

Transcript for S17, E6 – Exploring wirearchy in the AI era with Jon Husband

Intro: Welcome to the future of internal communication podcast. I'm Jen Sproul, CEO of the Institute of Internal Communication.

Since we launched this series in 2021, the world of work has been disrupted by event after event. A pandemic, geopolitics, AI, extreme weather events, remote and hybrid working, generational shifts, inclusion, diversity - the entire nature of how we work needs transformation.

This podcast explores opportunities for internal communication in the future of work. Internal comms is a critical function that helps organisations achieve lasting change, building trust and relationship between people, in pursuit of shared goals.

Please, join me, Dominic Walters and Cat Barnard as we dissect what this means for internal communication.

With relentless change the new norm, it's time to reimagine our profession.

Cathryn Barnard [00:00:00]

Hello and welcome to a brand new episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm your host Cat Barnard, as ever joined by Jen Sproul and Dominic Walters. And today we are going to be diving into another area of AI, obviously to keep things real. And I'm really excited to introduce our guest today, who I met for the first time earlier in 2026. but who has quite the online presence and following by virtue of a concept that he came up with very late in the 20th century, 1999, to describe the impact that technology would have on organisational structures and ways in which we communicate and collaborate together. without further ado, I'm really happy to introduce Jon Husband. Some of our regular listeners I know will be familiar with Jon and his work. But for those of you who aren't, he is a Canadian coach, consultant, writer, and self-described technoanthropologist. And in 1999, he named something the rest of us were still trying to see. The way that hyperlinks. were quietly rewriting the architecture of power and authority inside organisations. He called it wirearchy. And 25 years on, it's still the cleanest one word answer to the question, if hierarchy is dying, what happens next? So just to give you a little bit of background about why Jon would have even been thinking about this to begin with. He spent from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s as a senior principal at the Hay Group. And the Hay Guide Chart Method of Job Evaluation, Know-How, Problem Solving, Accountability is the code book that built the



skeletons of industrial age hierarchies. So wirearchy is an evolution of following lines on an organisational chart towards a dynamic two way flow of power and authority based on very poignantly for internal communicators based on knowledge, trust, credibility, and a focus on results enabled by interconnected people and technology. It's a principle, not a method, and Jon has consistently refused to package it as a framework. It describes the shift from command and control hierarchies to what he calls champion and channel organising, championing ideas and channelling time, energy, authority and resources to test them. So if that is not twisting your melons, let us proceed. I'm really interested in how the onset of mainstream AI changes and challenges this still further. But to leave you before Jon comes to speak, it's not the depth of hierarchy. Hierarchy plus communities plus networks equals wirearchy. So Jon, welcome.

Jon Husband [00:04:22]

Hi.

Cathryn Barnard [00:04:24]

Very short and sweet after that long and lengthy intro.

So you came up with the concept of wirearchy in 1999, I mean years before social media smartphones or AI as we now recognise it in its current form and the original definition, I took this from your website, the original definition of wirearchy is that it's a dynamic two-way flow of power and authority based on knowledge, trust, credibility and a focus on results. I love that quote because knowledge, trust, credibility and a focus on results is something that is incredibly close to the heart of all internal communicators and their profession. So I think we're in for a fascinating conversation, but let me start by no small question. Let me start by asking you what you think has changed about wirearchy in the AI age.

Jon Husband [00:05:28]

I just want to offer a little parenthesis up front. Which is yes, I've been studying what I call or interested in the sociology of work and the sociology of organisations for about 40 years. It's what led me to eventually work for Hay Management consultants or the Hay Group. And fortunately or unfortunately, so like many young people, I struggled at the outset in my twenties. I was first a banker and on the up and up getting promoted. And I'm at a stage in my life now where I look back and look at all of the idealism and the ambition that fuelled some of my choices. So disillusionment with banking, interested in sociology, end up in HR world with the Hay Group. And fortunately or unfortunately, I was blessed from an early age with a curious mind, so I read a lot. And in the mid 80s to early 90s, there were a lot of books coming out about the coming of the information age. So, Peter Drucker, John McClain, Charles Handy, Peter Senge, all sorts of stuff. So f I had already been paying and and in learning the Hay method as a young consultant, because you're trained in it for about a year, year and a half before you're allowed to go and do harm with clients. You really get steeped in all of the principles of and the practical methods of defining tailorism. Job evaluation methodology, as it's used in most organisations today, still, is a generic codification of



Taylor's principles. So that's how work is designed. And I began understanding that something really massively was shifting with all of these books about the the information age. Probably the most influential book was called PowerShift. The knowledge, wealth, and violence at the edge of the 21st century by Alvin and Heidi Toffler. And I still reread it every couple of years because it's very, very pertinent. At any rate, you end up diving into all of the deep theories about knowledge and about human psychology and human sociology when you're involved in HR consulting. And all of these methods divide define all ways sorts of ways of using knowledge, trust, credibility, and a focus on results. Those are really quite aligned still with the guide charts, but with just a different window or or foundational assumptions about how those are used in defining and designing work. So I think for for me personally, and I think for a number of people who know about the concept, there are many, many, many examples today, twenty-five years later, of wirearchy in action. Whether it's positive and utopian or whether it's ineffective and dystopian, in its effects is an open question and I've never suggested wirearchy was necessarily positive nor negative. It's just a principle. It can be used how it gets used. With the introduction of AI, I've really looked deeply, I think, I'm not a technologist, so I don't there's lots I don't understand. At the words power, authority, trust, knowledge, credibility. Because what is being floated and more and more often discussed is using sophisticated agentic AI for a lot of the coordination routing and support work that middle management does, middle to senior management. The issues for me in terms of looking at power, authority, knowledge, trust, credibility are where do the decisions get situated? And how do humans act and collaborate in using the discernment and judgment that everybody is calling for. So where become the loci of power and authority and how much of it is delegated to agents, which is something I don't know very much about. I think agents are programmed to do things given the parameters they take in and then make decisions. But I believe, and again I'm not very knowledgeable about this at all.

I believe that probably within I don't know, X years, one year, five years, three years, a lot of AI agents will become capable of switching roles or changing roles in relation to changing contexts, which again takes the human out of the immediate judgment loop, I think. I don't know. On the other hand, learning how to use AI effectively to support both results and collaboration and trust is going to require changing the dynamics of how people communicate with each other, I think, and internally. Things will have to become much more transparent than they already are, with a very clear context, so that people can situate themselves in what's going on. And I believe this is for me the most critical aspect of impacts of what I call wirearchy, which is that I fear people are going to become individuals are going to come to feel more isolated and less connected unless they have practical strategies to carry out their interactions on a on a daily and weekly basis. How all that builds up into changes in power and authority within a given organisation or system, I'm unsure of now. What I see is all sorts of leadership development suggestions and shifts because of I think the advent and the penetration of AI is this issue of learning to listen differently to your organisation, to your workplace, to the people that you lead, and learn better, how to I'm hearing a lot about building somatic leadership. How does this make you feel? And then how do you communicate that on a widespread basis while remaining personal and humble? And so I think



there are very significant implications. The other possibility, of course, is that the top and the bottom of organisations get pretty separated and everything happens fairly automatically and mechanistically and the communications just come. Overlaid on that, however, is for me the fact that we're now living in a I think for virtually everybody, pretty much a constant, constant flow of information. Whether it's updates, notifications, personal work, otherwise,

And that just it makes me curious, makes me nervous. I think what we're seeing is today, and I don't know where it's going, when I mentioned looking at organisations for the past forty years, understanding the nature of designing work using Taylorist principles, and then I remember beginning in about the early nineties. The arrival of books like William Bridges' Transitions, and Charles Handy's work, The Hungry Spirit, The Age of Unreason. It became clear that standard formalised ideas about what work meant and what jobs meant were beginning to fray and dissolve. And we're seeing that today in massive ways, with so many, digital nomads and work from home and which I think are all very hierarchical in a sense, but at the personal and small group level. What I don't know is gonna happen is it seems to me that there are pretty large parts of work sectors that are getting that are gonna get wiped out. I mean, it seems obvious. Coders, graphic designers, there will be some work left for, highly refined, taste based, judgment based, artisanal work. To close on this question, I'm paying attention to all of those elements, knowledge, trust, credibility, and a focus on results. I find it interesting that in online exchanges and interaction for years, whether it's in a comments group or elsewhere, there seems to be sort of a semi-conscious and semi-palpable push to come to a conclusion, to get results of some sort. The most important thing, however, about as we move into and I'll call it a more hierarchical period, is this notion of trust. I think it's question number three, if I'm not mistaken. And I think, Cat, as you know, I'm working with some people whom I think you should definitely interview on a podcast. Rob Pye and Annabelle Lambert in Mersham who are working on something called vemapper.ai, which is about people in a workplace sharing a dialogue, creating a dialogue about the value that they offer and the value that they can exchange, which is a way of surfacing tacit knowledge as the dialogue develops. And the interesting thing about that is underneath this is a data commons. So people are not giving away or leaking or providing their data to any other LLMs or any other outside party other than, let's say their work group or their organisation. And it's about surfacing and scaffolding trust with very sophisticated AI coaching walking alongside. And I think these are the kinds of things we're gonna see. People are gonna need a lot of adaptation to an increasingly wired and increasingly fast flowing. And fluid future of work. Perry Timms has been writing about something I think is very important called the polymorphic organization which is about being fluid and changing shapes according to purpose and context and so on and so forth. So it's a furtherance, if you will, of looking at the impact of wirearchy on organizational structure and dynamics.

Cathryn Barnard [00:16:28]

There's so much, so much that I want to say in response to how you have brilliantly outlined some key points there. I could be there all day. We had a really interesting briefing call last week to



loosely lay out how we were going to approach this conversation. We are really interested in the polymorphic organisation. We had Perry come and speak to a convening of internal communication leaders at the start of this year. And he introduced the concept of the polymorphic organisation and he's been on the podcast a couple of times, most recently to talk about polymorphic organising. But one of the things that comes up for me about trust and... you trust in the AI age. You and I loosely, and I don't want to go down this rabbit hole because it will be a total rabbit hole, but we loosely touched on last week the work of Shoshana Zuboff, who wrote a brilliant book called The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, which was published in 2018-2019. And one of the key questions... or two of the key questions at the heart of her thesis about the onslaught of these AIs and increasingly sophisticated surveillance technologies is who decides and who decides who decides. And I think because there's so much ambiguity around who actually is deciding anything, particularly as work becomes potentially more autonomous with the genetic AI, etc. The thing that always strikes me is that people do not respond well to change when they are in fear. When they are fearful of what might happen next, they stop. They tend to close down. The brain can't function, can it? The prefrontal cortex shuts down and the amygdala takes hold and... people aren't able to cooperate and interact together. And I think that is something when we come onto talking about, organisational effectiveness and trust and so on, in order to move organisations into the next iteration of their reality, unless we get rid of all the people, you can't, take people on journeys of profound transformation when they are distrusting and fearful. It's like trying to drive a car with the handbrake on, it doesn't work. So I think there's some really interesting things to explore and I will absolutely follow up after we stop recording on your suggestions for guests because I think all of these things need to be... brought out and evaluated under a spotlight because we're in such uncharted territory right now.

Jennifer Sproul [00:9:42]

Uncharted territory is definitely the word I think of many things as we go through it but I think that listening to what you said Jon, I'm gonna pick up on one point but there was many things that you were saying that spiked my interest as well is around particularly going back to this nature of interconnected people, this nature of collaboration, this nature of... how we need to push for conclusions and isolations and listen differently and adapt at team level. In the work that we've done, my fear is that whilst we brought in the sort of technology that's enhanced and changed and adapted over time, we haven't helped move our people into that thinking of new ways it's not been moved or our managers or to enable that dynamic workflow or that conversation because you can only collaborate and judge and learn and adapt or shape shift. I wonder if we're working in so much isolation we're all shifting into different shapes to use a polymorphic thing which means that therefore we're creating this sort of sense of we're actually all a bit confused on where we're going on which is left and which is right and where we judge and where we don't judge and where knowledge sits and where this all goes. Because I don't think we have socialised this sense of change. But also one of the things that I was particularly interested in picking up on was this thing around, you talked about organisational effectiveness. Now fundamentally, we're all here and



we're in this particularly fear heightened state at the moment of job security and what does it mean and am I going to lose my job? And you talked about will designers go? Will this go? And where does an AI agent bring me in where this doesn't? So we're all kind of again then hyper fixated perhaps on how do I make sure I'm driving effectiveness? How do I make sure I'm giving results? How do I make sure I'm part of something that's essential, not automatable, if that's even a word that I've not, I've made it up. So what I guess for me is what do you think when you're all the work that you've done that makes organisational effectiveness the conclusion we're seeking and how AI will impact that if we're working all these new tools, but I'm not sure we're working towards an agreed outcome or agreed pathway or agreed set of parameters in that dynamic way, I guess that sort of thing is what do you see as organisational effectiveness and therefore then what's AI's role in impacting that?

Jon Husband [00:22:03]

That's okay. And I guess the place to start is with the word effectiveness. And as soon as I say that, let's put it aside. Because I want to go back a little bit in terms of history. What we now have is an accumulated 25 or 30 years of being offered what is, I think, coming to be a very, very fundamental change in what's called semiotics, which is the use of signs and symbols to create meaning. I'm old enough to have grown up all the way through graduating university without computers. Electronic calculators were the bee's knees in nineteen seventy five. And I've watched what I would call the informatting of daily life, culture, society, business, commerce, all the way from early wood word processing and early spreadsheets and discs that you stuck in front of an early Macintosh and it whirled around for quite a while you tried to save while you saved something. And dial up internet. And so on. And the last twenty-five years has been the early stages, I think, of a transition in state of being. It's kind of like when water starts to boil, and the bubbles just start to appear before it gets into a rolling boil.

And so to set a quick little context, and Cat, I think we've talked about this, but have any of the three of you ever seen the movie Pleasantville? No. It's a movie from about 20 years ago that has I think Toby McGuire and Kirsten Nielsen in it as a brother and sister who start out in the 60s in a black and white world and end up getting sucked into television by Don Knotts, I think, who's talking to them about the future. And as people start coming into themselves finding their feelings and their voice, they start acquiring a bit of colour in their skin, their faces, and so on. And this is kind of like a viral infection that spreads through the town that they're in, Pleasantville, from these teenagers to the point where two-thirds of the way through the movie, the town fathers who are the police chief, the school principal, the parish priest, and a couple of the mayor, and so on, hold a trial in the city hall against these teenagers saying, you've brought too much disruption to Pleasantville, thou shalt not change. And they issue ten commandments of thou shalt not change. And what I think is going on now, notwithstanding the hippie movement of the late 60s and 70s, we're in a moment of much larger and more widespread societal change that we're only kind of halfway through and I think my generation and the generation beneath mine, so you guys, are still operating with sort of two models in your head. One is the traditional, more or less, two parent



family jobs, eventual pension kind of thing that Britain and and North America were essentially founded on ever since, let's say, the early 1900s. and we're and the other part of us is still, seeing all this wonderful stuff going on, being rebellious, being adventurous, living longer, working differently, and so on. And so I think we're stuck in sort of a aomewhere in a limbo of learned helplessness. Whereas the younger generations are facing even greater uncertainty because of a world gone awry and no particular clear path to setting up anything that resembles what we would consider a career or a stable life, except for some obvious necessities. And I'm reminded of books that I read about 20 years ago, you probably don't know the name Douglas Rushkoff of Team Human. He wrote a book a long time ago called Playing the Future that was republished as Children of Chaos. And it was about, how playing video games and all sorts of play was a new thing. The point of all of this that that I'm thinking about in terms of organisational effectiveness is, I'm not doing the Trump weave. I'm coming back to the point of organisational effectiveness. And it's going to be quite, or it's going to come to mean something different because it's going to have to, whether the it whether they like it or not, follow the pathways of using AI, and they're going to be stuck between generating quarterly performance, redesigning work all the time, coping with polymorphism, new developments in AI. So I'm unsure what effectiveness means in the old model. There is at the same time a new model building. Cat and I were talking a couple of weeks ago about a book called Regenerative Leadership, for example. Which is this notion, and I think people are becoming pretty aware because of heat, resources, wars, and so on, that we're in a pickle that has, only so many exit points. And the way that we are currently living is clearly not sustainable. So this is gonna be more and more and more present and important, and it's not gonna really have major impact I've said this before in other places. I'd love to see it pick up steam, accelerate, grow incrementally, and fundamentally transform economics. And there are many, many people working on this, as no doubt you know, whether it's Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics or Steve anyway, I can't remember his name. And that's I think some kind of war, because the old models will not die easily. I mean there are people out there, such as in the exponential organisation, saying that, businesses will that don't adapt will just more or less vaporise. I'm a bit sympathetic to that in the sense that I've tried for a long time to be able to be clear about articulating the constant change demands a review of the business logic.

Which I think I used to talk about this and people would go, huh? What do you mean? But it's the logic underneath the business model that is really critical. And that logic is changing because of AI. What is the impact of having all of this knowledge accessible, instantly available, but probably nine times out of ten, somewhat out of context or inappropriately matched, and so on? So there's gonna be an enormous amount of time in the next two or three years spent on the business logic architecture of using AI. A new friend of mine by the name of Igor Schwartzman very recently, about two weeks ago published a very interesting essay on his website called Strategy as Protocol. Because we're all working on platforms and what will what will come into effect over the next five to ten years is some degree of standardisation of very effective and very capable protocols for interacting with all of the intelligence and knowledge.



I think increasingly in our very fractious society, we hear a lot about relational economy. So it's more than ever, enterprises and organisations of all sorts are gonna have to pay attention to their broader constituency of stakeholders than they ever have before and that's gonna be, polarised by a continuous push for profits as business logic keeps changing. Does that make sense?

Jennifer Sproul [00:39:06]

I think that's a fascinating way to look at it in my brain. Yeah, it does make sense. It does make sense to think that listening to you explain that, it makes me think about two things really as well. Because I think when we think about the term effectiveness, do I feel effective as an individual, as an employee, right? So effectiveness is going back to that linear thing is have I fulfilled the tasks, the role, the processes I am responsible for to the standard that was required so I have been effective in my deployment of my responsibilities. Now, if those tasks no longer create an effective organisation because they are standardised, protocoled, automated, I think there's this thing where sometimes I think it's humans we sit there and go, I'm affected because I do something. It's very tangible in a way, right? But when those tangible tasks come out, or that tangible logic removes, so therefore, how do I be effective in a new age, in a new space, in a new way of order, in a new relational way, which also is against some of the things that I've done. And I think the one thing that, you're talking as well, that makes me think, is this piece around you talk about knowledge. So if you think about an effective organisation, it's an organisation that has, okay, look, they're all different strands, but they are effective because they have a reputation, they've built a brand, or they know something, or there's a process, or there's a protocol, or they stand out from competition, or they move at pace, all those sorts of things, it's results driven perhaps. But that all comes from the knowledge that in tacit or tacit knowledge that exists in an organisation. And I think that as humans as well we have become effective in our roles to either do a task or we give knowledge or we give expertise and we give judgment or we give views. Now we're suddenly unwittingly sometimes putting all of that information that's in our brains, that's in our thoughts or our thinking out loud in that spaces piece, thinking about what Perry talks about with the polymorphics into just cloud-based AI systems that can be misinterpreted, misused or misprotocoled because it doesn't have that sense of therefore uniqueness. I don't know if I'm going down a rabbit hole as well now, Jon, but I'm hoping I'm making some sense of, I wonder how we are in an information overload sense, as we're overfeeding, but we're not building up effectiveness of judgment and discernment when we are losing task in terms of how then to go towards a results driven future.

Jon Husband [00:33:14]

Well, what I notice as a chronic observer is that It's finally starting to be to have massive awareness that constant interaction with information of all sorts is having a very significant impact on humans' nervous systems. We are seeing stuff about nervous systems everywhere, absolutely everywhere, whether it's in coaching, whether it's work related, whether it's dating related, whether it's almost anything, there's this kind of mantra happening, at least in North



America, of take a moment, what is your nervous system telling you? To come back to effectiveness, and you pointed out an awful lot of people, and again, I think we're in a couple of transitional generations of moving from the black and white Pleasantville to the multicoloured, multi-voiced Pleasantville and I remember writing an article about 20 years ago called the mass customisation of knowledge work. I'll do it my way, my work my way. I think still an enormous number of people in our society I'm not an expert on classification and stratification in societies, but there's a lot of people that are sort of middling. They have jobs that are, I don't know, they pay them what, thirty to sixty thousand pounds a year and they're relatively straightforward and still sequential tasks. And a lot of people get a lot of pride and build their lives on having jobs that they do well and if there are tasks that are sequential and repetitive and so on in jobs, they're eventually going to be eaten up somehow by AI. And then there's this other kinds of work where different elements and aspects of judgment are required. And I don't know who is doing what in which jobs in society yet, but we'll find out over the next couple of years. And I think there's gonna be kind of two things happen. I think there's a lot of people that are, somewhere mid-level professionals who are really good at currently at using today, it's electronic calendars. Before that, it was agenda books and diaries and so on. And they're really organised and they know how to call the sitter and their home is pretty clean, and life is organised. They're gonna generally, I think, do well, depending upon how training and implementation and reflection and building of judgment happens in organisation X. I think there are going to be a lot of people who get really confused and insecure initially by interacting with AI. What do I do with this? Is it threatening me? And I think there will become more and more tales of different kinds of dependence on AI, AI psychosis, if you will. And I think there's a reason why it's been about twenty years now. I was trained very, very early as an executive coach, and I've never really made it anything that I did as a consistent career. But I remember my mentor who wrote a very famous book called The Adult Years, Frederick Hudson, predicted that coaching would become extremely widespread, if not ubiquitous, and I would argue that it is today. And I think we're going to need a new generation of thinking about what coaching means because it's I think the the lines between coaching and being a therapist are going to blur more than they maybe already have. Because I think a lot of coaches are gonna be getting into the listen to yourself, trust your gut, you've got intuition, let's learn how to use it, and so on, which again is a bit more therapy ish, I think, than f functional practical coaching.

I think all those elements are going to play into whatever we mean by effectiveness. And there's going to be a lot of reflection on the the morality and the eth ethicalness of what organisations do. The younger generations will demand it because, their future looks I think a lot of young kids either wear or want to wear t shirts that say eat the rich. We'll see.

Dominic Walters [00:37:23]

We will, Jon. Look, I'm fascinated. A few things I've taken from the conversation so far, because I guess a lot of people listening to this who are internal communication practitioners will be saying, this makes huge sense. And they've got a lot of notes about things they want to follow up on,



books to read, and even the film. Was it Pleasantville? We're going to watch that as well. But what does that mean for us as a profession? And I think one of the things that came through strongly in what you said, which echoes what I think we've heard previously, is around the value of building connection. Because it strikes me, we do training and coaching with leaders. Being able to build connection is one of the key things that leaders have got. I think, Jon, you've said that previously leaders could rely upon having extra knowledge. Well, that is going to diminish as a power source because knowledge is more widely available, as you were saying. Leaders could sustain themselves because they had the command. They were held together by a hierarchy and that's already been changed and probably will continue to be. And leaders also used to have power because they did stuff. They had skills and pver the years, acquired expertise, they could do good things quickly and that again is also going to diminish. It seems that the major lever, power, that leaders have is the ability to connect. And then connection will also give organisations and teams the ability to deal with the polymorphic organisation, the challenges that you've outlined, the need to deal with transition and change. So connection seems to be very powerful thing for leadership. And we know that connection is built upon trust. And I think the ability to influence trust is one of the things that we as internal communicators will be relied upon to do in the future. It's increasingly part of our role and doing it in different ways. And so you've also presented a situation where there was a lot of concern, a lot of misinformation, a lot of misused information. I loved when you talked earlier about the Trump weave, which I sort of heard before, but it was a great thing to mention. So I guess the question is if we agree that trust is important and maybe I've overstated it but if we agree with that then what can organisations do to maximise that trust to sustain that trust in a period where there is misinformation there is a surfeit of information as anxiety about information and that's only going to increase so what would you think we could do about that?

Jon Husband [00:39:56]

As internal communications professionals?

Dominic Walters [00:40:00]

and or as an organisation in which internal communication practitioners work. Yeah, the big picture and the small picture.

Jon Husband [00:40:02]

Well, I think it's in in the argot of complexity, I think. It's a thorny, messy, wicked problem. Because I think internal communications for an organisation has never been more important and will be a North Star or a touchstone for the effectiveness of an organisation. and I think internal communications professionals are going I mean this all sounds like rehashed advice from the last thirty years, in a sense. I think internal communications has to be the bridge link between what is being expressed in the workplace and the preoccupations of a decision making executive level and I think the internal communications professional has to become both the architect and the



champion of of that bridge and a truth teller. And I think the way I would go about it would be to champion to the executive to become more integrated into the nervous system of the organisation, communicating on the platform, in the platform where the work is taking place, which no doubt already happens, I'm trying to think of what's the equivalent in an AI-enabled remote work-based version of a concept I think advanced by Tom Peters about a hundred years ago called Managing by Walking Around? And I remember I wrote a piece about 20 years ago called Managing by Blogging Around.

Dominic Walters [00:44:46]

Definitely, yes. Yeah.

Jon Husband [00:41:57]

which just meant, get involved in the blog networks, find out what people are saying. But, people are people, so you gotta find out what they're saying, what's on their mind in relation to their alignment of their personal purpose with the work that they're doing, and the degree to which that aligns with the effectiveness pursuits of the enterprise. And internal communications people need to be, I think, at the elbow. Of she or he who is leading the organisation and wondering about all of these heartbeats and pulses and, different facial expressions that the organisation is using. I'm using metaphors of, how do you catch intuition? How do you catch feelings? How do you catch stuff that not revealed by surveys or asking questions of people when they're scared shitless of you?

Because you're the boss. I don't know. Different different ways of different ways of using surveys in and social media inside organisations for I think probably in all the platforms now you can do quick surveys and stuff. So it demands a strategy of being in constant but not overly noisy contact and being the notion about being transparent and really clear in communications is never been more critical. I and I don't, I don't know. I'm not a professional at it. It's tough to not sound smarmy, it's tough to not sound overly non-emotional.

It's tough to sound clear and direct when you know that people want to be soothed somehow. Maybe you say, I know you want to be soothed right somehow, but right now's not the time. I don't know. If Donald Trump can get elected president by saying, I'm the best and everybody else is nasty to you, then anything goes.

Dominic Walters [00:43:50]

Look, I think you've said a lot. It certainly has changed things a little bit, I think, hasn't it? But a lot of what you said, I think we've found from our own experience about, I know Jen would use the phrase that, in telecommunication. Part of the role is to be the intelligence agency for an organisation to understand what people are feeling and why. How that's influencing the way they work. How that influences the way they trust leadership. How that changes the way they want to achieve goals and feel aligned to them. I think that's a crucial part. It's always been part of internal



comms but it's becoming more and more important I think. You've also mentioned clarity. I think that's something we can do. And simple conversation, which is actually not simple at all. Just before I pass out back onto Jen. If I could ask you about the bigger picture, because you have worked with lots of leadership teams, lots of organisations, how do organisations in general manage this trust issue when there is so much information, disinformation, where people can go anywhere and hear things which may not be true about their organisation, or they hear rumour and speculation that might influence how they see the organisation. What key things do organisations do, do you think, that get this right in terms of managing that trust and sustaining trust.

Jon Husband [00:45:00]

They hire consultants a lot, which typically doesn't work. For a long, long time, most organisations and probably is still a very many of them do run cultural and attitude surveys. I think that the standardised response in the medium to large size enterprise world that I used to be familiar with was those reports almost always get discreetly put on a shelf somewhere when there's anything that is confrontational or negative to address. And I think they also have coined the term along with change management programmes of Bohica. Have you ever heard of BOHICA? It's an acronym for Bend over here it comes again.

So the year after year after year there's polls. I think Gallup is the famous one that show that, disengagement doesn't improve. People are disengaged. We're in a what I would call a fairly socially reengineered society where, you don't see cash anymore, you just tap your card, direct deposit of the pay, you lose your job, you go on government benefits of some sort and so on but everything that surrounds you and involves you is informatised and kind of have to fit into that somehow, somewhere. You have to find your way into this machine. The movie Brazil comes to mind. Because if you don't have a a card with money in your debit account and you don't have a home to live in and you don't have regular access to food or hygiene like showers you don't fit into the system now. And that is increasingly very worrisome. I think I'm straying a little bit from the question, but I have over the last few years, I think starting with COVID, but maybe even before that, I'd been researching issues about personality disorders, such as antisocial personality disorder, bipolar, or not bipolar. Borderline personality disorder and so on. And if you look at the symptoms and supposedly the underlying genesis, I'm thinking specifically of borderline personality disorder here, I think I could mount a pretty good argument that we're living in a societies in the Western world that are increasingly coming to resemble borderline personality writ large. With outbursts of violence, overspending, risky behaviour, and it's all related to an unstable or an uncertain identity. And I think that this is what, wirearchy and AI are bringing to the world. We can't y we can't go back to, Taylorism defined jobs, job titles, org charts, pay grades, and so on, unless there's a very, very clever way of assimilating all that into a very simple model. But, we're into a world of gig economies, rapid changes, polymorphism, and communication, internal communications will be the lighthouse in that constant turbulence.



Dominic Walters [00:48:22]

I've taken a number of things.I think what just comes to mind there is firstly, it's about the proper listening, isn't it? I mean, thankfully, we are moving away from the old fashioned surveys and stuff not happening. So more regular conversation, more informal discussions, being connected so you understand what people are making, what's going on. I think that makes huge amounts of sense. I think the stuff you talk about is really interesting about societies of my words, but a bit of a borderline personality disorder and how do we help people manage their relationship with work when everything else is uncertain around them and that seems a very, that's a whole new area, that's a whole different area we can talk about. And I love the lighthouse. I think that's a fantastic metaphor for internal cons. It's always been true.

Cathryn Barnard [00:49:00]

I love The Lighthouse. Isn't it lovely? I've never heard that before and it's really... soothed my soul.

Jon Husband [00:49:07]

Great. Well, I also think that, again, I'm coming back to the examples like the book Cat has, Regenerative Leadership. I think what we'll see, and I think it'll take two or three generations or more probably to play out, is that I don't know if this is true, but I've said often that sociology in the long term trumps technology. And so I think what's gonna happen is, let's say, 50 years down the road, the notion of community is the only thing that will hold societies and our world together, really.

If we're in an automated world where there's artisanal work and the only way to survive is in collective based communities. I mean, there's a very, very active and it's been going for twenty-five, thirty years, movement around the world based on commons, Michelle Bovins and a whole host of other people. I think the only thing that'll make us change to a very to a more just, fairer, more human society, at least in the western world, will be if we have a catastrophic calamity at some point in time that makes us literally come to our senses in terms of the living, working and economic arrangements under which we live.

I mean, people have been talking about you the need for UBI for, fifteen, twenty years now and it hasn't gone away. It'll grow. I'm definitely not a Pollyanna. On the other hand, I, deeply believe in people.

Cathryn Barnard [00:50:44]

I think we have to go back to our roots, don't we? That's it.

Jon Husband [00:50:44]

Yeah, pretty much.



Jennifer Sproul [00:50:44]

I was gonna say I feel like listening to it as well and we know it and like you say there's a lot of stuff we've done and we've read and we all know and as humans and all those sorts of things and get a consultant, bring it back around again, et cetera, et cetera, lighthouse, trust, all these foundational principles. I would say those foundational principles are in crisis at the moment. So it's kind of like there's no spine in anything, if that makes sense, to kind of navigate through something. And I think that what we're seeing, and I think there's an opportunity for, well, there is always going to be a new sociological study or consideration about how sense is made, understanding is reached, more dispersed, disconnected, isolated. And I think we'll see greater pockets of community as opposed to community at large. Everything's happening in smaller spaces that are then all walking around as their own little mini ecosystems that are not reconnected to a whole. And therefore the knowledge and information, power, structure kind of floats in this weird space and there's nothing that's connecting it. We're seeing that for example in some of the work that we're doing at IOIC where people actually to make sense of something because information overload and cognitive load and distrust and misinformation or not knowing is happening in smaller tiny digital spaces.

Jon Husband [00:51:59]

Have you have you ever have you have you ever seen the hierarchy to wirearchy graphic?

Jennifer Sproul [00:52:04]

No, I think I need to go and have a look at that.

Jon Husband [00:52:05]

You have been describing it. Is there any way of showing it here? No. Never mind.

Cathryn Barnard [00:52:14]

We'll put it in the show notes, Jon, because we're mostly audio for the purposes of this production, but I will make sure, I'll grab a copy and we'll make sure it's in the show notes.

Jon Husband [00:52:07]

I wanna say one more parenthesis here. I'm conscious that we're well over a time. But it's something that I think is important or feels important to me that that came to mind and it and it was really triggered by Cat's statement about going back to roots or to basics and I think this kind of gets into some of the work that a guy called Kevin Kelly is doing now on his Substack, and he's the famous first editor of Wired magazine and so on and so forth, and books like Ten Rules for the New Economy.

I think, pre-industrial age, life unfolded in villages, in communities, along came factory towns, along came Taylorism, the new kind of work. And I think if we were able to go a century or two



ahead, the 20th century, the industrial era, will be seen in terms of psychological and sociological terms as a blip of relative order and stability in a world characterised by much more flow.

However, I think what we'll what we may see in all of those electronically connected and dispersed communities of purpose, communities of interest, communities of location, and so on is a renewal of very deep human urges towards belonging. I can probably find it and I'll send it to Cat if you're interested, or you can look it up. About two years ago, or maybe three, I wrote a piece on LinkedIn with a guy called Greg Broham, who's from England, from London. And it was about the issues of return to work and what was pushing and pulling. In that aspect and saying that the really deep sense, and I think it's pertinent here, that people are looking for because they like working from home. They like a lot of the conveniences. There's still arguments going on about that in many companies that have pushed for return to work. But the notion of remote working has created a very more of a deep need for belonging. And if we combine that with aging population and the known epidemic of loneliness, and we combine that with what's called a relationship recession. people aren't dating each other anymore, or not much, these are all interesting signs of I would call it a deep current of needing to belong to something.

Jennifer Sproul [00:55:15]

Yeah, well I think we all want to so that it's a human nature, right? I want to fit somewhere. I want to feel valued. I want to feel seen. I want to feel accepted. I want to feel safe. I want to feel comfortable. I want to thrive. I want to do all that because we're innately human emotional beings, not algorithmic ones.

Jon Husband [01:55:31]

Absolutely. The fearful thing for me. I think I mean, I'm really impressed with,my experiences with AI, but I think it's gonna be pretty easy to make a lot of people feel more isolated, in one way or another. Where I'm really worried is that we've been In a relatively long-term process of separating somewhat on an ongoing basis from reality. It started with TV, electronicising everything, making all of our household tools convenient. On purpose, I don't have a dishwasher because it's faster to wash the dishes for one person by hand than it is to put them in the dishwasher.

We're just losing touch with what people over I don't know forty, forty five understood as reality.

Jennifer Sproul [00:56:20]

I think we've losing touch with being bored. Like it's a bad thing as well. Just to wrap this up, Jon, I think there was a couple of things I was going to say as well as you were talking. I just as the reflection comment as well is that work certainly feels less social in my working life now than it ever did. And I would say this as well, just as my personal observation. Bedding into the time to optimise or solutionise, I'm making up words by the way, I like to do that, or come up with something that makes a process or something quite linear, faster, more efficient, more way of doing it. That's the easy stuff. The people stuff, the human stuff is the hard thing to get with it.



And I think that Cat, I'm going to pull to you now to close, but the thing I would take away to internal communicators listening as well, listening to such a fascinating conversation is, I think it's our responsibility as professionals or to work to re-understand how information and relationships are formed in our workplaces, where sense-making happens, where meaning happens, where belonging happens, and where trust happens, and where that doesn't and where it breaks down. And sometimes it's okay, but I would urge people listening to perhaps go and think about what are all the mini community systems that sit in your organisation and how does listening and making sense and trust feel like in those mini spaces to make sure they come back to an aligned whole. But that's something I was taking away as a thought for internal communicators.

Jon Husband [00:57:05]

There's a really interesting little exercise. I'm just trying to think as internal communicators, or maybe in your newsletter, how I would do an experiment based on a an approach I know. I don't know if any of you know the name Virginia Satir, who is a very well known family systems theorist and therapist, I think. She's the guru of family systems. And she has an exercise I learned in coaching where you stand in a room and you're basically as an individual, you're involved in five systems. Your work system, your family system, your partner system, your community system, and your I think system with yourself, if I'm not mistaken. And with five other people, you place them in front of you in a semicircle, but at a relative distance to how you feel about each of those in the current moment. In other words, your family system might be way out here, you're not too connected to them, or it might be in close your system of yourself, you might be having a hard time and be disconnected from yourself. So you place them there and you think about that. And there's a coach that You maybe explain each one of those the way they currently are, and then you move them to how you want them to be, and you describe them for those five. And I'm wondering about what the equivalent exercise, at least mentally or abstractly, would be for various groupings or systems of people in an organisation and how you could communicate some of that kind of work for the organisation to have a look at how it communicates, let's say in a communications context. I don't know. Might be fun might be fun just moving to people on a moving the objects on a piece of paper to think about it. I don't know.

Cathryn Barnard [00:59:57]

Given where we are in the world right now, nothing is off the table. We need new models, we need new maps, we need new pathways. And so bringing anything that comes from adjacent fields to explore and experiment with in this profession, I think is a good thing. And I know that Jen, Dom and I have had some conversations about that offline at HQ about, where we should maybe borrow from, very well-serving, successful models. So, Jon, I will follow up with you once we conclude this episode to grab some of the resources that you've referred to so that we can put them in the show notes for those listeners who are interested in diving deeper. But as we close... I knew this conversation was going to be a bit of a mind blower and it hasn't disappointed. And it's just a joy to sit with somebody with the length and breadth of experience that you've got and reflect on your



observations. The thing about society being in vast transition has really cooked my brain, I should be down a rabbit hole for some time on that score. But suffice to say, thank you so, so much for spending an hour with us. And I think we could have another conversation. So let's keep the conversation in the green room going.

Jon Husband [01:21:19]

Thank you very much.