



## The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 13

### Episode 116 – How to build a remarkable career without a plan

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**Katie 00:03**

Hello and welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. I've spent the last 35 years helping organisations better inform, involve and inspire their people, and that mission continues with this show, where it is my privilege to interview many of the leading minds in our field.

Now, if there was ever a guest who proves that careers – indeed, lives – don't have to follow a straight line, it is today's guest, Fred Cook.

Fred is the chair emeritus of the global PR agency Golin, where he has spent more than 35 years working with many of the world's biggest brands: Amazon, Nintendo, McDonald's, Toyota and Disney. He's advised visionary CEOs along the way, including Herb Kelleher, former CEO of Southwest Airlines, Jeff Bezos and yes, even Steve Jobs.

Fred says he never imagined he would become a CEO. In his book *Improvise: Unconventional Career Advice from an Unlikely CEO*, he writes: "I lacked all the necessary ingredients. I attended mediocre colleges, received average grades and acquired no legitimate skills. Instead, my experiences became my credentials."

Before his career began in PR, Fred had been a pool hustler, Italian leather salesman, a cabin boy on a Norwegian tanker, a rock and roll record executive, a chauffeur for drunks, a cross-country tour guide, junior high school teacher and a doorman at a four-star hotel. And trust me, all that is very much true, as you'll hear later.

After talks on college campuses around the world, Fred accepted a position with the University of Southern California as the Director of its Center for Public Relations at the Annenberg School.

Fred describes his career – indeed, his life – as a series of experiments. And in this episode, you'll hear why embracing the unknown, asking for what you want more than once, and stepping outside your comfort zone can be the most powerful things you ever do.

We talk about the danger of being seen as a commodity at work, the evolving role of internal communication, and why great comms professionals must be, above all else, great relationship builders.

It's not every day that I get to meet someone who has lived enough for four or five lifetimes – at least. This conversation is full of hard-won, practical advice for work and for life.

I bring you the remarkable Fred Cook.



Fred, what an honour, what a privilege to have you on The Internal Comms Podcast. I'm going to take you back to your freshman year in high school. You are sitting in a French class when your tennis coach pulls you out to deliver some bad news. Can you share with us what happened next and how that moment changed the course of your life?

#### **Fred 03:44**

Well, you picked a good moment. I remember it vividly. I was asleep in French class, and he knocked on the door and asked me to come out into the hall. His name was Bill Johnson. He was my friend and my tennis coach, and he informed me that I was being kicked off the tennis team.

I was a freshman, and I was the only freshman on the tennis team. I was undefeated for the season, and our team was in first place. They were kicking me off because I had played with several old men over the weekend in an impromptu tournament – just four or six people. There was a woman there who was the mother of a player on another team at another school, and she reported me to whoever cares about this stuff. They sanctioned me.

Not only did they kick me off the team, they took away my varsity letter, which I was supposed to get, and they made all of my matches for the whole year a loss – which meant my team went from first place to last place.

I was very disappointed. I wasn't a great tennis player – I wasn't Roger Federer – but for somebody 15 years old, it was very disappointing. I gave up tennis, and I started hanging out at a pool hall with a lot of juvenile delinquents and people I had never met before.

I learned how to drink and smoke and get in fights and all kinds of things that I wasn't exposed to until then. And it really did change my life. It exposed me to a whole different kind of people I had never met before, and it opened my mind to the idea that there were other ways to live besides the way I had been living.

#### **Katie 05:19**

You have had so many jobs since then. I'm going to list a few of them – they're unbelievable. Here's this list: a cabin boy on a Norwegian tanker, you set up a company as the sober chauffeur, a doorman at a four-star hotel – and this is just to name a few.

If you had to pick one of those jobs that gave you an outsized return in terms of life lessons that potentially still serve you today, which job would you pick, do you think?

#### **Fred 05:51**

Well, they all have life lessons, and that's what I teach at USC. I use the book that I wrote about all these different jobs, and each one has a lesson with it.

I would say that the one that had the most impact on me was getting a job on a ship. I was in Hawaii with a friend of mine, and I'd always wanted to work on a ship. There was a Norwegian tanker stationed there that had broken down. My friend and I were in Honolulu, and we went down to the harbour, and I asked one of the people working on the ship if they ever took on passengers to work for their passage.



He said, sometimes, not very often, but you'd have to ask the captain. And that's the name of the chapter in my book – "Ask the Captain" – because my friend and I went up to the captain's cabin and asked him if he would take us. And he said no. He said he was leaving the ship in a few weeks, and you couldn't leave a couple of American hippies on board for a new captain.

I was, I think, 21 years old at the time – or 22. So we went away. And then I asked my friend, while we were sitting on the corner eating a pineapple a couple of hours later, "Do you mind if I go back by myself?"

And I did. I went back to the same captain's cabin and I asked again. And he changed his mind. He hired me. Someone had left in between.

I didn't even know where we were going. I was so excited, shaking his hand. I said, "Where are we going?" He said, "We're going to Tokyo." I said, "When are we leaving?" He said, "A couple of hours."

So I got my stuff, went back and got on the ship, said goodbye to my friend, and the next 10 days we sailed to Tokyo. And after that, when I got off the ship finally in Singapore, I travelled across Asia for a year. I had this wild adventure that would have never been possible if I didn't ask this captain two times.

So I think that is the biggest catalyst of anything I've ever done. It just opened the whole world to me. I travelled around for about a year in Asia and Europe, and then came back to the United States.

#### **Katie 07:47**

Isn't it interesting? When I read that story in your book, I just thought – the power of just asking and not being too afraid to ask twice. What was the very worst thing that could have happened? He said no the second time.

But how often do we really put ourselves forward to ask enough in our careers?

#### **Fred 08:07**

And that's what I teach the students. Young people today are afraid to ask for things. They think it's inappropriate and it's uncomfortable, and they don't like to do it.

I try to tell them that if you don't ask for something, you won't get anything. In the lesson called "Ask the Captain" in class, at the beginning of the semester, I have them choose someone in an industry or at a company where they'd like to work, and they have to get a meeting with them.

Through cold emails and calls and LinkedIn or however they can, their job is to get a meeting with that person over the course of the semester.

When they are successful, they're blown away. You can actually get somewhere if you ask people. And it's a lot easier than people think. People are more anxious to help you than you



think. They think they're annoying them or bothering them, when in fact, people are happy to help – but you have to ask more than once. People are busy, and they don't have the time to answer every email, so I have them go back again and again until they get through.

**Katie 09:03**

Yes, a really important life lesson.

Your book, which we've mentioned, is called *Improvise: Unconventional Career Advice from an Unlikely CEO*. Why do you call yourself an unlikely CEO?

**Fred 09:17**

Well, I think typically CEOs go to business school, they get an MBA, they drive a nice car, they play golf – and all of those things. I was never good at golf. I rode a motorcycle. I was a terrible student at school. I just barely graduated. It took me seven years.

So I just didn't have the mindset or the qualifications to be a CEO. When I started out, I was 36 years old when I got my first job. Most CEOs are not in that same age group when they're beginning. I really didn't have any idea that that would ever happen to me. I didn't even plan on it, but it did – and that's why I was sort of accidental.

**Katie 09:58**

It's interesting that you talked about the typical scenario for most CEOs – the same sort of car, the same sort of background. I've heard you say that people entering the business world today are a bit of a commodity. They've gone to the same schools, taken the same courses, read the same books, watched the same movies even.

How can young professionals avoid becoming a commodity?

**Fred 10:25**

What I believe, and what I teach, is that you do it through experience – and that's what I had when I came to work at the beginning of my PR career.

I didn't have all of the other attributes that people had, but I had a lot of experience with all my travels and all the different jobs I'd had. And that experience gave me confidence. It made me more creative. I had more ideas, I was more curious, and I wasn't as worried about failing as other people, because I'd experienced so many different things.

So I believe it's experience that makes the difference – life experiences. I make my students go out and do something every week that they've never done before, and that's to get them to be more confident, to experiment a little bit with their lives and push themselves outside of their comfort zone.

If you live in your comfort zone all the time, you don't learn anything new, you don't gain any new ideas, and you don't gain any confidence. So, to me, it's all about life experience.

**Katie 11:20**

I was going to ask you whether you see the same change from your students once they've

finished your course. Is there a common thread in terms of how they might have shifted their mindset, or thinking about themselves, or thinking about the world?

**Fred 11:36**

For some of them that take it very seriously, it can be a life-changing experience. They realise through these different exercises that we do – that push them outside their comfort zone – that they're a little more confident and a little more courageous than they thought they were.

And they also become a little more creative. They express themselves a little differently, and they're less worried at the end, I think, about their careers. Because in the beginning, everybody says this – their biggest worry is their career. And I try to explain to them that it's not a straight line, it's not a perfect step-by-step progress, that you try different things – like I did – and you end up in a good place.

And that, I think, gives them some sense of relief – that they don't have to get the perfect job the day they graduate. And I think that's a big worry of young people today. They have this ideal of what life's supposed to be like, and it's just not like that.

But it's more interesting when you try to take a different path.

**Katie 12:33**

You've spent decades and decades managing external communication for organisations. When did you first notice internal communication becoming a bigger priority?

**Fred 12:46**

It has grown year by year, I think, in importance. Since I started in PR, in the beginning, it was writing newsletters about company benefits and things like that – which I think people felt wasn't as important.

What has happened in the last decade – I think with the pandemic – that increased the importance of internal PR enormously. Because suddenly you had to communicate with employees about very serious issues, and they were not in the same room. They were remote and working from home.

And I think that made people think differently about the role, because it was a matter of, oftentimes, survival – getting them the right information about how to deal with COVID and how to work during that period of time.

And I think since then, with everybody working hybrid, it has also made the job more challenging and more important. We did a survey with internal communications people in the US and with IABC, and it showed that their jobs were more important. They were spending more time with senior executives. More people were being hired to work in internal communications.

So I think it's really elevated the field quite a bit.



### **Katie 14:03**

This episode of The Internal Comms Podcast is brought to you by the Internal Communication Masterclass.

I've condensed more than 30 years of experience and expertise into this unique on-demand learning experience. Gain the capability, confidence and credibility to turbocharge your career. There are eight workstreams in this programme, which you can buy individually or as one comprehensive learning journey. Each workstream comes complete with a downloadable course book filled with yet more resources and some compelling homework tasks.

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### **Katie 15:46**

We've seen the line blur between internal and external. More content is designed deliberately to go both internally and externally. Do you think the line will go completely?

### **Fred 15:51**

I think so, because people can get information about their own employers more rapidly from other people than they can from their own companies.

So I think that the speed and the transparency have to increase in order to be competitive with the information they can get from the outside. And that's a really important factor. The idea that you can say something to your employees and say something differently to the external audiences – I think that's old-fashioned.

You really have to say the same thing to everyone at the same time, if possible.

### **Katie 16:19**

And I guess your employees – they're often the front line serving customers and clients, aren't they? They need to be well informed, because they're the human face of an organisation so often, aren't they?

### **Fred 16:30**

Communication becomes a strategic tool. It's a business tool, because you want people to understand the business, be motivated to support your goals and deliver on performance. And unless you communicate with them, they don't have any idea about any of that.



So I think it's an important role. It makes people feel part of a brand, part of a company. It builds the culture.

And we've done surveys that show that people who leave – often one of the reasons they cite is poor communications as a reason for taking another job.

**Katie 17:01**

I'd say that a lot too. Internal comms teams – check your exit interview data, if you do exit interviews, because there's a wealth of opportunity as well as issues there that may be worth addressing, especially in a market, as we know, where talent is scarce at the moment.

**Fred 17:16**

The internal communications people are in an unusual place, because there's a lot of executives that – after COVID – want everybody to come back to work full time.

There are a lot of employees who are now used to, and expect to have, a hybrid, flexible schedule. The internal communications people are between those two groups, and they have to manage the expectations of the employees and the executives to find a middle ground that everybody's happy with.

And that's going to be very difficult.

**Katie 17:46**

So often, we are the conduit between different parties. We're the ones listening to the leadership and what they want. We've got our ear to the ground to find out what the workforce wants, and we're building those bridges and connections. I couldn't agree more.

Let's talk a little bit about AI. It's hard not to, given where we are in the world today and its rapid advance into every aspect of our working lives.

I've heard you say that AI will soon be able to do 50% of what PR professionals can charge for. That's scary. I'm just wondering what you think will remain uniquely human. Is there anything that, as humans, we can do that's indispensable, regardless of what happens with AI?

**Fred 18:29**

I think that it's relationships. It says "relations" in the name – so it's relationships with your employees, with the media, with online audiences. We create relationships.

And I think as long as you're active doing that, that's not something that AI can do. AI can do a lot of other things that we do – that we charge for – but I think that as long as you're involved in that relationship with the client or with the media or with any outside audience – employees – that's the heart of what our job is all about.

**Katie 19:03**

You segued very nicely there into my next question, because I know you have worked with

some very well-known and high-profile CEOs over the years. And we spoke as preparation for this show. I think you talked about Steve Jobs – working with Steve Jobs.

Many of our listeners will be responsible for building strong, trusting relationships with senior leaders. So I'm just going to ask you for a piece of advice here: when you meet a CEO for the first time, do you have a kind of go-to approach? Is there a key to creating a relationship that works for both sides?

**Fred 19:42**

That's a really good question. I've always worked in agencies – I've never worked in corporate – and I see the relationship between internal communications people and the CEO as so critical.

Oftentimes, when the CEO changes, the internal person changes, because it's got to be a good personality match. If there isn't trust and compatibility, then it's just not going to last long.

I've never been in that close of a working relationship with a CEO, but from an agency point of view – and I think this applies to any of your clients – it has to do with some level of flexibility. Your personality has to be able to be compatible. You don't have to be the same, but you have to be flexible enough to be compatible with different types of people – whether it's Steve Jobs or Herb Kelleher from Southwest Airlines – completely different kinds of people. And you have to be able to adapt to their personality in an agency environment.

When you're working internally, there's just one person – a man or a woman – who you have to figure out, and they have to trust you, and there has to be a level of mutual respect for that to work. If it isn't compatible, it can be a very challenging job to do.

**Katie 20:55**

How much of that has to be led by sheer curiosity? Whether you're on the agency side or in-house – becoming hugely curious about the senior person in front of you and what's going through their minds, what drives them. Is that a big part of it, do you think?

**Fred 21:11**

Curiosity is one word to describe it. I think you have to spend a lot of time getting to know someone that, in your normal life, you might not even associate with.

The more you know their quirks, how they like to be treated, how they like to say things, how they like to operate – the easier your job's going to be.

Sometimes you have to work with very difficult people. Steve Jobs was one of them. I was in a meeting with one of his PR people at Pixar. He was so dismissive and so nasty to her. I thought, how does she do this every day? He was just a difficult guy with everybody. I thought I wouldn't be able to tolerate this in a meeting for an hour – it was OK – but to do it day in and day out would have been, I think, intolerable.





### **Katie 21:56**

Yes, again – neatly brings me to my next question. I've heard you say that the best leaders strike a balance between "I've got this" and "I've got you".

And I just wonder if you could bring that to life for us, to elaborate on that thought.

### **Fred 22:13**

I stole that idea from an author and speaker named Samara Bay. And it was so great. She talked about the balance between strength and warmth.

I just did this last night with my students. We do all their leadership characteristics, and it's a balance between being a coach and being a cheerleader, being a dictator and being a democracy, and choosing where to be. Actually, the best leaders are sort of in the middle, because situationally, sometimes you have to be a dictator, and sometimes you run a democracy – depending on the situation.

If it's a crisis, being a dictator is important because you have to do everything so fast. But other times, it's better to consult with all of your colleagues before you make a decision. Sometimes it's better to coach people. Sometimes it's better to be a cheerleader.

It comes down to strength on one side, and warmth on the other. And if you have the equal combination of those, it works best for leaders. She used this phrase – "I've got this" – to describe the confident, strong leader: I've got this, don't worry about it. And then the warmth is: I've got you.

So that you combine those two into "I've got this" and "I've got you" – and that's a really simple formula for what I think is a good leadership style.

### **Katie 23:29**

I love that so much, thank you.

You kindly sent me a copy of *Mind the Gap*, which is the 2025 Global Communication Report from USC Annenberg. There's a survey of more than 1,000 PR professionals. Can you walk us through those four big findings – those four big trends shaping the future of public relations?

### **Fred 23:54**

Well, we do a report like this every year, and we've studied activism, technology, polarisation, ethics.

And this year was a particularly interesting year. We thought that four big trends that are disrupting our industry like never before are: AI, the hybrid environment, polarisation, and the changes – the shift from traditional media to social media.

Not all of these are new, but they're all happening at the same time – which is really changing our world dramatically.



And we looked at it from a generational point of view, to see how young people just starting their careers might think differently about these topics than people who have been in the business for a long time – like I have.

We called it *Mind the Gap*, because there are some definite gaps between how different generations want to deal with these different topics, these issues.

**Katie 24:44**

Is there one big kind of misunderstanding or misconception that you think slightly older generations might have about Gen Z?

**Fred 24:55**

The funniest finding we found – most interesting – was that because everybody's getting their information from different media sources, we thought we'd ask: which generation do you think is the best informed on politics and current events and societal issues?

And every generation picked themselves.

They had very little to say about the other generations. Gen Z picked themselves. And then I think only 4% thought Baby Boomers were well informed. And the same thing with Baby Boomers – they thought Gen Z weren't well informed.

And I think that was a very interesting finding. Not only is it funny, but it's kind of scary. Because if the older generation thinks the younger generation doesn't know what's going on, they're not going to take them seriously. They're not going to listen to their ideas. And if the younger people think the older PR people are out of date or out of touch, they're not going to listen to them and be able to benefit from their experience.

So that was a very interesting finding. But there was a lot of other stuff where Gen Z in particular is an outlier.

In terms of the media, for example, with older people – the decline of traditional media – they worry about misinformation, they worry about the loss of credibility, and a lot of things with new media. But the younger people – that's the only media they know. They're not worried about that.

They're not as upset about social media and the consequences of legacy media going away, as older people are – because they grew up on it. They don't read it. They don't watch the same television programmes or read the same magazines and newspapers. They are all on social. So they're much more comfortable with where things are going than people who've been in the business for a long time.

**Katie 26:38**

I'm interested in your perspective. When you think about today, and maybe you think about decades earlier, do you think there are bigger differences between the generations now than there used to be?

I'm just thinking of the Swinging Sixties and how the older generation would have looked at those hippies as though, ah, the world is going to pot, literally. Do you think there have always been the same kind of differences and tensions between the generations?

**Fred 27:03**

That's a great question, and I think there are two answers to it.

When we've surveyed people about this – and we've done studies of this – I was one of those people in the Sixties. I was a hippie, involved in a lot of the things associated with being one, and we felt like we were changing the world.

And in fact, we didn't change the world very much. We all got jobs and had kids and had careers. All the things that we thought were going to happen didn't really happen. And you see where we are today as a result.

I think that people now look at the younger generation with the same hope – that they're going to fix everything that we screwed up. And I think that's a giant burden on them.

I don't think that Gen Z... I think they're different than we are. They use different technology, they have different information sources, they have different values – but they shouldn't be held responsible for fixing all these problems that we've created.

But I am hopeful. We saw a lot of optimism in this report about the future from younger people. And the question is whether they're going to change things long term, or whether they'll become disillusioned and fall back the same way we did – into the norm. And I don't know the answer to that.

I'm hopeful that there will be some changes, because we certainly need that. But at the moment, polarisation, for instance, has never been greater than it is now, and I don't see it getting any better any time soon.

So it's going to be interesting to see. But I do think there are more similarities between the generations than we imagine.

**Katie 28:36**

Yes, I was actually going to ask you about polarisation, because there is a big divide – not just in the US. We've got it in the UK. We've got it everywhere.

What sort of advice can you give corporate communicators who are trying to navigate these really complex, sensitive social issues?

**Fred 28:57**

Well, that's a great question.

If you'd asked me two years ago what the future of PR was, I would have told you it was purpose – that people were going to be spending all of their time working on campaigns for



companies and organisations that were going to improve the world. And I really thought that was the case.

And polarisation has nailed that coffin. It really stopped it dead in its tracks. And it's because there are so many different opinions out there, and they're so violently held, that any company that makes a statement about any issue has the potential to alienate half of their audience – half of their customers, half of their employees.

So it's created a real challenge for communicators.

We asked people the last three years in these surveys: do you believe companies have the responsibility to address social issues that are not related to their business?

And we asked PR people this every year. Three years ago, it was 89% who said yes. This year, it was in the low 50s – like 52 or 53%. It just dropped – dramatically dropped – in the course of a couple of years, in terms of PR people thinking business has a social responsibility.

But young people still have high numbers – they're still at 75%. But the people who've been doing the business for a long time no longer believe companies should have that role in society. And it's mainly because of polarisation – because they feel it's a high-risk proposition now. They're going to be punished for doing something good for the community.

It's a scary time. It's a disappointing time – when, as communicators, we're not able to communicate the things that a company wants to do, or is doing, for its employees, for its communities, for society overall, because we're afraid.

I don't know if that's going to change. I'm feeling it very much in the US right now. Really. We'll see what happens.

#### **Katie 30:51**

How optimistic or pessimistic, therefore, do you feel about the future?

Do you think at some point we are going to want and need to come together more – and see each other, and respect each other for our differences as well as our similarities? Or do you think that ship has sailed, as it were?

#### **Fred 31:10**

I think I'm a genuine optimist, and I'm always hoping that things will be different.

But there's a reality now in the world – and in the United States – that may not be different for quite some time.

Hopeful, but not confident, I guess is how I'd put it – that things are going to change any time soon.



I heard someone say, you know, the arc always comes back to the good side. But I don't know if that's the case now. We'll see.

**Katie 31:37**

You must have seen many changes in your career, but I'm wondering if there's one fundamental principle of great communication that has consistently remained – that you've never seen change. It's been there from the beginning, and that principle is still the same today.

**Fred 31:56**

That's a good question. What hasn't changed?

I think connection between people is still very important. The human side of our business.

I think with AI, technology is what people are excited about and afraid of at the same time. With polarisation, it's this challenge – this divide – between people. I think media... how people are connecting with each other... and they don't talk on the phone anymore, it's all text and online.

I think that those connections between people are still the most important part of our business and our life. And I think the in-person part of it is really important.

Al Golin used to say: don't let high tech replace high touch. I think he's right.

The relationship between people – at work and in your life – is still the primary human need that we all have, and we can't forget that. And we can't rely on Twitter or Facebook or Instagram to do that for us.

There has to still be that human connection – between family members, co-workers and clients – that makes us fulfilled and satisfied and keeps us going.

**Katie 33:11**

Without putting words in your mouth, it would be helpful for people who are entering the profession to think of themselves as entering a relationship business. You're in the business of relationships.

**Fred 33:20**

We had a seminar last week, releasing *Mind the Gap*, and we had a panel. One of the people on the panel was Gen Z – she'd been out of school for three years. They said, what's the biggest thing you've learned at work that you didn't learn in college?

And she said, pick up the phone.

But it's the truth. People forget that. Sometimes you just have to pick up the phone and call somebody.



### **Katie 33:48**

It's often a lot quicker as well.

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 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.

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So give it a go. That sign-up page again: [abcomm.co.uk/friday](http://abcomm.co.uk/friday). And if you do choose to be a subscriber, I very much look forward to being in touch.

I'm going to head to just three quick-fire questions, if that's OK. Don't need to be quick for you to answer – they're supposed to be quick for me to ask.

You've described your career as a series of experiments. Is there anything you haven't yet tried but would love to?

### **Fred 35:45**

There are probably things that I have not tried. I've never jumped out of an aeroplane. I've never climbed a mountain – those sorts of things.

But I've had a lot of experiences in my life, and I really feel fortunate that I've had so many different ones and been so many places and met so many people.

So I don't really have a bucket list. My bucket is empty, which is a nice thing. There's nothing that I feel I need to do that I haven't already done. But I still do new things all the time.

I went roller skating the other day – I was terrible at it. So I'm always trying new stuff, but there's nothing that I'm dying to do that I haven't already done.

### **Katie 36:22**

Right. If you could debunk one common myth about communication – public relations, internal communication, it doesn't matter – what would it be?

**Fred 36:34**

Well, there's a lot of myths about PR.

I think it's a wonderful profession. I have loved every minute of it, and I urge people to get into it – because I think it's creative, it's interesting.

I have a shirt that I wear all the time that says "I ❤️ PR – I love PR", and I wear it at every event because I really do love it.

And I think people tend to be dismissive. It has sometimes a bad reputation, and people think that it's just spin, or it's just people playing with the truth or trying to tell a story that isn't true.

I resent that. I think it's a great profession. And the more smart, good people that get into it, the better off we'll be.

I'm a big advocate for that – that we need more talented people, and we need to be a profession that people are dying to be in.

**Katie 37:20**

Do you have a kind of go-to response? Say you were sitting next to someone on a plane you didn't know who said, "What do you work in?" and you said, "I work in PR," and they said, "Oh, that's all about spin."

Do you have a kind of go-to response to that?

**Fred 37:31**

Public relations is something that people don't understand. Your parents don't understand it. When you say you work in PR, your friends don't.

I'm not trying to explain to everybody what I do – it's not that important that they know exactly what I'm doing every day. But I think, as an industry, we hide behind these other terms, because we don't want to say "public relations".

And I think we should own it. I think we should own it. And if we want to redefine it as more broad or more important or more inclusive, then I think that's good – but to shy away from the term is, I think, unfortunate.

It's like we're embarrassed to be called PR. We have to be called "marketing communications" or some other term because of our own bias.

But I think we should just own it and build up the reputation of PR rather than try to be something different.

I've had a great career in public relations. I started out at the bottom. I started out as a freelancer, then an account supervisor, and ended up being the CEO of one of the greatest PR firms ever.



I've had the chance to work with Al Golin, and our current CEO is from London – Matt Neale – and just some fantastic people.

I feel very lucky. I worked at Golin almost 40 years. I'm chairman emeritus now.

And I think young people are told that you should get a new job every two or three years to increase your salary and get promoted – and that's the normal career.

And I didn't start working till I was 36. But I've worked at the same company for almost 40 years. And I think if you find a company like Golin, where you love the people, you have opportunity, you're being rewarded and you're growing in your career – then you can stay at the same place and have a wonderful time without jumping jobs.

And I think that people who are just starting out don't realise that. And I hope some people still do it – because it's like being married. It's not as exciting as dating, maybe, but it's much more fulfilling.

**Katie 39:30**

Yeah, and I'm guessing, Fred, to have stayed there for 40 years, you must have found the opportunities to grow and develop and take the next step. I'm guessing you were someone that actually sought out those opportunities rather than waiting to fill dead man's shoes, as it were?

**Fred 39:47**

I raised my hand all the time. I volunteered to do different things in the company – to take on new clients, to manage other offices, to get involved in things that weren't part of my job.

And I think just raising your hand and letting people know that you're interested in doing more is the most important thing.

If you just sit at your desk and do your job all day, maybe nothing will ever happen. But if you're out there letting people know that you're ready for new things and you want to try different things, they won't always say yes – but if you're persistent about it, eventually they will.

And that's what's happened to me.

**Katie 40:23**

Yes, great advice.

Finally, Fred, we give you a billboard – a metaphorical billboard – for millions to see. And we'll mock it up for you in Times Square, if you like.

You can put on that billboard any message you like. What message are you going to put on your billboard?



**Fred 40:41**

Drive carefully!

I think the message I have in my book is “make it special”. I think that everything we do, we should put our creativity into it, our heart into it, and try to make even the most boring task, or the most boring product – try to make it special.

To do whatever we can to make our lives and our work feel like it’s important, and it’s different, and it communicates our personality.

So I like people to make their lives special. And a lot of that has to do with experimenting and trying new things and just enjoying the process.

So: make it special.

**Katie 41:21**

Make it special. I love that.

And I’m guessing, Fred, you are someone that’s completely comfortable with failure. Failure to you is just another lesson – something to learn – gets you a little bit closer to success. Would that be fair?

**Fred 41:34**

When I was a doorman, I was fired twice. When I was a sober chauffeur, that business went bankrupt. I was a tour guide for a while, and I was lost all the time on tour. I failed many times in a lot of my jobs. And I got kicked off the tennis team – it started with that.

Many people say “don’t be afraid to fail”. It’s easier to say than do. Most people don’t like to fail. But you do realise that once it happens, it doesn’t kill you. You’re stronger because of it.

And I think those are the kind of experiences that we have to embrace – because it makes us more confident, and it makes us more courageous.

We build this courage over time. It doesn’t happen just when you turn around – it’s a switch. Experiences build your courage. You try something new, and if you do it, you’re a little more courageous than you were the day before.

And I think that’s an important part of failure.

**Katie 42:26**

Fred, thank you so much for your time. This has been a great conversation.

**Fred 42:30**

You’re asking a lot of good questions.

**Katie 42:34**

And so, that is a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast.



You'll find all the links we mentioned, plus a full transcript, over at AB's website. That's [abcomm.co.uk/podcast](https://abcomm.co.uk/podcast).

If you did enjoy this episode, found it useful, I have a small favour to ask you. I'd really appreciate it if you could like, rate, or even leave us a quick review on your podcast app. It just helps more internal comms folks find the show. It gives the algorithms a little nudge in the right direction.

As always, a big thank you to the team that makes this show possible – John, Stu, Maddy, Rob, everyone at AB who keeps the wheels turning behind the scenes.

And finally, a heartfelt thanks to you for choosing The Internal Comms Podcast and being part of this amazing and growing community.

Please feel free to drop me a message on LinkedIn – I always love hearing from listeners – and a special shout out to those of you who share your favourite episodes on your network. That really is a wonderful endorsement. Thank you very much.

So until we meet again, lovely listeners – stay safe and well, and remember: it's what's inside that counts.