can I learn about myself? What can I learn about other people, and lean in with that kind of curiosity rather than thinking of experiences as good or bad, of course, we can go home and say, Listen, this was just a horrible day. And this was a horrible experience, a horrible boss, whatever it might be. But if you can dig a little bit deeper, it can really also be helpful when you're in the throes of something difficult to say there's something to be gleaned from here. So if you can have that, then I think that's a great that that is a lesson I have learned and share with others. Also differentiating yourself through taking on projects and experiences in roles that others typically may not, and then crystallise, how that has helped you add value in new ways. And that helps you move beyond the sea of sameness as an

educator and that traditional path. So for me starting out as a clinical social worker, becoming a certified coach, doing other kinds of things, even leading leadership development, that gives me something that makes me a bit unique as an internal communicator. So find those points of differentiation. And then the third thing I would say is enter every professional relationship like a forever one nahi I think it was Wendy mas who said, you know, be kind everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. And so if you think about people beyond their role beyond their title, then come back to the theme of connection. But just thinking about less of a relationship as a transaction is smallworld. And I think as people move along in their careers, they'd be surprised to see how things come around again. So if you enter every professional relationship, like it's forever, that's something I have learned over time. It's interesting, too. Last year, I saw Dermot Kennedy concert with my daughter when he was on his sonder album tour, and I bought the sweatshirt not only because the show was great, but because on the sleeve he has the description of sonder in small print, which is the realisation that each brand and passerby I is living a life as vivid and complex as your own. And I love that because when you approach everyone you meet with that central belief, you meet the moment and the person with empathy and compassion. You listen more generously you connect in it. Look, it's a beautiful thing, and it takes practice. But that is a lesson I have learned and continued to practice. such

Katie 55:22

Fantastic advice, Kerri, thank you so much. This episode of the internal comms podcast is brought to you by my very own Friday update. Would you like a short email from me, never more than five, but it points long, giving you my take on the week's news from across the world of communications? This might be the latest reports, books, podcast 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. We're going to hop over to those quick fire questions if we can just for the last few minutes. How would you complete this sentence? World class internal communication is...

Kerri 57:15

an organisational team sport. And by that I mean you need executive leadership to set the tone for transparency, openness, trust innovation through their behaviour. You need the employees whose stories are the proof of business moving forward and



embodying culture that they're not just these values on the walls, but behaviour in the halls if you will. And you need a comms team who can bring it all together in creative, compelling and credible ways.

Katie 57:49

I love it so much. What books should all comms professionals read?

Kerri 57:55

Oh, gosh, it's hard. It's like choosing a child. I love a more beautiful question by Warren Burger, the power of inquiry to spark breakthrough ideas. Because going back to table stakes, there are table stakes things that all communicators need to do well to value and where you really differentiate yourself is being a thoughtful adviser, an enabler of the business and the culture. So a more beautiful question by Warren Burger, perfect

Katie 58:23

Links as ever in the show notes, of course, listeners. What piece of bad advice or unhelpful thinking has consistently dogged the comms profession do you think?

Kerri 58:36

That the focus needs to be on getting the message out rather than getting the message through? Oh, it's incredibly important to move fast at times. And we know our external comms partners are often in that position. But if we don't focus first on how are we going to make sure that the message gets through. And that means understanding and knowing in advance what are the hopes, fears, concerns, listening preferences on all of that, then the message as great as it might be as important as it might be? It's never going to get through?

Katie 59:13

Great answer. And finally, of course, we give you your billboard for millions to see what are you going to put on your billboard, Kerri?

Kerri 59:25

Assume positive intent. I think it's just a great foundation to build strong relationships a helpful attitude to have when you need to move things forward with a team or a group or people you disagree with and even if people you find don't have positive intent, you having it and saying so could suddenly influence them to step up. And it also just says a lot about the kind of person you are in the best way. Imagine if everyone did that it would be amazing.

Katie 59:57



It would. Kerri I have lost count of how many sound bites I want to take from this conversation. It's been absolutely amazing. Thank you so much.

Kerri 1:00:08

Oh, Katie, thank you so much. It's been such a pleasure talking with you.

Katie 1:00:14

And that is a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. All the links you need, including a full downloadable transcript can be found on AB's website, just head over to abcomm.co.uk/podcasts. If you found this episode helpful, I do have a small favour to ask you. Please like or rate the show on your favourite podcast platform. This just gives the algorithms a little nudge and makes it easier for your fellow comms professionals out there to discover our show. We have some great guests lined up still for this season in house internal comms practitioners at Iron Mountain, Reddit and the management consultancy firm McKinsey. So my advice, I'd hit that subscribe button today. A big thank you to Kerri, my producer John, sound engineer Stuart, Content Manager Madi, designer Rob and the rest of the fabulous team back at AB who helped me keep the show on the road. And finally, a heartfelt thanks to you for choosing the internal comms podcast. The show would be nothing without you. Please do continue to get in touch with me via LinkedIn or Twitter. I love hearing from listeners. A special shout out to those who share their favourite episodes on LinkedIn for their fellow comms professionals to find. That is a truly special endorsement. Until we meet again, lovely listeners stay safe and well and remember what's inside that counts.