



## The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 11

### Episode 103 – *Say the thing now: Candid conversations at Reddit*

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**Katie** 00:04

Hello, and welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. If you're passionate about making communication in the workplace truly effective, you're in the right place. Every fortnight I ask a comms practitioner, author, academic or consultant to sit in my podcast hot seat. And together we explore ways to make people feel heard, understood, valued and inspired at work. I'm going to try to keep my preamble for this episode short, because honestly, I can't wait for you to meet this week's guest, the Head of Internal Communications at Reddit, Sean Langston. I found Sean's passion for internal comms, his vision for the future of our profession, and the way that he expresses these ideas nothing short of inspiring, listeners, I hope you do too. I really would love your feedback on this one.

**Katie** 01:07

As you probably know, Reddit is a platform where millions of people around the world engage daily in conversations about hobbies, issues and interests, whether these are mainstream or incredibly niche. So I was eager to discover if Reddit's ethos of open, egalitarian, transparent communication is reflected internally as well. As you'll hear, Reddit aims for radical transparency internally, it adopts a 'say the thing now' approach, which is all about communication that is candid, respectful, simple, and human. Listen out for Sean's smarter manager communication plan, which empowers people leaders to feel like the owners of business decisions. And to illustrate this approach, Sean asks us to imagine what internal communications might be needed if your company is being relocated to Mars – it is a very clever analogy.

**Katie** 02:13

He explains why if you're moving slowly as an internal communicator, you're probably already too late. And let me give you just a little of Sean's backstory. This includes over a decade of experience in leader and employee comms roles at organizations including the software company Autodesk, Glassdoor, PayPal and the logistics and shipping company AP Moller Maersk. Listeners, prepare to be inspired, enlightened and energised. It is my very great pleasure to bring you Sean Langston. Sean, welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast. I'm so excited to have this conversation with you!

**Sean** 03:01

Katie, I'm super grateful to be here. I'm really excited to just dive into all the things internal comms with you and for you to pick my brain and for me to pick yours quite a bit.

**Katie** 03:09

Sounds fantastic. To start, I'm going to take you back to university if that's okay. You are sitting in Melissa Johnson's class, your communications professor, and you have a sudden revelation. Can you share that with us?



**Sean** 03:28

Well, you're really taking me back in time and making me think about college life. Look, first and foremost, Dr. Johnson was such a spectacular teacher, coach, advisor, mentor, and I learned so much from my time at North Carolina State University with her. One class in particular that I had with Dr. Johnson was focused on Communications and Public Relations case studies. And in that class, we have this pattern of being assigned a case study, and having to think through how to solve problems that a company in the past has already faced, and really putting our professional hired salary communicator hat on while still being unemployed and in college. And so, one day I was signed a case study, I won't say the brand's name, but in this instance, the brand published something on social media that was a bit out of touch. It wasn't well timed. It was just not well received. But of course, as always, it was well intentioned. And first reading the prompt for this case study, my immediate reaction was, who the heck let them get into this situation? Who signed off on this? Who saw this and said, Yes, let's go? And I pondered on that a bit before diving into the assignment. And I said, I wonder if there's a career where someone's not just cleaning up the mess, but making sure that the company and the teams and the way these organizations function are more mess-proof, and more thoughtful about creating governance around what they do and don't do publicly. And it dawned on me that some sort of internal expert and spokesperson and consultant who has to say, what will be told external, is only going to reflect how we think and operate inside of our company. And I said, There's got to be a communications role for someone who can say, "Don't do that. Because even internally that will create kerfuffle." And I dove down a rabbit hole, and I found the internal communications function, which I didn't know existed before then, and it caught my eye. And I've been there ever since.

**Katie** 05:54

Did you have an alternative career in mind before that moment?

**Sean** 05:59

It was definitely public relations. Just working on the agency side was always a dream of mine. And this moment completely changed that because I'd always thought of myself as someone with a bit of common sense, not saying I always made the best decisions in my life, but that little bit of common sense gave me confidence to place myself in a role where I can say, can I give you a piece of common sense before you make that decision? And as I've leaned into the internal communications role and function, I've learned that a lot of what we do is bring common sense, bring real signal, bring real context to real timely business environments and situations. And I've fallen in love with it. So I don't regret this side of the comms function, the internal side one bit.

**Katie** 06:52

That's very good to hear. I want to get into the detail of your role at Reddit. But before we do, let's talk about internal comms more generally, having told me what you've just told me. In preparation for this conversation, you made a prediction for how you think internal comms is likely to change over the next five to 10 years. Can you share that prediction with us?



**Sean** 07:15

This might ruffle some feathers. But my belief is pretty transformative for the internal communications function. Hear me out folks, I hypothesise that the future of internal communications is one where we're more far removed from the tactics, we're more far removed from the day to day tactical executional pieces of the job that we do today, and that we've been doing for quite some time. I believe the future, my new promising future of internal communications, is one in which we have prepared and equipped the organization to communicate just as expertly as we do. And so we shift from the single point of failure role, where we are the people who can write the best and tell stories the best into one that we've always wanted. One where we're really strategic, highly sought after advisors for the most senior executives, and decision makers in the business. We are able to leverage our creative talents to help managers and leaders across the organization tackle really hairy, messy, nebulous communications challenges inside of the business. And we're not publishing newsletters, we're not ghost writing, we're not updating the intranet, we've actually built an ecosystem and the competencies alongside that ecosystem to help everyone be an expert communicator. I think that's the future of our function. I think that's where the exponential business value is. And I believe most importantly, that's promising for internal communicators. Because we've always wanted nothing more than to be the creative geniuses that we've always seen ourselves as. A challenge with that, in today's environment is we're really caught up in the tactical, there's too many fires to put out. So we have to scale our competency, we have to scale our expertise to the organization, so we can buy back time. So we can buy back our ability to make more strategic decisions. That's my hypothesis for the future of the function.

**Katie** 09:21

And it makes perfect sense because we live in a world now where so many people are publishers of content, even if it's just that they're on Twitter or LinkedIn, or they've got their own blog about their passion or their hobby. Also, it chimes with that word that gets used all the time now: authenticity. When real employees are telling real stories about their own lives, then you don't really get more authentic than that, do you? So it's right on the money. For me, certainly. You recently spoke at a conference about your smarter manager communications plan. I'm guessing that whole plan aligns with your prediction for IC as you've just outlined it. Can you share with us what your smarter manager communication plan is all about? Another reason for asking you this is that all the research I've seen over the years shows that we as internal comms practitioners think there's a stumbling block or a barrier, often around line manager communication.

**Sean** 10:20

One quick call out at Reddit, we refer to our managers, leaders of people, as people leaders. And I think that's already a mind shift in itself. Because what I spoke about, most importantly, at that conference, was that people, leaders or managers need to feel like owners. When you set them up to feel like owners, like shareholders of business decision making, I think you are able to call them to action more distinctly. You're able to entrust them with more information, you're able to give them the context, but also the autonomy to



take that context, to take that clarity, and execute. A lot of what I spoke about there was, how do you build an enablement ecosystem toolkit and playbook for the people who lead your people? Right? I think one thing we've learned over the past few years with all that's happened in the world, is that organisations are nuanced. Teams are nuanced. What may be a key message for your team might be a different key message for someone over in the product development function. Although we're marching towards the same goal, translating that message, and that business strategy, and whatever those next steps are into action looks different for those different teams. As we look out on the horizon towards that five to 10 year vision I was articulating earlier, how do you equip managers with just the right toolkit to take that message, own it, and say, we're not making this change because this Vice President said, we're making this change, and it's the best thing to do. I believe in it. And here's how I believe in it. And here's how that translates to future success for our team, for our users and customers, for your careers. If you can give a manager the toolkit to own that story, instead of saying, Here's line number one, recite your script. Here's what our response is going to be. Here's a list of FAQ's... maturing the organization to say, you own this, this is your team, here are the key pieces you have to get right. And the rest, it's an autonomous exercise. I think entrusting your people, leaders at your company with that level of autonomy, to bring the mission, the work, the execution to life, and to translate that to their teams is the way forward. And we've seen great success with that at Reddit.

**Katie** 13:00

That phrase 'shareholders in the business decision making process,' I love that so much. That's the holy grail for so many organisations, isn't it? Because once you get to that place, people feel invested, then they're more collaborative, they use their ingenuity more, they're more inventive, innovative, and it's all the things that organisations want. So I love that so much. Just out of curiosity, because I know listeners like something practical, in terms of that enablement system or that playbook, what are some of the pieces of that? What are some of the elements? What does it look like?

**Sean** 13:38

At its core, it is the key message you need to communicate to your organisation at any one time. So in action, let's just say you are working for a company that is all about space travel, all about exploring the universe. So this company is currently stationed here on planet Earth, and there was a big decision made recently, the company is relocating to Mars. They found the ability, the tools, the infrastructure to operate the business on Mars, with better cost outcomes, better access to interstellar customers that we've recently located. And you need to find a way to not just communicate to the organization that the business is going in this direction. But that the expectation is that 80% of roles need to relocate to Mars within the next six months. When you put all that together, you've got to figure out what is the key message here. The one sentence message is 'Business will be great on Mars, we'd like you to come with us. We'd love to hear back from you within the next three months to prepare for a six month journey.' When you have that you've distilled what the key message is, and you then have to figure out how to give people leaders the tools to take that simple message, and to take some additional augment of resources and bring that message to the organization. So that might look like a quick one pager or one slide that literally asks the



questions. What's happening? When? Why are we doing this? Why now? Who's impacted? What decisions are needed? And by when do they need to be made? Where can I find additional resources to answer questions? And if I have a customised question, who might I speak to? If you can list all those questions, and have the answers, you've done 80% of the work for your people leader. And then alongside that, there's a people leader asset that says, here's how you can take this story and make it your own. Here's how you can get your team excited about our intergalactic relocation. And here's what it means for you as a leader. And so we'd love for you to be bought in, we'd love to support you however you need us to. And having all this on paper, alongside those resources, is really all a people leader needs. If you hire and you manage and you trust someone to lead other people, they've got everything they need to not just distill and communicate and cascade the key message, but to make it their own, and to feel like they're bought into the intergalactic relocation. And so it's that toolkit, and that repetition, alongside what we as internal communicators helped bring to life and all these other communications channels to communicate that change is happening alongside the people leaders, that brings it to life in a really magical way.

**Katie** 13:48

Just out of curiosity, because I love that approach. Do you also have some community forum or place, for want of a better word, where these people managers can share their experience and come together and share best practice? Because I think that's a bit that's companies often miss, I think.

**Sean** 17:06

Absolutely. One of the most beautiful things about Reddit, as a platform is that it can be used for many different use cases. And we use it as our internal intranet. And so we have a private people leaders-only space, a private people leaders Subreddit, in which we communicate those changes, we foster community and conversation as real people do on reddit.com and on our platforms across devices.

**Sean** 17:35

We also have a Slack channel that serves a bit of a different purpose. We try to go above and beyond to give people leaders the sanctuary not just to receive information, but to exchange information and to contribute, and not necessarily to debate truth and understanding, but to call out potential shortcomings or opportunities in information that's been given to them. It creates this really healthy and bustling ecosystem where a people leader in a small town here in the United States could say, hey, in reference to this line of the intergalactic relocation plan the company is embarking on, I think teams like mine are going to struggle with this piece: we previously told them, we are Earth-first. And so it creates an opportunity to build out that toolkit with more answers, more clarity, or a response to that question and why we've changed our minds. Or in those really unique moments an opportunity to rethink how we're going about the actual execution of this plan.

**Sean** 18:46

Our people leaders are where I look for signal in our organization; they're closest to the teams. That's contrary to what the educational path typically tells you, your most senior



leaders and executives have all the clarity. I think your most senior leaders and executives have clarity into what success for the business looks like. They don't have the clarity into what the workforce is thinking and feeling and experiencing the way a frontline manager does.

**Sean** 19:16

It's important to also know when you are cascading new information to a people leader, you should do it early. They should not get that information at the same time as the rest of the organisation. That foresight, that ability to go ahead and hash out what some discrepancies or disagreements may be, or where information is unclear, is critical. Because not only do they help you sharpen your message and your delivery, when it's time to bring it to the rest of the organisation, but they help you get ahead of what are going to be all the push back moments that the organization is going to bring to you when you push it live.

**Sean** 19:54

So trust your people leaders is one thing that we always have at the top of our list. Enable them, empower them, inform them early, and make sure that they are set up for success when it comes to driving this transformation and change throughout the organisation. And it all maps up to them feeling like owners. You don't feel like an owner of something when you get it at the same time as the people you're supposed to lead. You feel like it's been given to you and now it's for everyone to action.

**Katie** 20:22

Yeah. And I just want to come back to that word that you used. I loved it so much: sanctuary. This idea of a safe space where they can discuss they can share they can ask questions. That's fantastic. Thank you for that answer.

**Katie** 20:39

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](http://icmasterclass.com). This is a comprehensive program, 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](http://icmasterclass.com).

**Katie** 21:40

So Sean, and I do like to do a bit of research before these interviews, and I came across an article you wrote where you compared being an internal comms manager to that of being a traffic controller in a busy metropolitan city. And you use this great line. You said "I'm the guy who's putting up a billboard to show you that you're on the right path." I love this so much. Can you bring this analogy to life for us?

**Sean** 22:08

Sure thing, Katie. This one always makes me laugh because it is the absolute embodiment of what we encounter and work through as internal communicators. I like to say that companies and organisations are actually organisms, they're complex organisms. And they're filled with micro organisms and micro cultures. And when you look at one of the best real world examples of a complex ecosystem, an organism, it's a busy metropolitan city. It's super diverse, it's fast moving, new information is just popping up and being transferred and exchanged at all times. And so when you think about the role of an internal communicator, you see us as some sort of direction setting function inside of that city. And I like to dive directly into travel.

**Sean** 23:03

So imagine, you have your grandmother who you have not seen in six years, you can't quite remember where her home is. But you're more excited than ever. Because two weeks ago, she messaged you and the family in gibberish, because she's not very good with mobile devices, and said, pecan pie, my house, see you there, this date, and this time. And so a family member texted you the address because she can't even remember her own address. And you said, Whoa, I'm excited. Let's get there.

**Sean** 23:39

What you need to get you there, is a few things. So grandma's got the pecan pie, you've got her address, you need a mechanism to get you excited and motivated about getting there first. The pie itself is that mechanism. That is comparable to we as internal communicators spending the time to get you excited about the mission and the values and doing that frequently. And that's what's been happening your whole life, you've been spending time with grandma, you've built memories. And so you're excited about the pecan pie and the opportunity to spend some time with her in the family. And so there's the getting their part: in this busy metropolitan city, to get to the outskirts of the city and to Grandma's little wrench, 30 minutes outside of the town, you need some guidance, you need directions. When you think about the role of an internal communicator. What we do is guide you towards that place that you're looking to go. We are the billboard. We are the GPS system that's saying turn left, turn right, and we're doing this alongside leaders.

**Sean** 24:44

Our job is really exciting because we have to be flexible and changing when the city around us changes to edit your directions to tell you, here's a detour to go left, and all along the way to keep you motivated and excited about going to Grandma's to taste the pie, because if you get too discouraged, the trip's not worth it. And so our role is really critical, driving people to delivering the right outcomes for the business. And being that role of a GPS system, or a billboard to say, turn left or turn, right. It's really fun, because you get to tell really cool stories about the business, and the impact it's making on the world.

**Katie** 25:28

The other reason I love that analogy so much is that in any busy metropolitan city, the traffic controller is also impacted by the weather, there are external forces that we don't control that impact our organizations. And we've got to prepare, and we've got to deal with





those on behalf of people as well, all of a sudden, it's starting to snow, we've got to tell you about changing your tires.

**Sean** 25:54

And what's really cool – and we know this as internal communicators – you extrapolate that one person on that one trip to go get the pie to a an organisation of 1000s. And so what you have is this diverse collection of people with different experiences, different motivations, different biases, who all need to arrive at the exact same house at around the same time. And you got to figure out creatively across all these different micro towns and cities, how to get everyone there. And so I believe, pointing to my point earlier, that building that ecosystem of helpers, and people who help you tell the story, is critical. Because you can't be the GPS system for every single person in the organization. They have different motivations, they have different starting points, they have different roles in getting the organisation to that end goal and fulfilling the company's mission. And so I think that's where the most fun happens in our job: enabling, partnering with and telling stories alongside other people is where the magic really happens.

**Katie** 27:10

Brilliant. Now we are going to get to Reddit, I promise. But before we do, I also read about a campaign that you did at the software company, Autodesk, I think it was called the 'my why' campaign. Again, I know listeners love a real life case study. Can you share that one with us?

**Sean** 27:30

Absolutely. That was a really exciting part of my career. I got to work with some really smart and creative people on that campaign. I was working at Autodesk at the time, and I was leading internal and executive communications for the product organisation. And we were growing so rapidly, we were transitioning to become a subscriptions business, and so really digitalizing the company and transforming the organisation to move into that next chapter. And so with a lot of the transformation and change that was happening, there was a need to reorient ourselves around who we were, and not just who we were, but why it mattered, and why it was something to get excited about.

**Sean** 28:17

And so my recommendation was to just pull everything apart, take some time to rearticulate who we are in this new future, and let's not just communicate it, let's get people bought in and excited about it. And so the reaction from the leadership team at the time was, yeah, this is great. Let's do it. I think we'll see a lot of success in telling people who we are. And we embarked on this exercise where we assess how they would tell the story of who we are. And we quickly learned that they hadn't yet spent enough time and thought on creating a compelling, personalised story for what that future looked like. A lot of the storytelling was about the product and the features, and what that would look like out in the real world. We quickly learned that was just tactical speak. It wasn't enough to motivate employees, it wasn't enough to say, here's who we are, here's what we're doing, here's why it matters. And here's why it's personal to me. And here's why I think it could be personal to you. So that campaign was built on extending leadership's connection to and bought in-





ness to what we're building and what we're doing to the rest of the organisation. And so we took our director and above employees to an off site for two days where we focused on storytelling. Don't tell me about the product you make. Don't tell me about the technical specifications and features. Tell me what you're doing for the world, tell me how your work maps to our vision. And then let's prepare to retell that story to the rest of the organisation when we get back home. That was the first step of the campaign, bring leaders together to sharpen and create their story for their organization, in this new mission-oriented organisation.

**Sean** 30:22

From there, folks came back home with really personalised creative stories about what their teams were all about. This wasn't tactical, this was 'I build products that allowed these types of customers to solve these problems in real neighborhoods, with real people. And my team is such a critical part of bringing that all to life. And here's why.'

**Sean** 30:49

And so that was the second piece, bring that story back to your teams, we're going to have our most senior leader tell his 'my why' story: here's why I work in this organization. Here's why the work we do is so critical and meaningful. And from there, we kicked off a cascading campaign to say, all right, leaders who went off site, we want you to spend the next two weeks telling the story to your teams, and helping them build a team story and then their own personalised stories so they can feel a sense of ownership in this organisation's and the company's mission. Once we got through that, it was a really beautiful opportunity. Folks showed up with their own personalised stories of what it meant to work in this organisation and at this company. And we gave them the opportunity to do that across any sort of media. So whether you were a long form or short form writer type of person, or if you love to create videos, or record something via audio, and/or video, the world's your oyster, just tell your story, we invite you. What happened over the next three weeks was this curation of stories of personalised buy-in to our mission, and why the work mattered. And told from the voice of our employees. This is really rare for companies, because there's always corporate storytelling that's either coming from the marketing function, or recruiting or the social media team. And so what we had there at the end of that campaign was employees who were more bought into the mission, the survey and poll results showed that for multiple quarters following that campaign, and we were able to go to our external go to market teams, and our recruiting team and say, we've got all the employee advocacy stories. Yeah. And that became fodder for recruiting. Right, here's why you should get excited about our company reaching out to you and saying, This is a great place to work. And here's how we see you fitting in. That grew legs in so many ways. And I'm really proud that the team was able to come together and deliver such a compelling campaign.

**Katie** 32:55

i imagine it must have also humanised leaders at all levels across the business as well, because all of a sudden, you're 'letting down your guard' is possibly the wrong expression. But you are creating more human connection with each other that way, I'm guessing?



**Sean** 33:12

Absolutely. I think what was really special was a few instances where employees actually teamed their story, like in across functions. So they said, Whoa, there's obviously connection between what you're doing and what I'm doing, I think we have an opportunity to tell stories about our experience of being a part of this organisation, but from two different functions, two different sides of the table. And so it created this really healthy community building exercise, where folks looked across the organisation and said, Whoa, like we're, we're kind of working on the same thing, but just from different roles. And that's what every company and internal communicator dreams of, right, shared ownership of the mission, and storytelling and clarity to follow that. So it was really special to see that human element come to life.

**Katie** 34:06

Let's turn to your role at Reddit. Now I'm guessing that many listeners will at least know of Reddit even if they're not active users, but can you give us an overview of what your company actually does have a sense of the makeup of your workforce?

**Sean** 34:22

Wow, I love the opportunity to tell people about Reddit. It is such a special place on the internet on the worldwide web. It is a community of communities. It is a place that's built on shared interests, passions, and trust. And it's home to some of the most open and authentic conversations on the internet. And people really come there for connection and they're able to do it anonymously. And so what you get is real people having real conversations about real topics, and exchanging ideas and building relationships. Reddit is really cool because users submit, and then vote and comment on the topics that they care most about.

**Sean** 35:07

At Reddit, we have an upvote and a downvote. The things that capture attention the most and that are the most compelling and interesting, they get upvoted. It's also been really cool to see Reddit become this ecosystem for getting questions answered. Right? Which beach towels are best for people with linen allergies? You search that on Reddit, and you find the answer immediately, it's been upvoted 2000 times. And so it's a different quality interaction you get on the internet. And then you can take that and extrapolate it out to any interest, any inquiry, any group, and you get really raw, organic, authentic storytelling and reactions from real people. And so we've got tons of communities on any topic you can think of. I was speaking about the pecan pie earlier, I'm sure there's a pecan pie or a pie Subreddit, somewhere on Reddit, you all can do the homework and figure out if it's there, but I've put my money on yes. And so it's a really special company. I've been at the company since May of '21. And it's been really exciting to watch the company continue growing and maturing, and to, of course, become a public company. And so we operate in a few markets now. And we have Subreddits on all sorts of topics. And we've got a few 1000 employees, it's a really exciting high energy place to work. There are so many exciting challenges to solve, we know that we've just scraped the surface. And that's what makes the work we do so compelling. There's so much more that we can do. And so I love working at the company, I



love being in a role where I can help tell that story about how we're serving real people with community and belonging and empowerment on the worldwide web.

**Katie** 37:00

I'm imagining a lot of people that work for you are engineers, software engineers, and developers. I'm guessing there's a few of those. But I'm just curious, and this is gonna sound like a very strange question, but in researching my book, many years ago, 10 years ago, I came across a book called *The Cluetrain Manifesto*. And I don't think many people are going to know this book, but it's by three people, one of them being David Weinberger. And it was written just as the web was just being launched. And these three academics were imagining a place where the web was going to be like the Townsquare, the web was going to connect all these people, it was going to create this collaborative, flat environment where everyone was sharing knowledge and ideas, it was just a very beautiful place. I'm just curious, do your people share that spirit? Is that ethos, part of what people feel they're doing at Reddit, or I might overreaching a little bit?

**Sean** 37:58

You must have talked to someone at Reddit before you talked to me, because you were exactly right. We embody that same ethos inside of the company: transparency, like radical transparency, and like 'say the thing now' is so much a part of how we operate at Reddit. It allows us to set expectations early, it once again allows folks to feel like owners of new information and decision making. And so we have a really healthy communications culture, that we built at Reddit, because we demand the exact same in how we build our product, and how we envision our platform to continue growing.

**Sean** 38:39

Conversations. That's Reddit, that's when we are. And so inside of the company, it might be a bit of a cheat code, but it makes it easy to say, here are our expectations for how we communicate inside of the business. Here are our values, and how that all maps to the same outcomes we're trying to build for our users. And so yes, it is a bit of a mirror ecosystem of what it looks like on Reddit, but in the most healthy ways as it is on our platform.

**Katie** 39:11

I just want to come back to something you said there: 'say the thing now.' Now I'm guessing that means two things. So in internal comms there's always this big debate. We mustn't say anything until we're absolutely sure we've dotted all the i's crossed every t and we know exactly what's going to happen. There's some people that think that. Other people say look, do you know what if the message is, we're not quite sure yet, but we're getting there, we're still gonna say that, we're not just going to keep quiet. 'Say the thing now' presumably means if you've got a question or concern, raise your hand. Am I right? Is that what you mean by that phrase, say the thing now?

**Sean** 39:44

Absolutely. I think there's a few different meanings you can attribute there. Yes, when you're communicating with partner teams and collaborating on work, you should be really clear



and human and respect We'll, of course, and candid about what you're trying to accomplish, or a roadblock you're running into, we built that healthy expectation inside of the company where communication clear and simple and human and respectful communication is your path, one really critical path to being successful. Right? If you can't articulate what's wrong, or what you need to get done, there's no chance we're going to build the result that we need to best fulfill our mission. So saying the thing now and my team and our partners working really closely, especially with our most senior leaders, to just be really candid, and respectful but just really simple and human about where we are what we need to do. It is absolutely built into our communications ethos. And I love that it builds really healthy expectations for employees about feeling respected enough to get things quickly and trusted to receive information, no matter the tone, so they can be well equipped to do what they need to do. It puts a lot of onus on my team and the leadership team to be really clear about what we're trying to do. And why. And then once we have that clarity, put it out there.

**Katie** 41:19

You said you've got a few 1000 employees, and then you said your team. How big is your team?

**Sean** 41:25

Oh, my goodness, Katie, I love for you to guess. You gotta give me a really good guess here.

**Katie** 41:31

I'm gonna say five or six but I have a sneaky suspicion. It might be smaller than that.

**Sean** 41:36

We have a team of two. Yeah. And we are a mighty team. And I'll say this, with a quick caveat, we've built the infrastructure and the relationships that make our team feel like we're a team of 10 or 15, or 20. This is also why I'm so passionate about and urgent with scaling competency to partner teams. We can't do it all. If we were a team of 30 we couldn't do it all. And so since joining Reddit, I was hell bent, given my experience in the function over the years, on like giving people what they need to at least do 80% of what my team does. And we've seen so much success from that. We've seen communications core teams stand up across the business, for example, in our people and culture team, which is the people function. We've partnered with them to organise best practices, governance, playbooks, templates, meeting structure, all the things they need to organise communications inside of their function. And then they use us as a strategic advisory function. They say, Hey, here's what we're looking to do. Here's a change that's coming down the pike. Here's how we're thinking about it. Guess what we've prepared 80% of the things, can we get your eyes on it? Can we spend 30 minutes just talking through this is the right approach? And so it allows us to just come in and say, I like this. I changed this a little bit. Can we spend a little bit more time talking about this? I think we should be more thoughtful about why we didn't take this action. What you have here is a competent communicator who does not have communications in their title. I say team of two with a big gas, but also a team of two with so much gratefulness for how we built trust and competency with our partner teams.

**Katie** 43:39

You talk about transparency, candor, openness, but Reddit recently went through an IPO, initial public offering, which I know there are all sorts of rules and regulations about what you can say and what you can't say and there's close periods and all that kind of thing. What are your reflections on that experience from an internal comms perspective? And any lessons, I guess, would you share with other IC folk that might be going through something similar?

**Sean** 44:05

That's a great question and what arrived that was and it was really special in such a milestone in my career. I think the simple answer to that question is, what do employees care about, and need, on this road to becoming a public company? So a few things come to mind. I'll say the first thing, right? IPOs liquidity events equal potential liquidity. So immediately, it would be insincere, and just ill-intentioned to not put money and topics about money near the top of your list of what do we need to communicate about and provide clarity on this road to becoming a public company? That was one.

**Sean** 44:52

Two, on this path to becoming a public company, how can we celebrate the road to even reaching this milestone, the path through it. And then also what life looks like beyond IPO Day, which I jokingly coined, like Day Zero for me, right? Like, we have these milestones in life. I liken it to a marriage, right? Like, you get really excited that you met this person, and you're in the honeymoon phase. And then you're dating them and everything's beautiful. And someone proposes and they say, the other person says, Oh, wow, I can't wait. You plan for the wedding. The wedding shows up. All these people that you love so much are there to celebrate. And then the next morning, you're a little hungover and the wedding's over. And really, it's about spending the rest of life together and making the routine exciting, and building adventure into your every day. And so, this kept me awake for a while when I first learned that we're planning to go public: how do I keep the magic alive post-wedding? Ah, and I think this was the most exciting and complicated question and challenge to work on as an internal communicator. How do I, in partnership with leaders across the company continue to build excitement for the Reddit of the future? And so that was the second thing, like being really clear, and bullish about how we solve Reddit continuing to be an exciting place to work in the future.

**Sean** 46:34

And part three, being really candid about how things might change. So this is an education around mostly the earnings rhythm, and following SEC regulations, and different compliance measures we need to take. And so when you pour money, promise, bullishness and compliance together into your communications ecosystem, pre IPO, what you get is employees who feel confident and educated about what this moment means for their money. And doing that in partnership with our finance teams and our legal partners. Along the way, never losing sight of who we've been, and who we continue to envision ourselves to be, and how that might even transform in the most positive ways in the future. And then making sure most importantly, you build the foundation for compliance. So this moment



can happen without any legal hiccups. And so folks can steer clear of any legal trouble when we are a public company. And so they understand what it means to be compliant. And then, of course, set expectations around what this earnings rhythm looks like, and what a quarterly earnings report looks like, and being really proactive about how we plan to share our progress and our results inside of the company, as well as outside of the company in our earnings calls.

**Katie** 47:59

Such great advice. And I think for any change, that thing about celebrating the journey that got you to this point, sometimes can be forgotten. And also the other thing is yes, some things are going to change, highlighting the things that potentially aren't going to change, so some of these things are still going to be very much part of our culture, who we are what we do...

**Sean** 48:21

An IPO, whether folks realize it or not, is a moment, it's a life changing moment. It's like the wedding. It's this big milestone. And sometimes after the wedding, folks are in shock, when there's not another wedding. Right, there might be a honeymoon after but after the honeymoon, it's life. We balance all that excitement with what is now public expectations around delivering and saying what we're going to do, and then doing it. And so celebrating, and also being more disciplined than ever, was a really special mix to blend together.

**Katie** 49:06

Traditionally, I think it's fair to say that internal comms has always been fairly careful, maybe even a risk averse kind of discipline. I just wonder what your thoughts are on risk and speed.

**Sean** 49:21

I have really simple thoughts on this one, and I'm really convicted on them. If you're moving slowly, as an internal communicator, you're too late. Our function is built on the movements and clarity of people. As I shared earlier, we work in the most complex bustling ecosystems out there. If you can't react in nearly real time to what's happening in that ecosystem, you're too late. There's no use, for example, polling employees about what they'd like from an intranet and what their needs are, and then building that intranet, to launch it six months later. You're too late, your organization has completely evolved in six months, it's shed its old skin. And when you ask about risk aversion, and speed, I think we have to move even quicker than the product developers. We risk missing out on who employees are today, what they need, and meeting those needs with real communication solutions, and clarity and information. And so my approach on risk is, understand what you're trying to solve for, collect signal, quickly, to affirm or completely kill that hypothesis, and then build something and get quick reactions on it. I think... my school of thought is if you get real world data, and real world suckiness, if you will, beats perfect theory and hypotheticals, every time. And I think our function operates in hypotheticals in theory, and too deep in spreadsheets, and data sometimes, even though that is such a critical part of how we storytel and make and sell decisions and investments and changes that need to happen. We can't let our fear of



feeling like a subpar function in the eyes of partner teams make us move slowly, we need to prove to death to start executing.

**Katie** 49:21

So interesting.

**Sean** 50:18

And I think I've seen that hamstringing our function for quite some time and talked to peers in the industry about it. Sometimes we get so caught up in 'Yeah, but I have to prove the value of this thing.' It's so important, where you can actually prove the value of the thing, but dropping some seeds into the organisation and showing some quick turnaround of results. Instead of building the perfect story for the executive or leader you need to be on board. But I think it's a balancing act.

**Katie** 52:08

Yeah, such good advice. I think, I think one word you didn't use there but it comes to mind is confidence. Having that confidence to move at speed, as you say not to ensure that but people sometimes use this phrase, don't know, they say don't let the perfect be the enemy of just good enough, just get it out there and see what happens.

**Sean** 52:29

Absolutely. It's important for internal communicators to have the relationships and the access to the signal of an organisation or a company to feel confident in doing that. So I think that's difficult to do if you don't have the relationships, and the people who can say, this is what's happening in this part of the organisation, and here's how things probably need to change if we want to see this sort of understanding, or this change in mindset or behaviour. And with that, with those people closely accessible, you can make more quote unquote, risky decisions more quickly, because you got signal from a trustworthy person. But trust takes time.

**Katie** 53:12

We should be an expert in our audience, just like investor relations are an expert in the analyst audience just like PR guys are an expert in the media audience. We should be the expert. This is this how people are thinking and feeling this is what they're telling me. As you say, the signal. There is a personal question, I cannot help but ask you. And you were not expecting this question.

**Sean** 53:32

Oh, let's do it.

**Katie** 53:34

I have interviewed over 100 people for this show for the last five years. You have a unique eloquence about the way you talk, you use phrases and words that are unexpected and surprising that result in a very captivating way that you express yourself. Where does that come from?



**Sean** 53:54

I think it's having come across some really big fill the room personalities in my life. And if I can attribute one thing that has made those people memorable in my life, it's their ability to tell stories, and say things in a way that's memorable. And so I've dedicated a lot of personal development resources and time to becoming a really memorable storyteller. Someone who people want to hear from, or someone who people want to follow back up with, or someone who can give you a cliffhanger that you just have to text back and hear the rest on. And then I think a lot of that in a more elementary way. My mom, my mom is just the most animated human in the entire world. And she just gave me the joy and confidence of just telling colourful stories, and showing up every day with a lot of excitement and love for life. So every time I open my mouth, every time I show up somewhere, every time I do something, I'm really grateful for the opportunity to be able to tell a story, or to be able to build a relationship. And so I don't take any of those breaths for granted. And I show up with the most energy. And I think folks enjoy that. And I think it's also why I enjoy what I do for a living so much.

**Katie** 55:25

Part two, you and your mom.

**Sean** 55:28

She would love that I'd get no mic time.

**Katie** 55:37

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

**Katie** 57:12

My goodness me, let's do these quick fire questions if that's okay with you. What personality trait or characteristic has most led to your career success, do you think?

**Sean** 57:25

Active listening. I say internal communications is actually internal listening. They just put the wrong word at the end.



**Katie** 57:33

Great answer. What books should everyone read in order to be a better communicator, do you think?

**Sean** 57:43

That's a really good one. I read this book when I was in college, that just changed my life and how you disrupt people's just every day, monotonous brains with jump in your face communication. So maybe this is more of an answer to the question you asked me earlier: a book called Pitch Anything. Oh, and I just remember it was about this guy's name was Oren Klaff. And he's like, here's how most people start presentations. Here's how you can start a presentation like no one else. And so you don't put up your slide you like slam the table. And so I don't model that. But how do I disrupt what's regular to most people? And that book was really powerful.

**Katie** 58:28

Nice, thank you very much links is ever in the show notes, listeners. What piece of bad advice or unhelpful thinking do you think has consistently dogged the communications profession?

**Sean** 58:43

This crippling fear of feeling like you need to be right to do something; like everything has to be perfect. I think that's the school of advice that's been given to practitioners, hey, let's make sure we have all the data before we do that. Sometimes when you have all the data, it's too late, and you've missed the conversation of the moment and an opportunity to engage and learn. So get high signal, build the relationships and the trust so you can act on that with high confidence.

**Katie** 59:13

Perfect. Now finally, this is borrowed from the Tim Ferriss show, we give you a billboard for millions to see you can put a message on that billboard any message you like, what are you going to put on your billboard Sean?

**Sean** 59:29

In all caps, 'internal communications is more than drafting things.' That's it. Some folks hear internal comms and they say can you help me write something? Can you help me put together a newsletter? Our function is so much more than that. And there's so much value in in being confident to build more complex solutions in that.

**Katie** 59:53

I absolutely love that answer. This has been a delightful conversation is so many different ways. Thank you so much. for your time, thank you.

**Sean** 1:00:01

Thanks for having me, Katie, and I'm happy to chat anytime and I hope I provided some value. That's what I love to do anytime I get a mic or someone's attention. So, thanks so much for the opportunity. I appreciate it.



**Katie** 1:00:13

You certainly did. Thank you.

**Katie** 1:00:17

So that is a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. All the links you need, listeners, including a full downloadable transcript can be found on AB's website, just head over to [abcomm.co.uk/podcasts](http://abcomm.co.uk/podcasts). If you did enjoy this episode, I have a small favour to ask. Please could you like rate or subscribe to the show on your preferred podcast platform? This just makes it easier for your fellow internal comms professionals around the world to find our show. A big thank you to Sean, our producer John, sound engineer Stuart, Content Manager, Madi, designer Rob and the rest of the fabulous crew back at AB who help us keep the show on the road. And of course, my heartfelt thanks to you for choosing The Internal Comms Podcast. I absolutely love hearing from listeners. So please do feel free to get in touch via LinkedIn or maybe email me directly. I'm at [icpodcast@abcomm.co.uk](mailto:icpodcast@abcomm.co.uk) That email address again, [icpodcast@abcomm.co.uk](mailto:icpodcast@abcomm.co.uk). So until we meet again, lovely listeners stay safe and well. And remember it's what's inside that counts.