



The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 13

Episode 114 – The credibility code: Become the leader your team deserves

Katie 00:04

Hello and welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. If you're passionate about improving the way we communicate at work, you are in exactly the right place. Every fortnight I sit down with a communications practitioner, author, academic or consultant to explore how we can help people feel more heard, understood and inspired at work. Today, I'm excited to welcome back a familiar voice to this show, one of our most popular guests, Jenni Field.

Katie 00:43

Jenni is a global communications expert, consultant, speaker, podcaster, and a former president of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations here in the UK. She is also the author of a new book, *Noone Believes You: Become a Leader, People Will Follow*. Now, I've long admired Jenni for her sharp thinking, her very candid insights and her ability to see beyond the communication challenge to the deeper business issue. Her latest book had me nodding along, reflecting on my own leadership journey and the work I do supporting C suite executives to hone their own leadership style. At its core, *Noone Believes You* is about credibility. Now, we hear a lot about the importance of being an authentic leader, but Jenni argues that authenticity is overrated. Instead, she makes the case for credibility, the real key to being the kind of leader people actually want to follow. In this conversation, we talk about why leadership is so often the root cause of workplace communication problems. We unpack the disconnect between what leaders think they need to do and what their teams actually want them to do, and we explore Jenni's 'research back' framework, the eight practices that set credible leaders apart. So if you have ever found yourself battling to get people to follow you, or your work involves helping others hone their leadership skills, this conversation is for you, and I'm delighted to say that we recorded this conversation in person, and as we always do when Jenni and I get together, we had great fun sharing insights and experiences. So please enjoy what I hope is both an entertaining and informative conversation. I bring you, Jenni field. Jenni, welcome back to The Internal Comms Podcast. It's lovely to have you here.

Jenni 02:59

Lovely to be back. Thank you for having me, Katie and in person too. I know it's always exciting.

Katie 03:05



We're here mainly to talk about your new book, *Nobody Believes You*. Now, I know from personal experience, writing a book is very demanding. This is actually your second book. What inspired you to write this book? Was there a particular moment, challenge or insight that made you feel this is a book the world needs?

Jenni 03:26

It's a really good question, and the answer is sort of twofold, really. Part of it came from my first publisher getting in touch to say, so you want to write another book? And I said no. And then I sort of thought about it, and thought, actually, one of the problems that we always come back to in the world of communication in organisations is leadership. We always come back to that. So I said, yes, I'd quite like to write a book on this. And they said, no, thank you, we just want you to write about communication. So I took that idea away and spent a bit of time thinking about what it was I really wanted to talk about. And from about 2019 onwards, I've been thinking about authenticity as leaders. Is that the right thing? Do we really mean that? Actually, is it credibility? And so it all kind of came about over the course of a couple of years of thinking, actually, I do want to write another book, I want it to be about leadership, because I know that's the root cause of so many challenges in organisations when it comes to communication. And I want to explore this sort of credibility, authenticity thing, and that's how it all sort of jumbled up together in there.

Katie 04:30

So when you say leadership being often the problem with communications, is it that old story of, I want to do this, or I know what's right, but they just don't get it, or they won't give me the air time, the budgets, they won't give me the support? Is that...

Jenni 04:46

All of those things, yeah, and it's all of those things. So it's comms teams struggling with that leadership buy-in and understanding, but it's also leaders not really understanding the impact of their communication and behaviour and the unintended consequences sometimes of what they're saying and doing, and how they're doing and saying that. And I think if we could educate more of our leaders and managers in the power of communication, then no matter what your infrastructure is for your internal communications, really so much of that heavy lifting is done by the people and the relationships. So as much as you can tweak channels and content, and you can have really great strategies and campaigns, that can disappear overnight if a leader says or does something that doesn't align with that, or has repercussions that aren't aligned to values. So it's both of those things for me.

Katie 05:35



Let's touch on your own personal leadership stories, ease our way in here. Again, was there a pivotal moment or an experience that shaped your understanding of what it takes to be a credible leader?

Jenni 05:50

So I've had a really interesting journey being part of teams and watching leaders a lot. And I think when you're a curious communicator, as I know you and I sort of both are, you're always interested in other people. I wrote my dissertation on why people chose one pub over another, because I was interested in consumer behavior, and why did we do that. So I've always had this interest in why people do certain things. I've had the privilege of working with some outstanding leaders. I've also learned from some leaders who weren't really my cup of tea, and that's fine, but I've equally watched them, learnt from them, and thought this is a bit strange. Not sure I want to be like that.

Jenni 06:28

But it's been really interesting to watch lots of leaders and look at how people thrive underneath some of them, and how people really hate it and they're crying in bathrooms. And how can you have one leader having such a different impact on two different people? But for me and my own leadership, it's been shaped by all of those leaders around me. The book's dedicated to the leaders who have shaped my life, and that's not just in work. That's my mum, my dad, other people that have been leading. And I think when you step into leadership roles, you become a bit of a melting pot of all those experiences together, it is to figure out what your style is and what works. And as a communications director, I learned a lot more about myself as someone that wants to sort of nurture and serve others. That's always been there for me, but it really came out in that role. And as the President of the Chartered Institute of PR and a board director for them, I learned that I just step back during times of crisis, and let the team do their thing, and you come to me when you need me, but I'm not going to sort of micromanage, which was interesting, because some people who know me would think that I would definitely micromanage in a crisis. So it all depends on what you've experienced, I think, and being open to what that feedback is and how you might need to adapt and grow and change, and that's the big part I think, of being a leader is having that development mindset.

Katie 07:45

So let's talk about the 'a' word: authenticity. You write that being authentic can be both wrong and dangerous. Why is authenticity overrated? And I guess potentially, striving for authenticity could lead, you know, lead us astray.

Jenni 08:06

So it's deliberately inflammatory. I say that because we've spent a long time saying to people, you need to be authentic. And I think for someone who isn't in a leadership position, being authentic probably isn't the worst thing in the world. However, it's very easy to behave badly and then say you're being authentic. When you're in a leadership position, you are in a position of power, whether you like that or not, that power dynamic does exist. And if you're being authentic and you've had a bad day, or you're behaving in a way that is shouting and yelling at somebody, but you're just being authentic. That's not okay. You have a duty as a leader to recognize that's not the place you really want to be. It's just talked about too much as something that is going to solve all of our problems. Just be more authentic than everybody will just love you. Honestly, I find it bizarre that we have sort of this narrative that that is the solution to unlocking everything, because we do have to manage some of our emotions and our behaviors to be able to work with all of the different people that we have to work with in an organization. And so I talk more about being genuine rather than authentic, and I discuss that difference in the book. But the reason credibility comes in is because, actually, as a leader, you want to be followed, and being authentic doesn't necessarily create that. There are leaders in this world, both political and business, and I'll let you decide who they are, who are very authentic, and some people will follow them, but that authenticity equally switches off a lot of people, and it just doesn't feel like they've really got their hands around the problem that they're trying to address as a leader. Yes, they're just being very authentic. And I'm not sure that's somebody I want to follow, and I'm not sure it's someone that's credible enough to do the role that they're being asked to do. Yes, that's the distinction.

Katie 09:57

Yeah, I couldn't agree more. I also like Seth Godin's story about authenticity, because he says, if you're a brain surgeon and I'm the patient and I'm just waiting for my brain surgery, you don't want the surgeon coming in being terribly authentic because he's had a bad day. Yes, he's feeling off for some reason. Maybe he's had a few too many drinks the night before. You don't want an authentic brain surgeon. You just want a consistently professional brilliant one.

Jenni 10:22

Yes, it's true. Because actually, that impact is huge, and it's that power relationship again. Even when I think about CEOs I have worked with, I often tell the story of a CEO who told me to get out of their office in a very aggressive, swearsy way. Oh, and I thought they were joking. It was very awkward. They weren't. Oh, so I did leave, and then I went back in, and a few months later, they did apologize, and they said, I'm really sorry for my behaviour, I sometimes forget the weight of my words and the position that I'm in. Yeah, now you could easily argue, well, they were just being authentic, right? That is not okay. You can't tell a



member of your team to just get out of your office in a very aggressive way where they're actually trying to save you money in a budget.

Katie 11:02

Oh, my goodness. Well, for me, credibility, it's strange that you picked that word in particular to sum up these eight characteristics, because it's a word that I've used over and over again, weirdly, to talk about internal communications content. So often, I think, in the past, previous decades, what we produced was considered propaganda or gloss, not of any relevance or interest, or just a one sided, rose tinted view. And I used to keep saying that over and over again, it has to be credible. That was the word, so truthful, open, honest, real, relevant. All those things fit so neatly under that banner, yeah.

Katie 11:43

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Katie 13:14

The whole book is based on research. Can you just touch on slightly the research that you actually did and whether there was anything particularly surprising that came out of that research, the combination of reading and research together.

Jenni 13:25

So from 2019 I started to look at, what does credibility really mean? And then we had the pandemic, and everybody was telling leaders to have more empathy and be more vulnerable and just 'be a better human', generally, was, I think, the message during the pandemic. I started to read more about what those big words meant, because nobody was actually saying, and this is how you do it. We were just demanding it, everybody, in the middle of a global crisis. So I started to read more about trust, empathy, vulnerability, humility, all of these different things. And I created, at the time, which was a list of sort of nine characteristics or traits, I called them then, that I felt made somebody credible. And I

was having a conversation with my dad about these who used to run his own business, and he's worked in other countries. He's now retired, and we were talking about these traits, and he said to me, I just don't think men care about this stuff as much as women, really. And I was like, Well, let's find out. So part of the research was to explore that, was actually, is this an issue that is only an issue for women, and do men not care about this, and really what's going on? So I took the nine traits and practices, or whatever we'll call them, we call them practices now, but they were traits then. And I did a survey out and I asked leaders to complete it, to rank the different words in order of importance to them, and I collected all demographic data, so age, location, gender, all those things. And then I asked followers the same question, what's most important to you? And I asked the leaders, what stops you? And I asked the followers, just as an open question, why have you followed some leaders in the past? Like, what is it that's made you follow them? And then we analysed all of that, and those nine words became the eight practices that we talk about now, and those eight practices have sort of subsets underneath. So that's what the research was doing. And I know you're just gonna go and what did it say? There wasn't a huge difference between men and women. Interestingly, men ranked empathy as more important, but I don't know if that's just because the pandemic had been bombarding them with that for some time, and whether or not that was more important. What was most interesting between the leaders and the followers was that followers felt that credibility was very important and the leaders less so. So it was almost like there was a bit of a disconnect in terms of the importance of that, whereas followers felt like it was much more important for you to be credible, whereas leaders didn't really think it was as important. Wow. So there's a bit of a disconnect there. And things like integrity and trust come up top quite a lot, and there's a slight difference in ages as well. But there is a full research report, which we can put in the show notes for people as well.

Katie 16:07

Interesting! Men rated empathy higher than women. I'm going to guess, and this is just a guess based on, you know, nothing at all..!

Jenni 16:18

Years of experience!

Katie 16:22

I'm just reflecting on my own experience of the workplace over the last 30 years. My expectation of being understood as a woman in the workplace is not particularly high, so my bar is set lower, yeah, whereas the men think: I expect someone to empathise with me more than a woman might just because it's not been her experience. She's been in the workplace for a long time. Yeah, maybe, that's just a thought.

Jenni 16:49

It's interesting, and there's so much more I could have done with that research, but that's another conversation, because there's so much in there that I really wanted to explore and dive into. And when I was looking at all of this, it was, do I write a book, or do I do a PhD? And I think you probably do either, but the book is now here. Yes, that's the avenue we went down.

Katie 17:06

What's the ninth? Curiosity has got the better of me.

Jenni 17:10

So they are slightly different. So it's not that there was an extra one onto the eighth. I had psychological safety as a top one, it had taking action. It had flexibility. So they are different words, some of those words became sort of supporting words in the eight, because other words, like supportive, came up as much higher, and things like flexibility actually start to sit more in empathy rather than stand alone. So yeah, just how you start to sort of package them together.

Katie 17:36

That makes perfect sense. And you asked leaders what stopped them from being a great leader or credible was there one thing in particular they said, Oh, this is the biggest hurdle or barrier?

Jenni 17:48

So, there's a few, and I think I list about eight or so in the book of the challenges. The biggest one is time. The biggest one is 'I just don't have the time.' Close to that is sort of the culture and the very senior leaders don't endorse and support development, which made me a bit sad, because I'm a big believer in professional development, but time is the biggest one. We just don't have time to do it, because we're so busy doing all of this other stuff. And that's a flip in our mindset, that actually, if you invest in that, that other stuff gets easier, but we just don't seem to be able to make space for that.

Katie 18:21

Because I think you and I have got the same problem with people who say I haven't got enough time. What you have possibly are the wrong priorities.

Jenni 18:29

100%. I don't want to use the quote we've all got the same 24 hours in a day, because that's not a quote that anybody wants to repeat. But time, you know how you spend your time is down to you, and even though it can feel like someone else controls that, you can control it.

When you're saying yes to something you're saying no to something else, and just being mindful and intentional about that is important. I spent the Christmas break watching Harry Potter films because I haven't watched them, and every year my husband has to give me an education of some film thing that I haven't watched, and this was Harry Potter. So I watched seven Harry Potter films, which are two hours. So that's 14 hours of my time that I spent, it was great. I mean, I ate a lot of Quality Street I sat still, which for me, is big thing, but I was properly resting. It was intentional time. It wasn't like I was just scrolling on a phone or just watching stuff for the sake of it. It was an education. I have lots of thoughts now about the Harry Potter series. About 20 years too late. I'm catching up, but it's intentional, and I think that's the important thing. And I do think again, as leaders, you have a responsibility to invest in this. You are leading other people. You're leading them in a direction to achieve something together, that needs your investment and time to do that really well.

Katie 19:41

I couldn't agree more. My shows run long, but we probably haven't got time, even in the internal comms podcast, to go through every one of your eight practices. I'm gonna dive into empathy, I think because possibly we could think that's the one that you could be born with, rather than be able to create. Some people are more empathetic than others. You share a great story actually, in your book about empathy, about someone who's just got their experience and their beliefs and can't really even understand how someone could have a contrary idea, yeah. How do you build empathy? What's the steps, the practical steps we might advise someone to go through, or indeed, we might have to go through?

Jenni 20:25

Yeah, so empathy is a great one, because we all, you know, like many of the practices, we sometimes think we all have them and we don't, or we think we definitely can't have them and won't. I'm a very task focused person, but I also have a lot of empathy. So this excuse of, Oh, I'm just, you know, focused on doing the do, and I'm not really thinking about the people. You can build it. I have built it, and I've also built a team around me who have more of it so it offsets some of mine, and that's important. So you can do it as a team, but you can build it through being able to understand someone else's experience regardless of your own, and that's empathy, it's believing someone else's experience regardless of your own. That can show up by being very present with people. And if we come back to the issues people have is, I don't have time, yeah, then if you're rushing your way through everything, and you're not really paying attention, and you're on an online call, but you're also sort of half doing something else, then people aren't going to feel that you're listening to them. They aren't going to feel that you're caring about them. They're not going to feel that you believe them, because you're too quick to rush to do something else. So you have to slow that down, and you have to listen to what that person is saying, and you have to listen to understand,

not to judge, yeah, and we have to also show we're listening. So I was thinking about my dad again, like, sometimes I'll be talking to him, he'll be watching the telly, and I'm like, you're not listening. He's like, I am listening. And I'm like, You're not because you're still looking at the telly, even though you think you are and you might be, I don't feel like you are. Turn and face me and make eye contact, if that's comfortable for you, take notes, if that's easier, but show the person you're listening and that's the bit that's important. If you're being told that you don't really listen to other people's perspectives, or you're not very good at making people feel seen or people don't feel like you really care about them, you have to show it. Yeah, and there's little tips and tricks like that that will show somebody that you're listening to them and that you believe them.

Katie 20:29

You're also making me think about how you can sometimes slow down to speed up. Many, many years ago, I was doing internal comms for a call center, so one of the joys of the job was listening in to calls. On the lost and stolen credit card desk, we changed call times, reduced it, I think, by 35% because when someone called in, instead of just going through the motions of getting them a new card, we introduced, are you okay? What's just happened? Do you need me to call anyone on your behalf? And that just gave the caller a moment to get their head sorted. And then they were bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, and answer all the other questions. So it isn't always padding out your day with these unnecessary questions. It's just taking a moment and then we all get our heads in order. It's a bit like taking deep breaths on stage. We need the oxygen to get our mouths to work in the right way.

Jenni 23:18

And people want to know that you care about them. The pandemic has had such an impact on work, it's dehumanised the workplace in more ways than I think we talk about. And empathy is such a great way of re humanising that, like it's bringing that forward in terms of that care and that compassion and that interest in others, and we have a duty to probably overdo that now to offset the impact of technology and other things that have led to it feeling a lot more dehumanised, to make that experience much better.

Katie 23:47

Yes, yes. You're reminding me of a recent study coming out of the States that talked about loneliness, yeah, and how everyone's feeling very lonely at the moment. Yes, just It's shocking. I love the piece on vision, and you write that not all leaders need to be visionary, but they do need a vision. You must have seen loads of vision statements, missions, what are the ingredients of a compelling vision?

Jenni 24:12

So it is an important distinction, because I think you could easily think everybody does need to be visionary, and that's... we don't need all of them. There's probably enough. There's probably more to come, but we don't all need to be visionary. It'll be exhausting. But to have a good vision, it has to inspire people, and it has to have passion, and it has to be something that is going to move people. If you have a strong vision, you will move people. If you don't have it, you'll just get apathy. So if people aren't doing what you want them, or they're not doing anything, or they don't know what they're doing or why they're doing it, so everything's just feeling very sluggish and slow, that's because your vision isn't clear. It's not been communicated well, it's not inspiring people, and it's not passionate. I was looking at some vision statements of some companies this week just for some other work, and I was like, Oh... and there was nothing that was like, "yeah!" like, you know, just to sort of bring that passion and inspire, and let's do this, whatever that might be, you know, doesn't matter what it is, you can find that passion and inspiration, and that's what a good vision should do. And a leader needs to be able to communicate that in a way that does those things.

Katie 25:19

And likability, this is an interesting one for me, because you say, and I couldn't agree more that being a leader is not a popularity contest, but likability is still one of your eight traits and practices. Talk to me about being likable. Can you be too likable potentially as a leader?

Jenni 25:35

I don't know, and I've had this question about, could What if you had too many of all of these eight practices? Like, what happens? I was like, what is it? An interesting question. So likability is different to being liked. Ah, so you have to pull those two apart. So if I want to just be liked by everybody, I'm not going to make decisions that a leader needs to make. I'm going to have to make decisions in this leadership role where people aren't going to like me. Yes, and that's okay. Not everybody's going to like you. I've made my peace with that a long time ago, and it's fine, but I want to be likable, and that means I want to be nice to be around. I want to be a bit light hearted and have a bit of charisma, and that's it. I don't need us to go on holiday or go for dinner or spend weekends together, but I need us to be able to be able to sit in a meeting room and have a pleasant conversation that's respectful, and nobody's sort of skin is crawling during that 30 minute meeting, and that's what being likable is about. But if you can pull apart this need to be liked, to just I just want to be likable, then it will free you up to make some of those decisions or have some of those difficult conversations you've not been having because I just want everybody to like me. They're not. They probably don't already, so you're just wasting your time trying.

Katie 26:49

Yeah, I think that's such a good point. How many times have we met leaders that are afraid to take the tough decisions because they want to be liked, and maybe they are liked, and suddenly their organisation has grown, or it's got a new strategic priority, and they're really uncomfortable with getting uncomfortable.

Jenni 27:05

Yes, hugely. And also people that are promoted, where you go from being working with your peers to then going above them. And I've worked with leaders and coached leaders that have made that jump, and we've had to have conversations about you have to let these relationships go. They will change, and those people will change with it, or they won't change, and then that relationship will just disappear, yeah? And that's okay, because there'll be other relationships that will replace that, yeah. And I think it all comes into that sort of relationship piece. And I've just finished listening to *The Let Them Theory* by Mel Robbins, which is everywhere at the moment, and there's a great chapter in that book about adult friendships and how we form them. It's a book I've recommended to everybody, but that chapter alone helps you understand why we struggle so much with it, certainly as grown ups, because we've grown up making friends at the same life stages of us. School. We're all in that same you know, we all go to school together, we all play together. And then at about 20 years old, there or thereabouts. She calls it the great scattering. And everybody just goes off and does different things. Some people get married. Some people go traveling, university, jobs, children, everything changes. So your proximity to each other shifts, your time with each other shifts, and where your energy is going shifts. And as a result of that, friendships are different, and some go and then you have to make new ones because you've moved somewhere else. And how do you do that? How do you do that? Because we're all at different life stages, and I don't know how to do this, because I'm just used to playing with Fiona in the playground, and it's a great lesson for friendships, relationships as we get older. And I can bring that into work a little bit about how those relationships are formed as well.

Katie 28:37

It begs the question, having done all this research, Are leaders born or made? The whole thing suggests to me that actually they must be able to be made. But you also ask in the book some important questions. Can you talk to me about the kinds of questions you might want to ask yourself before you step into that leadership position?

Jenni 28:58

The biggest myth, almost, is everybody can be a leader. Everybody can be a leader. In some ways. Yes, if you want to be and if you want the responsibility, and if you want what comes with that. So if you are interested in other people, if you have a growth mindset, if you want to support others and help them grow, then leadership is absolutely right. If you just want to



serve your ego and be someone really important, then that's not going to work long term, because you're not doing it for the reasons that are leading others into an outcome and something will happen. So I do think leaders can be made, but I also think sometimes we get that wrong, and I think we put people into leadership roles, because everybody can be a leader. So this person can be, without giving them that training and development that has to come with a leadership position.

Katie 28:59

Because unfortunately, you get to lead more, or fortunately, depending on how you look at it, you get to lead more people purely by promotion. Don't you?

Jenni 29:56

Yes.

Katie 29:57

Is there ever really a moment when you're sat down or someone says. Do you want this responsibility? Do you want this accountability? Do you want to become uncomfortable in certain times and take these difficult decisions where you might be respected for the decision but you might not necessarily be liked for it?

Jenni 30:11

Yes, I think we don't have that conversation enough. We just go, you're really good at this task. Let's promote you. And then it just builds and builds and builds. But I know a lot of people I know I had someone that worked for me, and I remember them saying to me, I never want your job. I love writing content. I love doing the staff magazine. I love doing the intro. I love doing all of this stuff. But I don't want to do what you're doing, which is the strategy the leadership conversation, slightly more political role that you sometimes have to play. I equally know people that have gone into leadership roles and done sort of three months, and then gone, actually, I don't want to do this, and gone back into a more sort of ground level role, and that takes a huge amount of courage to actually go, I don't want to do this. But I think we're just not open enough about what happens when you go into a leadership role, and what the implications are of that, in terms of your workload, your relationships, what's expected of you. It just becomes, well, naturally, I'll get promoted and I'll get more money, and I'll just go up a level, and we just keep going until one day somebody says, I don't want to do this. This is horrible. I've got no work life balance. I'm doing this. I'm doing that. This isn't for me.

Katie 31:14

You're also making me reflect on my work with Cranfield University, where we work with small, medium sized enterprises, and I know a couple of those managing directors have

become managing directors and founded these companies that have grown because they were the expert in something, and have decided to step back from actually being the leader of their organisation because they recognise they don't have those skills, those characteristics, those traits and actually spent the money on a leader. Yes? And I think that's a really brave decision.

Jenni 31:45

Yeah. And I've worked with similar SMEs, where they've been experts, whether it's the fitness industry, things like that, no one's taught them how to lead a team or run a business, but they've taught all of the other things that go around it. And unless you're willing to do the work, it's not going to so it's not going to change anything. And even some, you know, some of them say all the right things, but and they do all the right things, but nothing actually changes. And that's particularly challenging to get underneath. But I have huge respect for anyone that says, You know what? I know my craft. I know where my zone of genius is. It's not in running a business. So I'm going to bring someone in, and we're going to figure this out together to be able to make this really succeed.

Katie 32:24

So this is a question that I'm always keen to ask somebody who's written a book which is what's not in it? There is always something that you have to leave behind that piques your curiosity, but for whatever reason, you think, oh, no, I can't go down that rabbit hole, or maybe that's such a big subject, it's my next book. Was there a topic like that?

Jenni 32:47

There's a few bits that aren't in the book that I would have probably put a bit more in about things like bias and things like that I probably would have delved into. I wanted to take the research and talk about that more. I wanted to do sort of round tables with organisations and different leadership groups and discuss it and and pull all of that into the book, but it would have taken too long, and I really just had a very good coach who was like, just do the book. If you then want to have conversations, then have them afterwards, right? If you want to, then use that to maybe do another edition or change it later, you can, but those conversations need to be had in boardrooms now, and if you hold off on the book, it's just going to delay the ability for people to learn quickly.

Katie 33:32

This is a really, really unfair question, but I'm going to ask.

Jenni 33:36

Oh, good.

Katie 33:37

And we didn't plan for this. So this is really putting Jenni on the spot. Is there one piece of advice you've got the FTSE, 200 chief executives in front of you right now, is there one piece of advice you'd give them based on what you've seen in the research that would improve their ability to be a credible leader?

Jenni 33:59

Gosh, one piece of advice. The piece of advice is the consequences of their actions. So you think you will have integrity, but your engagement scores are really low, and those two things are linked. If you want to improve your engagement scores, you have to work on yourself and your integrity and your trustworthiness, because that's what will have an impact.

Katie 34:22

That's so interesting, because that brings us full circle to the conversation at the start, which is, there's not a communications problem, there's a leadership problem.

Jenni 34:32

Yes, exactly that.

Katie 34:33

One of the things that's peppered throughout the book, which I absolutely love, are all the personal stories that you share with your interactions with leaders. When you're stepping in the room for the first time to meet a new client, do you have a particular process or an approach that you've honed over the years? Are there key questions that you always like to ask when you're meeting one of these clients for the first time?

Jenni 34:59

So it's a really good question, because I had a call just yesterday with a director of a company who wants to have a look at their leadership team. Feels that things aren't quite working how they want them to work. More managers than leaders. How do we help them? How do we upskill them? And so I have a set of questions that I run through, and they're not necessarily written down on a piece of paper, they're just in my head that I know I want to ask. I always ask, how many are in the leadership team? How long have they worked there? How many employees do you have? Some of those sort of basic questions, what's going on for the organisation at the moment? Is it merging, selling, growth, decline, what's happening? And then what is it that you're seeing that's making you feel that they're not leading? And then I always just have to listen, because people will talk. And then just on my experience, I'll know, they'll say certain words, they'll mention something, and I'll go that's what it is, that's the issue. So as we were talking yesterday, and they were saying, oh, you

know, they're not very good at this, and this is happening, and this is happening, so the CEO gets more involved, so they're coming into more of the meetings and doing more things and doing that, and so I'm immediately thinking, well, that's part of the problem, because there's no trust being extended to them. They don't know what their role is, and therefore they don't know where the line is, and that's not allowing them. So we've got to deal with the CEO first, and then we can have a look at everybody else. But I need to have one to ones with everybody else to understand how they're feeling and what's going on. It's in that open conversation of just tell me what's happening and what's going on after I've done some of those sort of hygiene questions about the organisation, that I can quickly spot that there's an unintended consequence of that action that you haven't recognised.

Katie 36:37

It's interesting. It's almost like being like an archeologist, isn't it? Yeah, taking away to find the nuggets of gold, as it were, the buried treasure.

Jenni 36:47

And you just keep going, I'll find something, and I'll pull on that thread and see what, what comes out. And then I'll sometimes I'm quite blunt, which I know is a shock, and I'll go, Well, that's the problem. Just to see where their reaction is, yes, in terms of defensiveness, or, you know, where are we at in terms of the recognition that that could be something? And when I said that well, I think that's the issue, it was a quite a bristle, right? Oh no, I don't think, I don't think that, I don't really agree. And I was like, Okay, this is interesting. So there's a dynamic here that's at play between these two individuals, yeah, I need to understand, yeah, to be able to unlock that to help it. So you're just playing a lot of chess. Yeah, it's listening. Like I'd never go into a conversation with any potential client or client thinking this is what I'm going to sell them, or this is the solution, or they need a workshop, because it's always something different. This one's ended up with going down for a day, for one to one conversations and observing people, which would never be something I would just decide was the answer. It has to be the right solution for the culture and the situation, yes, because otherwise you're just using that cookie cutter approach of trying to fix things with one solution which doesn't work. So you have to use that listening to understand, not to win or to judge or anything.

Katie 37:59

And how often do you think people conflate or confuse a symptom with a cause? They'll keep harping on about something like low engagement or lack of innovation, but actually they're not focusing on the real issue, which is the cause of those?

Jenni 38:17



All the time. And that was the first book, where it was looking at the field model and how you understand the symptom, you diagnose the root cause, and you fix that. And that's still something that we're seeing in organisations now. That's still uncomfortable, because even if we're going in to do an auto communications audit, there is this, I don't want that to be the problem. Is communication improving the employee experience? I come in and go, No, and they go, Well, that's not really the answer we were looking for. We can talk about it, but that is the answer. And we can talk about why, but there's lots of things going on here, you know, and sometimes the root cause is the credibility of the communication team, and that's hugely uncomfortable to say this is part of the problem, is that they don't believe you as a comms function. And we can fix that, because we can build your credibility, but we have to acknowledge that this is what the issue is. This is why you're not being invited to meetings, or you're not getting into projects early. You can keep banging on the door, but we've got to work on actually this issue.

Katie 39:19

Yeah, why that is, yeah, at the end of the day, fantastic. Thank you, Jenni.

Katie 39:25

This episode of The Internal Comms Podcast is brought to you by my very own Friday Update. Would you like a short email from me, never more than five bullet points long, giving you my take on the week's news from across the world of communications? This might be the latest reports, books, podcasts, conferences, campaigns that have caught my eye during the week. I always limit myself to just five nuggets of news, so you can read it in record time, but still feel a little bit more informed, hopefully a little uplifted as you end your week. Now, this is subscriber-only content which was initially intended just for AB colleagues and clients. I don't post this content anywhere else. So you do need to sign up, but that is super easy. Simply go to abcomm.co.uk/Friday. We just need your email address, and it's equally easy to unsubscribe at any time. So give it a go. That sign up page again: abcomm.co.uk/Friday, and if you do choose to be a subscriber, I very much look forward to being in touch.

Katie 40:59

Let's head over to those quick fire questions, if we may. If you could debunk one common myth about leadership, what would it be?

Jenni 41:11

That you have to be a task focused extrovert to be good at it. That's not true. That's not true. And I think we sometimes think I need to be like that if I want to lead, I need to be loud and focused and decisive and all of these things. And actually, you can step into your power, whatever that is, and embrace that. That's the biggest one, I think.

Katie 41:37

I wasn't going to reveal this, but I will do. So, reading it, obviously, as I lead a small organization, thinking to myself, where are my weaknesses? And the one that I was worried about, which may be weird may not be, is capability, because you have to be capable on so many different fronts. Yeah. We talked earlier about you can't just be the subject expert, yeah. And you talked about not necessarily being task focused, which I always think of capability. Get things done, get things moving. How do you define capability? Is there something you're seeing in people who think that's a capable person?

Jenni 42:15

Yeah. And there is an element of action, you know, you have to do stuff to show you're capable, but it comes from also being knowledgeable. And you can be knowledgeable about the industry that you work in or the role that you're doing. I know people, and there's some stories in the book who have worked in the public sector a very long time, and they were moved into being head of like the cyber security, and she's going, I don't know anything about this, but there were some issues there that needed unlocking that her knowledge of that public sector organisation, how it worked, she could lead that team, she could fix that, and she could... and she didn't need to be a subject matter expert, right? Her knowledge of that industry and organisation meant that she was very capable at doing the leadership role that needed to be done. That's not always going to be the case, but you'll often find CEOs will come into roles and different organisations for a purpose, I know CEOs who are brilliant at creating that vision and that growth. But if you need a CEO that needs to sell an organisation that's a very different mindset and very different sort of type of CEO. You can't be capable of everything because it would be mad. So that knowledge piece, you have to show that. So as a communication expert, you have to show your knowledge of the organisation that you work in and your knowledge of the communication industry to really be seen as capable from the leaders in that organisation. But you also have to be respectful, and that's about making sure that people feel valued, that they are seeing that you are capable, you see them as capable, and that sort of works both ways, and therefore they feel valued, believed, respected, and that all has a little bit of a role to play in there, so that you're leading that team in that way.

Katie 43:56

Yeah, I often think about part of my role is to get out of people's way, yes, as well. I've got their back. I'm absolutely here for you, but you know what you're doing, yeah. And I really want to give you the autonomy and freedom to get on and do it.

Katie 44:10

I think that's particularly important when I reflect earlier on in my career where I felt my age was against me, yeah, I now feel my age is against me.

Jenni 44:10

Yes, yeah. And they will take that once they know that you're capable as well. Yeah, they'll respect you. Yes. If they don't think you're capable, they'll disrespect you. When I used to work in an office, I'd have comms books on my desk. So I'd have Neuroscience for Organisational Change by Hilary Scarlet. I'd probably have a book by Dr Kevin Ruck. I'd have books that I had read. They weren't just for show, but they were there to make a point. There is reference books here that I might need to refer to, and this is a profession to people that wouldn't know any of this stuff. There's so many people that still don't really understand what we do. And I would talk about going to conferences, listening to podcasts, what I'd heard, because all of that shows my capability. If we don't do that, it becomes very, very hard to be heard. And I remember my boss saying to me years ago, I'm going back to about 2011 here, where they said to me, your opinion is just not enough in the boardroom. And whilst I felt it definitely was, I went off and did the Diploma in internal comms with Dr Kevin Ruck, so I was qualified so you could take that argument off the table. And over my career, I've just generally looked at taking arguments off the table where my capability might be coming into question.

Jenni 44:45

It's not. It's definitely not.

Katie 45:31

But yes, coming in with evidence, data, Insight more than your opinion, yeah, I think it's a balance, isn't it? Because I think we do want, we were talking earlier before we started recording, we are also employed for our opinion, yeah. So it is a balance.

Jenni 45:46

It is, yeah. And you've got to speak the language that the leaders are speaking. If you go in and start using a lot of the jargon that we use in the profession of internal comms and employee experience, that doesn't mean anything to them. It works both ways, yeah. So we have to speak their language. It's not just the data written the insight. It's how we tell that story in a way that aligns to their objectives, their success criteria, the things they're worried about. Yeah, it's how you package it all together.

Katie 46:12

If you could write a letter to your younger self just starting out in your career, is there a piece of advice that you'd share with yourself?



Jenni 46:23

Calm down. Quite early on in my career, I had a bit of coaching and training because I was, you know, quite pacey. I used to walk with a notebook in my hand, and I'd be walking and doing stuff, very much like we've just got to get stuff done. And I think over the years, I've just calmed down and managed to get stuff done, but in a way that takes people on that journey, rather than trying to sort of just bulldoze through it. And I think that just takes time.

Katie 46:54

You say that just takes time, although not through any particular pivotal moment or experience that you've experienced, burnout or anything like that?

Jenni 47:03

No, nothing like that, you know. And I do remember someone saying to me, I was, I think I was an internal communications manager in an organisation, and the head of HR said to me, you'll never progress here because of how you were when you started in this company, because I was, you know, let's go. And I became the Global Head of Communications in that organisation. So that was a lie. She's now a very good friend of mine as well, but I've always remembered that remark, and I think that was a pivotal moment for me in terms of actually, if I do want to be a leader, if I do want to grow, I do have to think about my energy and how that impacts other people. I've been very fortunate to not experience burnout, but I am very mindful of managing my energy and my time and how I do that and well being is a big thing for me.

Katie 47:46

Yes, thank you. So a really tricky question for you here. Jenni, you can invite three people, living or dead, to a dinner party to discuss leadership. Who are these three people going to be?

Jenni 48:00

This one I did really think about. And the three people I'm going to invite to dinner are Winston Churchill, Michelle Obama and Elon Musk.

Katie 48:13

Didn't see the last one coming.

Jenni 48:18

Yeah.

Katie 48:19

How is this conversation going to go?

Jenni 48:21

I don't know, because, I mean, one of them is dead, so it's going to be tricky, but I'm quite interested in Winston Churchill's leadership approach, based on the stuff I've read and watched from his career and the decisions he made in his likability, there's just a lot in there that I'm just very interested in during a time in history that was particularly challenging having some conversations to understand how you navigate that I would be quite interested in. Michelle Obama. I've read her biography book, and I've read quite a lot about her career and her life, and I just think it would be really interesting to just learn even more about that and how she stopped her career and did other things, and then how she's found her leadership role in that environment as well. And then Elon Musk, I find very interesting as a leader. I don't like to talk about leaders being good or bad, because I don't think that's fair. I think there are leaders where some people thrive and some people don't, and there are leaders who people will follow and people won't, and that's okay, because if we all followed the same people all the time, the world would be very boring, and I, my curiosity of, I feel like I would just be staring at him for a very long time while he talked. I find so much of it fascinating, and that I would just want to spend time in that presence to see if I could understand it a bit more.

Katie 49:38

You're also making reflect on the dynamics between those three as well, which would be really interesting, because I think Churchill, and again, only from my limited reading, was a great wartime leader, but less popular at times of peace. Also. Churchill was potentially around at a time when he possibly couldn't have even imagined the Obamas in the White House, yes, and Michelle being a First Lady, yeah, so that might make him think twice. Yes. I'm looking forward to the reaction on his face, and Elon, just, yeah, just...

Jenni 50:15

I think he'll just be in the corner, just probably talking to himself or having a drink. Or do you know? I don't know. I just Yeah. I think it would just be such an interesting discussion to talk about those different leadership styles and experiences and what you might be able to learn from each other and understand the context is important. Like you said, Churchill was a great wartime leader. It comes back to that some people are great for a specific task, yes, and then it's time to go, yeah. And how do you deal with that from an ego perspective as well? Yes, there's a lot. Yeah, there's just a lot. Be great dinner. Everyone's welcome.

Katie 50:50

You're making me think it'd be a great play. There's a thought. I'll credit you with the idea. We've given you this billboard before, Jenny, but we're going to give it to you again, this



metaphorical billboard for millions to see, what message this time are you going to put on your billboard at the beginning of 2025?

Jenni 51:17

I am going to put on the Billboard 'be the leader your team deserve.'

Katie 51:21

Nice, lovely. Thank you, Jenni, very much for this great conversation. I've thoroughly enjoyed it. Thank you for having me. And so that brings to a close another episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. For the show notes and a downloadable transcript of our conversation, head over to AB's website. That's abcomm.co.uk, you will also find there our entire back catalogue of more than 100 episodes. My thanks to Jenni, my producer, John, sound engineer, Stuart, Content Manager, Madi, designer, Rob and most importantly, my thanks to you for tuning in. This show would be nothing without you. I do have a small favor to ask you, you can help your fellow comms professionals around the world find our show by simply liking rating or subscribing to the show on your favorite podcast platform. So until we meet again, lovely listeners, stay safe and well and remember it's what's inside that counts.