



Transcript for S13, E7 – Making the case for spaciousness with Megan Reitz and John Higgins

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.

Dom (01:05)

Hello and welcome back to this edition of the Future of Internal Communication. I'm Dominic Walters and I'm joined as always by my co-host, Jennifer Sproul and Cathryn Barnard. Today we welcome back Megan Reitz and John Higgins who joined us for an earlier episode when we looked at their work around activism. Megan is an associate fellow at Said Business School at Oxford University, an adjunct professor of leadership and dialogue at the Hult International Business School, where she focuses among a number of other things on transformative dialogue at work, looking at leadership, change, dialogue, and mindfulness. She's a leading business thinker and is ranked in HR magazine's most influential thinkers listing and has written a number of books, most recently *Speak Out, Listen Up* with John Higgins, who is also joining us today. John is a widely publicised researcher and author who has been working among a number of other things with Megan looking at activism, but also about today's topic, which is spaciousness. For the last year and a half, John and Megan have been looking at this concept, what it means for organisations to bring together a more spacious mode to enrich work and to enrich employees' experience of work.

So I guess the first question, apart from saying welcome John and welcome Megan and welcome back, thank you for joining us again. The first question I suppose is what is spaciousness and why is it important? So who would like to kick off with that one please?



Megan (02:35)

Shall we kick off actually by chucking that one straight back at everybody that is listening to this? It's quite an ironic topic to study actually because if we immediately define our understanding of spaciousness, we are already narrowing everybody else's understanding of the experience. And so what we've been doing in our research is we ask others first. And I'd love for people listening in now just to pause for a second and consider a time where they felt they experienced a sense of spaciousness.

So there are no boundaries on what that means. It might mean anything. We are fascinated with what pops into people's minds straight away. When you just recall a moment when you felt a sense of spaciousness.

And we have asked, well, don't know, hundreds, thousands, I don't know, by now, a lot of people that question. And we often get a real, I mean, we get such a range of responses. They include things like, that time when I was going for a walk and I wasn't actually listening to a podcast like this. I was actually letting myself sort of wonder and letting my mind wonder it's included people saying it was in a conversation with a really good friend when we didn't have an agenda and I didn't have to pretend to be a certain way and we just connected and we just talked and it felt spacious. We've had people say to us. Well, actually the last time I think I experienced spaciousness was when I was in hospital and I just had a major operation and I literally couldn't do anything else. I had just this huge amount of space. We have a real range of responses and before I sort of hand it over to John but it probably is a wise place to start in terms of our research to suggest that we have two kind of modes of attention. And one mode of attention we call the doing mode.

And in that mode, we are looking to achieve a goal. We're looking to control something and predict something. We are instrumental in what we're paying attention to. We tend to see things as quite fragmented, sort of singular items that we have to manipulate in order to achieve something. So the doing mode, we're all very familiar with, and it includes words like, you know, being efficient and productive and having goals and language that we're very used to in the workplace. Doing mode is utterly vital for survival, so we wouldn't get anywhere if we didn't have the doing mode. However, we have another form of attention and that's called the spacious mode and that mode is one which is more expansive, it's less hurried.

We're not seeking the next moment to rush into something. We're not looking to achieve a particular thing. We're much more aware of relationships and interdependencies. And we're kind of free from the typical shoulds and oughts that often occupy our brain. So we actually spend a lot of time at work and at home with a constant to-do list. I need to do this or how am gonna do that? I wonder whether I should, I shouldn't have done that, I must make sure that. So most of us have what's called the default network going on, a narrative network going on in our brain. That's very, very busy.



And the spacious mode, that quietens and it allows us to see relationships, interdependencies, and therefore it opens us up to possibilities. We start joining dots that we never even, in the doing mode, we just see the dot. In the spacious mode, we see how those dots might connect. And so it's a field of insight. So I'm gonna pause there. John. Over to you. What else do we need to say at that first question?

John Higgins (07:18)

To that first question, well I'll do the rest of the podcast. That's all right with you, Megan. You've teed up most of it. I was really struck by in terms of, again, just touching on what people raise when the word spaciousness, what does it evoke in them? And I just wrote down the things I'm really reminded of is cathedrals. And I remember interviewing somebody and they said that when they are walking around a cathedral or a big religious space, that sense of, you suddenly almost decenter from your ego. You suddenly realize that the world does not revolve around you. And I think this is quite a major challenge to our established business culture, which is still very ego driven, very much about privileging the individual. Megan lightly says, well, it's about embracing interdependence.

If you step into the experience of interdependence, you know the world quite differently. Suddenly, you are not the sole author of your life or your experience, and it is a profound philosophical challenge. Get into the discussions about, no longer is it about the sovereign individual. You are an interdependent being, and that invites you into different forms of consciousness and different forms of the word I'm going to use is attention.

So one of the things I think Megan briefly mentioned it, but when we're asked to say, what's the relationship between the spacious mode and time management? I say, it's not really time management. It's about attention management. It's paying attention to how you pay attention, which can sound very esoteric, but actually is the most important thing we can do in our lives. We have always have the choice. What am I going to pay attention to right now, this moment, this second. And too often, we almost don't want to shift our attention mode. It's very addictive, the doing mode attention, because it keeps us busy. It allows us to avoid the big questions. And instead, spacious mode attention, suddenly doubt comes in. And one of our favourite quotes comes from someone we interviewed and says, yeah, yeah, who wants doubt in their lives?

Well, actually it's the most important thing we can have, but we're not conditioned to stay with it because we rush into the balm of busyness. Between us, we've stolen wholeheartedly now from the work of Margaret Heffernan, who talks about wilful blindness. I think a lot of our working life is filled with wilful busyness, where we prefer busyness over the experience of doubt, where we prefer it over the notion that



my understanding of the world is wrapped up with the experience of others. And I think I'll just listen, finish before sort of handing back to you, Dom, is it's about curiosity. And that if I was thinking of anything is the key orientation, a deep curiosity about self and the world. And that is very different from certainty. It is the shift from advocacy to inquiry and dialogue.

And by and large, most of us, and I speak, I'm over trained in my advocacy. But what I am woefully underdeveloped in is my curiosity and my willingness to stay with, that's a different way of knowing the world. And that can be quite unsettling. But curiosity is the drug.

Dom (10:48)

It sounds almost counterintuitive in terms of, I guess we're brought up to be busy. We're brought up, I was anyway, but we're brought up to be doing things, to fill every unforgiving minute as it were with stuff to do, to show and record what we've done. And I think communicators actually can get caught up in this. One of the things that we debate is how we prove our worth. And I think sometimes we try and prove our worth by stuff we've done as opposed to the impact we've had. It'd be good just to explore a bit more about why it's so important to help people be aware of spaciousness and what it can bring them in their lives. It would be great to get your take on that please.

Megan (11:28)

We often measure ourselves on our to-do lists and the success that we've had in ticking them off. Our teams and our organisations are pretty much obsessed with short-term, tangible targets.

We don't assess very well whether the short-term tangible targets we're actually doing are the ones that we should be doing. And John and I often talk about, are we being busy fools? Yes, we're ticking a lot of things off our to-do list, and yes, as a comms person, I'm doing a lot of stuff, I'm pushing a lot of stuff out there, but without the spacious mode, you literally might be a busy fool. You're doing lots and lots, but it's not the right stuff. So the spacious mode is really the one that should be in charge. The spacious mode is the one that looks at the big picture and kind of figures out what's happening here. How does this sort of system work? How do I play into this? What's important? And then make some wiser choices that our doing mode can then get stuck right into and start delivering. So the two work fabulously well together and we can't live without both of them. But a life with just the doing mode risks well, disaster actually, for our relationships, for our environment, and for ourselves as human beings. So that spacious mode has to take precedence really and we are influenced by the work of somebody called Iain McGilchrist, and he talks about the master and his emissary. And the master is the right hemisphere. In a way, that's our spacious mode. And that is the one that allows us to make wise decisions and wise choices. But of



course our research is mainly in the workplace but I have two teenage daughters and I see the education system that we have here. The education system very frighteningly early on teaches us that success is grades in exams which is the product still overwhelmingly of short-term memory ability and so we indoctrinate kids into a particular view of what success looks like and what gets recognised. And then they join a workplace, which is not surprisingly, we're still looking for the tangible targets, we're measuring those and paying attention to them and we're promoting people that seem to show activity very successfully.

And part of that is because of course the spaciousness is intangible. It's a lot less easy to measure simply. But that is a lame excuse for ignoring it.

John Higgins (14:29)

I was just thinking again, it's this, it's the fear of having conversations about qualities rather than quantities. And again, we talk elsewhere about the tyranny of the tangible and we have become obsessed. It's that throwaway remark which was taken out of context is what gets measured gets managed is possibly one of the most toxic sticks that we've developed to beat ourselves with because actually all the other stuff happens as well, we just don't take it seriously. And again, because we wish to demonstrate our personal contribution, because again, going back to the focus on the individual, we again will do things that are within our sphere. And so again, that restricts us by and large to short-term visible activity. I just wanted to just say something about the measurement field, is so I back in the 90s briefly worked in the firm for a guy called Dave Norton, who was one of the originators of something called the balanced scorecard. And that was one of the early attempts to say, can we actually look at the long-term measures and areas of focus and particularly around learning? And the tragedy is that actually the balanced scorecard got reduced and just turned into another doing mode mechanistic thing and the learning turned into how many programmes have you run because that was the thing that was easy to measure. But actually this, was always identified that it's in things like learning that actually the long-term health of an organisation lives. That is the biggest difference that if you're an internal comms person or anybody you can make. But that is the thing that we run away from because if we're talking about profound learning, if we're talking about the learning that, the new challenges the world faces, our dear friend AI coming looming into view again, these are things we do not know and we wish to put them in a box. And yet what we need to do is learn how to embrace our anxiety more healthily. And at the moment we use the busy mode, the doing mode in a way to contain our anxiety.

John Higgins (16:43)

Whereas actually what we need to do is become more uncomfortable with the uncertainty. And that's quite difficult when you're in a context where everybody's saying, can you prove yourself? Can you dedicate? Can you deliver the next quarter's results? Which just stoke the anxiety. To be the one who can say, we need to step back and not get caught up in the



frenzy. And one of our recent articles in the HBR, we were talking about how do you advocate the spacious mode without getting kicked out of your job for sounding like a fruitcake? Because basically you're doing the classic which is can we hasten slowly please? Can we look before we leap? And this is in an era where we're still living in the shadow of you know the break things and move fast. I'd say that again is one of those really toxic overplayed cliches which is really really bad for us and drags us into the doing mode with no attention to the qualities that the spacious mode makes possible.

Megan (17:42)

And just one story to add here as well, which John and I thought was very telling. We talk to somebody that heads up the learning and development department of a big organisation that has a big customer services department. And the customer service agents fill in a time sheet every day and if they have to take some time to go and do some training which enables them to be even more skillful with the customers they note down on their timesheet that as NPT, non-productive time. That is what it is recorded as and the person we were speaking with, with a twinkle in their eye, sort of said, you can imagine my status being head of non-productive time at my organisation. And I think that is quite a telling, you know, saying we can get right, we can get swept away with the wonderful measurement and ease and controllability of productive time, time in front of the customer.

And we get so obsessed with that we don't want to take any time away from that because the training thing is kind of well we know we need it but it's less measurable but can you imagine if we don't take that step back and so this is the link now with with leadership and indeed the link with communication professionals as well is it takes a great deal of courage when we are stuck in pathologically busy workplaces and many are, it takes a lot of courage to be able to step in and go, you know what, we're going to pause. And we're particularly interested in the role that leadership plays there.

John Higgins (19:35)

You reminded me of one gorgeous person. We interviewed one Olympic athlete and they said, isn't it fascinating when you're a top class athlete, you spend most of your time training and very little performing. And yet when you move into the corporate arena, you spend all your time performing and hardly any time training.



Cathryn Barnard (19:54)

I was just reminded of a story that appeared in a book that I think you may have referenced in your spaciousness report. The book is *How to Do Nothing* by Jenny O'Dell. And do you remember that story where she recounts, and I think by name, but I won't do it here, a big four consultancy and somebody is in the reception lobby area and they appear to be doing nothing and somebody comes up to her and says, what are you doing? And she says, well, I'm thinking. And they're like, what? And she eventually, like various people come up and they're so stumped that this person is doing nothing. She gets reported to HR. But what I think is really interesting and I was listening to you is one of the thoughts that I had was our entire culture now is so performative and perfectionist and even if we do have time to ourselves, we tend to, a lot of us tend to spend that time scrolling on social media and looking at what everyone else is doing to see whether we measure up somehow. And obviously a lot has been written about the tricks and tools of the social media platforms to keep us enthralled, enticed, engaged and scrolling, which is its own podcast episode by itself. You said something earlier, Megan, which is that you guys, your area of expertise is studying the workplace and yet this kind of hangover, this overhang into, it's hard actually, isn't it, in this particular area to distinguish between work and life because we don't have space really in either of them. Work is insane and nuts now and so results oriented. But I think our lives have become like that as well. We're all of a certain age, that we probably are very familiar with the keeping up with the Joneses, which is something that our parents would have would have talked about. But that kind of keeping up with people and doing what everyone else is doing. And am I driving the right car, going on holiday to the right place, eating the right food in the right restaurant, have I got the right exercise regime, am I wearing the right clothes? It's on steroids now and there literally isn't a nanosecond to stop and think about what our own choice and preference is in that. It feels like to me anyway, and like you, Megan, I've got teenagers and I think they're probably reasonably well adapted when it comes to social media, but I think the pressure to do what everybody else is doing, is intense and I guess my kind of rebellious 80s kid inside me is like well who says, who says you're not the boss of me, who gets to decide these things but I'm really curious about spaciousness being a business issue and a personal issue because if we can't apply that in our personal lives? How are we ever going to apply it at work, right? I mean, those two things to what I think you're saying, they're very intersected, aren't they, and very interconnected.

Megan (23:34)

So you're talking a lot about performance, as in performative. How do we need to be seen by others? And just to mention, going back to that point I made on the narrative mind. So what happens in personal life and workplace systems, community systems, is we can have a lot of our attention driven by an internal dialogue that is telling us that we need to be seen in a certain way.



So we need to come across like this, or we're asking, do they approve of me? Do they like me? Will this lead to this goal that I need? So it's quite an insular, self-focused comparison narrative. And when we think about it, unfortunately, that really does rule an awful lot of our lives. You know, as parents as well, it's like, am I doing this well? Am I a good mother? Or what would a good mother be doing here or do I really have I done this all wrong what am I doing wrong they seem fine everybody else's kids are sorted. Actually, and this is very interesting with the mindfulness research as well. **When we become more mindful, we really notice the degree to which that narrative takes our attention. And spaciousness is when that volume goes down.** In fact, it stops. And it can be quite extraordinary because it rules our lives to the degree that it does. Again, just asking you if you're listening to this, when was the last kind of real sustained time where you were actually free of the need to be seen in a certain way or the need to do something in a certain time where you allowed your attention, rather, to be on present moment sensory awareness. So for example, you are simply outside and you are looking around and you are full of wonder or at what's around you, or you're in a deep conversation and you're not having to worry about how the other person thinks about you. You're just in a really good dialogue.

When did that last happen? That's probably part of what we're pointing to in this research and we're saying, goodness me, this spacious mode, be really careful. It's a bit of a disappearing art. And at the heart of it, when we ask people, you know, to recall important moments in their lives they don't normally point to the to-do lists that they've ticked off. They'll point to moments where they were deeply in relationship or interconnected or in this more spacious realm. So we lose that. We're losing what it is to be human.

John Higgins (26:38)

This is just come on the back of where our research at the moment is we're looking at people who are experienced as being in spacious relationships in workplaces. So we're often talking to managers and direct reports, just pairs of people who, when we ask them in the midst of this madness, who is it that you experience as actually been capable of inviting spaciousness from others?

And it can be done. And I'm just thinking about last night and a lot of it is to do with the quality of presence that you bring to that relationship. Just thinking about people from a Scottish medical establishment yesterday and it was the head of one of the departments and their matron. And there was something about allowing each other to just show up. They were able to cry together. They didn't feel that they had to keep the stiff upper lip in this face of, impossible situations. And it is that willingness to be human together. And this is where, Megan's PhD was all about the work of Martin Buber and the difference between I it and I thou relationships. This is the other really major philosophical strand that informs our work.



And in the I it, that is when we are approaching other people as instrumental objects. And that's fine, there's a time and a place for that. But if I'm thinking about two sets of people I've interviewed in the last 24 hours, what was striking was their capacity to turn to each other in an I thou mode, where they were looking for deep connection, where they were inviting the other to show up in all their messy complexity.

And so they didn't have to spend all this energy putting on a brave face, playing the corporate game. And that if I'm looking at what happens with in the field of communication is it invites people often to fake it. Can you fake a particular way of being with others? And that's how things like the DE and I think have in a sense lost a lot of its credibility because it insisted on people adopting a language which didn't come as an authentic expression of human relationship and connection. **This dehumanisation of the workplace that comes when we just have the doing mode desperately needs the spacious mode to remind us that as human beings, we only live and thrive when we are in relationship with others, when we are open to being touched by others in the sense of when you are with someone who really sees you and sees you as you are, not as they want you to be, boy, can you fly and boy do you come alive. Boy do you experience joy even.**

Jen Sproul (29:22)

I feel like what I've just listened to is like one of the best therapy sessions I've had in ages. Because there's so much in what you say that as you're talking, I feel like, yeah, yeah, that's what life feels like. And it feels like some of the narratives in my head about did I say that right? I do that right? Was I the right friend in that? Did I respond quickly enough? Did I come back quickly enough? Did I miss out on that? We need to get this done, that done, that done. If I don't meet this deadline, what does that do to somebody else? And how do I go on about doing all of that? And as you say and as you think, kind of when you've been truly spacious, it's really hard. But I would know to say those moments, but what gets me through and when I feel truly comfortable and I think safe as well is when you're in that relationship where thinking about what I say or I do isn't an issue because they know who I am and my intent and there's a security in that and I think those are really important things as human beings that we need to create for each other personally, professionally, in many walks of life but do I have enough time to be that person and I think that's often a struggle and as you were listening as well when I think about the internal communication profession and where we're going and what our members are experiencing, that if by doing all of this that makes them performative then that's great, we're so focused in doing. And I often say as well our job isn't necessarily to do but it's also to be a diagnostician is to take a step back and see where problems are, human process, understanding, feeling, emotion, all those sorts of things. But it feels like as communication professionals, picking up a little bit what Cat was saying as well, picking on the point around attention, is that we're trying to all fight for it in the wrong way, if that makes sense. So as communication professionals, one of the



hardest things we're trying to do is how do I get the attention of this person to read my thing, to do what I'm saying and take the action and the doing mode that I need from them?

And then you have social media and we're all fighting for this attention to compare and to thrive rather than, as you say, is to take back from that attention to bring it back to those thoughts that enable you to join the dots and make those connections and think about those deep relationships. And I find that quite sort of a paradox. And I guess if we were to dial up as communication professionals who were perhaps thinking about, I need to get this out for the stakeholder, do this, be this, measure my impact, show I've made this noodle move from here to here, craft messages that get the attention of everybody. But when we're so busy doing, how can we use that spaciousness to come back to something where we really think critically, we think how we can solve complex problems to be creative and to be innovative? I've lost count of the amount of times I've said recently, and Cat, I'm sure Dom will attest to this as I just need some time to think. I just need some time to think. I just need a minute to step back from that and have a think before I propose a solution. So how can we dial down the doing mode and dialing up the spacious mode to help us be more critical, to help us solve problems and creative innovation, what does that, how would you kind of advise, I guess, communication professionals who were too busy doing?

Megan (32:49)

It's an ironic question, isn't it? And it's a very reasonable question. How do I do more spaciousness, essentially? How can I get it? And in our research, we've come at that in a variety of different ways, but the sort of probably most pragmatic way to talk about now is in the acronym **SPACE**, actually. So we talk about, okay, remember these kind of five things here. If you're listening to this and you're going, my gosh, I get it, I just need some more space, how do I do that? The **S** stands for **safety**. So the more that we can enable safety in our teams and our organisations, the less of the frightened narrative we have in mind of course, the less we need to show up and perform and pretend. So the safer a place is and that links a lot to John and my research on speaking truth to power. We've done an awful lot on psychological safety and how do you actually develop a situation where people can relate to one another and not be so engaged in having to be seen in a particular way.

So safety is an important aspect. The **P** stands for **people**. So in a way, one of the easiest and quickest ways to enable spaciousness is to think through who do I know that helps me to open the space that I need.

It might be a coach, it might be a mentor, it might be a boss, it might be a really good friend inside or outside of work, but **it's somebody who just helps me to see the wood for the trees, that actually pauses, that doesn't seek to interrupt me or take over the conversation. Just somebody that helps me hold that space.** And somebody, perhaps sometimes, that will kind of force me to look at some of those bigger questions because I'm bloody good at avoiding them so I'll need a coach or somebody alongside me to go hang on



a second no let's stay with this so who are the people that we surround ourselves with and that's online as well as offline so many of us are surrounding ourselves in the online space in communities that close down dialogue that advocate certain perspectives that are very narrow that don't enable us to be curious. So join more networks that are helping you to be spacious. **A** in space stands for **attention**. We can train our attention. Many people would say that our attention is by far and away the most important resource we have. It utterly defines our lives and the lives of the people around us where we place our attention and yet nearly all of us leave that up to chance. It's unbelievable. We are able to train our attention through certain mindfulness practices. That's been a lot of my research as well.

So there are ways of training our brain to make sure that we can at least know what we're paying attention to and then make different choices. And we can also interrupt our attention during the work day. We can schedule things that we might call speed bumps. they're things that in our mindfulness research, we had a couple of participants who said that when they'd had a really awful day at work and they came home and they were about to go through the front door and they were in an awful mood, as they put the key in the door, they used that as an anchor to just do a five second scan. What am I about to take into my house? What am I about to infect the rest of my family with? Is that how I want to show up? So it was a speed bump. It was just something that went, wake up, hang on, stop, look around, make a choice. And there are quite a few lovely little examples of how we can put speed bumps into our day. **C** in space stands for **conflict**. We often think of conflict as quite negative, here we're talking about dissonance. We're talking about things that disrupt our automatic pilot, that help us to wake up and go, wait a second, I didn't think about that. And they immediately broaden our attention or they trigger our curiosity. So, different books, conferences, away days that have different sort of, offered a tangent. They're things that really expand our awareness. They're different voices. And then **E** is **environment**. And this is really interesting. Our physical environment has an enormous impact on the way that we pay attention and how we show up. And certainly in terms of meetings at work, good grief, could we be any more uncreative around where and how we have conversations? We show up and we do it on Zoom or Teams or, and we expect different results, through using the same media or the same place. You put people in different environments, they'll think differently, they'll relate differently. John and I have both spent time with somebody that takes senior teams out fly fishing. They literally stand them in a river fly fishing. I guarantee you have a very different conversation. You have them paying attention in very different ways. That's quite an extreme example, but how do we really pay attention to our environment and how it affects what we are then attending to. So that acronym of space gives us some kind of slightly more pragmatic, tangible ways of thinking what might I adjust here. And the final thing I would say is please, please hear that this is not time management. So all of us have had examples where we can create time, but all we do in that time that we've created is get thoroughly stressed about the amount of work that we've got to do. We've also had experiences where we've met people for five minutes and they've had the most profound impact on us and enabled us to see the world totally differently. So we're not, whilst time scheduling does have a role to play, this is not about having more time. This



is about us really attending to where our attention is lying and just being more choiceful in that rather than letting it be up to chance.

John Higgins (39:28)

I was just linking that to also one of the earlier phrases one of you said was talked about the need to be perfect or perfectionism, which I think is really very much the enemy of spaciousness. It is this classic thing of soon as you go into that perfect thing, I've got to turn up in a certain way and I've got to look in a certain way. And I'm just remembering a story Megan once told of being invited to take part in a conference, which is about dialogue. And they wanted the MD to come along. And they said, yeah, that'd be absolutely fine. He'll come along and do his standard pitch. I'll come and give my 20 minute talk and then people can ask me things. And I said, no, we want you to come and join in the dialogue. And I was like, that's gonna take quite a lot of work. Because actually to be prepared to turn up and not know the answer, to show the loose threads of your thinking is not something that people are very skilled at doing. I know it's a cliché now, I do love that phrase, the best we can do is fail again, fail better. I think perfectionism is one of the big enemies of spaciousness.

Jen Sproul (40:42)

And I think learning and trialling and together and experimenting and making mistakes and doing all that, not mistakes but just you know things going in a different direction and taking something from it. It takes comfort perhaps in your environment to feel like you can do that, you have a license to do that. How can we encourage to have that more license maybe?

John Higgins (41:03)

The thing that reminds me is how Megan and I started this work and it's to do again that we keep on thinking we can join relationships I could step into a spacious relationship to order. It doesn't happen like that. Megan and I have been working together now I think for 10-12 years and when we started the spaciousness research we were on one of our ungendered work walks down the canal which is how most of them happen and this is two and a half years ago she pauses when we're about an hour into it and turns to me and says, I think we need to research spaciousness. And so I turn around to her and say, OK, what do you mean by that? And she says, I don't know, but I feel it's really important. And so I then say, that's good enough for me because it's this whole idea, because I value the relationship, because I trust her, because I know that the journey will be in itself of deep interest. I hang on in there. And that's what allowed us this work to happen.



And too often, because we haven't invested in that relational connection, we expect trust to be manufactured to order. We don't realise that if you're going to step into spacious relationships, you've actually got to spend time with each other. You've got to tune into each other. You've got to know each other. And that means you've actually got to show up as you are. And you're not going to like everybody and not everybody's going to be your cup of tea. But there are going to be some people who you're going to suddenly know. I come alive with them.

Jen Sproul (42:27)

Absolutely, I love that. And I would say my cohorts are two people that I feel particularly I can, but it is, but we can speak and phone up and I don't know, I could be on the phone to Cat for about two, three hours. I'm not sure, but there's something in there, there's a kernel of something when you're just thinking and talking out loud with somebody where I'm not worried about if I say something wrong or if I'm not perfect. And I think it's, but it's for internal communicators. How can we encourage them to enable that in their own working or lives or their own relationships or encourage that in their stakeholders, their people to sort of go this is because it feels to me in recent years that we've lost the meaning of what relationship is with another human as in principle, I know them, that's not a relationship. It's not a safe connected place, but we've de-prioritized in our lives, in our minds, relationships and their value. How do we kind of put them back up the agenda as you say, they're pivotal to everything.

Cathryn Barnard (43:29)

One of the things that I think about as we're having this conversation is that the enemy of spaciousness and relationship at the moment has got to be the almost existential and universal worry about economic performance. And so, the elephant in the room really right now is the worry that I might lose my job if I take a moment, if I step off the conveyor belt, how do I demonstrate that this very intangible activity, I hear you theoretically, I hear everything that you're saying and it makes sense to me at a visceral level, how do I have the courage to take a moment, to take five moments, to breathe spaciousness into my existence and the existence of my peers, my team, my colleagues, when this shadow is looming over me, which is performative and, you mentioned earlier, John, the AI kind of spectre. We were having a conversation earlier about what is inhibiting AI adoption. And one of the things we're talking about is a lack of transparency in the C-suite inhibits AI adoption because why would I use something that might make me redundant? That's another massive conversation over there. But I guess what I'm thinking about is at a theoretical level and as I say, almost at a cellular level, when you think about the concept of spaciousness, it makes total sense. And I would even go as far as to go a little bit off piste and look at the work that Michael Pollan revealed in his book, How to Change Your Mind, when he looked at the role



of psychedelics on shutting down the default mode network and creating that space for all of the random synaptic connections to then appear. And there are parallels, aren't there, between clinical use of psychedelics and meditation and this clearing of space in order to create the bandwidth for new things, new imaginings, new ideas to emerge. But I guess the question that I've got is how might we create more space in our workplaces when regrettably, lamentably, most of our workplaces are controlled by leaders who are trained to think in short-term ways and deliver those short-term results. It's a big one isn't it? I don't know what the answer is. I think it's cause for debate but I would love to know what you guys think about that.

Megan (49:39)

One thing I would say straight off is I would seriously start asking the question, what happens if we don't? So just what happens if we carry on like this? What happens if you carry on like this? Is this a life where, sorry to sound so dramatic, but is this the life that you want to live? Is this a life worth living at this level? So there's perhaps more attention we could pay to the sort of like what happens if we don't. Not, how do we, but also, okay, what happens if we don't? I think that it involves certainly people in positions of power inside our organisations making choices that enable them to open up space for others. But what you just said there is a really, really amazingly common misunderstanding of what it takes to be productive and to create economic value longer term.

Our busyness obsession is not leading us to create fulfillment. So at some point we all need to really come very close to the realisation that we've built our whole model on the completely false assumption. It's like this is the best way of doing it, is to be this busy. The best way of us to produce brilliant results next year is just to be as busy as this and not take our time out to develop relationships. So there's some more attendance that we need to have to the misleading assumption that we have that means to be spacious equals lower economic output. It is the opposite from what we've been reading and understanding. So I'd certainly just mention those points.

Cathryn Barnard (48:36)

Do you think with all your experiences as researchers, do you think that misunderstanding is because our business cultures are still so entangled with the scientific school of management and Frederick Winslow Taylor? Do you think that's it?

John Higgins (48:58)

I think the machine metaphor continues to dominate our thinking. 20, 30, 40 years ago, we began to talk about complex adaptive systems and trying to take an organic, systemic view



of how social systems work. But we love the mechanistic. I mean, you just notice it in our language. We love talking about drivers. We love talking about simple cause and effect. The number of times people will say, we've done a root cause analysis.

And I'm thinking, okay, can we just unpack what you mean by that? But that's dragging us back down into the negative. I was thinking, I've actually had some very positive experiences and where we're going with our research is I had a gorgeous interview with a very senior executive quite recently who said he is abandoning the use of a high performance culture in his organisation. Instead, he is calling it a high learning culture. Now, this is a person who's soaked in all our background absolutely all the reasons why he wouldn't give up, but he is, you know, smart enough, wise enough that he can see that what he sees is that when he talks about high performance, people freeze. People stop being thinking creatively, they just do more of the same. But he's saying it's got to be a high learning culture. And the other thing we're doing at the moment, this is why we're interviewing pairs of people in organisations. **There are very successful people who are inviting others into these sorts of spacious relationships.**

The way you get round this problem is to show, be able to point to particular individuals in particular relationships and say, look at them. They're doing something called spaciousness and they are making it work for them. Because it then completely derails the discussion of we can't do that here by being able to say, yeah, but over there we can see that others are doing it differently. And there are lots of examples of people doing it differently and making a difference. And it's just, we need to amplify and make visible this different form of success.

Megan (50:57)

Just one final thing to sort of mention here, what we're not saying is to for those comms professionals listening in here, there's discernment that the doing mode just to reiterate the doing mode has a really useful place in terms of various forms of Communications when we have to send out data we have to get particular surveys done or whatever it might be the doing mode has a real role. What we're saying is that if the doing mode takes over and you start thinking of communication just in that kind of mode, then you are absolutely losing insight as well as relationship. So what I'd encourage people to do is not sort of think about, my gosh, this feels totally overwhelming. How can I stop what I'm doing? It's not that. Given what you are intending as a communication professional. Given what your overarching intent is, in which areas do you need to open up more space? Which areas could do with a little bit more of this space? And then look at it like that, because otherwise we tend to sort of freeze and just think, I haven't got time. And we make that sort of confusion again.



Jen Sproul (52:15)

I've never done that many times in my life. I've never done that. And I think Megan, to some degree, you've probably answered already the question I'm going to ask, but perhaps I'll try and phrase it a little bit differently about, so, the opportunity for internal communication in this, I was going say in this space, in this space of spaciousness. I'll try that.

We've talked a lot about how we can bring spaciousness for ourselves as individuals, also in that one about how we can bring it collectively and what our role is to bring that, I think very much at the beginning, as you were saying, is how we create that for each other and we take it out of the eye into the collective. And I think that we know and we've touched on this again and some of the research that we've been doing as well is that if we think about the workplace and we think about what's going on, it's become dehumanised, it has become transactionalised, it has become a performative place, as you say. But I think as internal communicators, we are seeing that even with the avalanche of AI and all this other thing that can perhaps do more of the doing for us, so that we do perhaps a little fragment less of that to do more of the other work, but how can we as a function take an opportunity of this to enable that who's trying to look at how we build connection and community in organisations where perhaps people have lost, I guess, the desire for it or lost connection with what it feels like. How can we, what opportunities do you think it presents to us as a function to be someone that enables that as a collective? I'm not sure if that makes sense, but hopefully there's something from that.

Megan (53:52)

I think it's a similar answer in relation to leadership more generally. I guess my advice would be for professionals is to just make sure you create the space with someone else where you can remember what you're really trying to do in the more expansive meaning of communications, what is it you're trying to impact and develop? And when you kind of remember that bigger picture your choices and your actions tend to alter somewhat in terms of what you then do. But it's so easy to get dragged into that doing mode. And this is the advice I sort of give to the senior leaders that I work with is if there was one thing I would say is make sure that you have just that space to remember why the hell you're doing what you're doing. And bring it foreground, because if you've got your attention on that, then you'll show up differently and you'll make some different choices as well. Having been working in a consulting practice in internal comms specifically, and stakeholder management, it's incredible how quickly that particular work can get sucked into to-do lists and so instrumental, stakeholder management. I have this person here and I need them to move three boxes to the right so that they're here by the end of the project. It's unbelievable how quickly it can get to that. And whereas some of that is useful and helpful, what is the bigger question? What's the bigger picture that we're trying to do and that's probably the one thing that I think would make a difference to individuals and the impact that they have in their organisations.



John Higgins (55:49)

I was just, this might be a bit of a tangent. It is this anxiety about people using surveys as a form of, it becomes so easy to do them. And it's this whole notion, particularly things like pulse surveys, great ways of collecting data, which simply reinforce the sense of lack of interest, the lack of human connection. So if you think of internal communications as a dialogic process rather than a transmission process, then dialogue is a deeply social process. And that requires you to be inquiry led. It's about how do you hear what people really want to say rather than arrive with your frameworks first. I remember a piece of research I recently did on a book on the role of silence in organisations. We sent out a survey and we got 35 responses and we were about to categorise them. And so we then finally just published all the free format material because that was really rich because it was nuanced, it was complicated, it was contradictory and it is this idea linking back to the perfectionism is actually allows space for the messiness of communication to play out because that's an expression of the reality of human relationships. Again it's our fear of the lack of space that we've got to tidy up our human experience. For me the really lovely thing about spaciousness is it allows you to show up warts and all and that will be one of the richest things that we could do as a community.

Dom (57:25)

I have lots of notes and lots of thoughts buzzing around in my head. We need to come into land. And I think a number of things I'm taking for this, but a few things that strike me. One is I think we've said that attention and curiosity are a vital resource for everybody but for organisations. And for me that means that as internal communicators there's something we can do there to help use that resource, create as much of it as we possibly can and make sure that it's focused in the right way. I think spaciousness and providing that SPACE as you describe Megan is one way that we can start to help people to unleash that attention. I'm probably using the wrong sort of words here.

I really interested in that. **I love the shifting the mindset from high performance to high learning.** That's a very helpful way of thinking about things, I think. And it's something that we as communicators can start to discuss with leaders that we're supporting. And also I picked up, you talked about inauthentic language. About, I think you were saying one of the reasons why DE and I as in terms of policy and approach may not have the same traction that people might expect because it's, these are my words now, it's become almost dehumanised and distracted and taken away from people's experience. So there's a lot, I'm deducing all the wonderful stuff that you said, but there's a lot there that we can take away as communicators. But I'm going to be lazy. I'm going to ask you to do that work for us. So.



on the basis of what we've said, what's one thing that from your research and your experience you recommend that internal communicators focus on to start to help organisations become more human, to build these better and spacious relationships that you've talked about? There we are, that's an impossible question I know, but what do you think?

John Higgins (59:14)

What's on my mind is pay attention to how you pay attention. Don't just go on automatic into any conversation, any workplace, ask, what am I paying attention to right here, right now? Because you can choose in that moment to shift. And it's not time, it's attention.

Megan (59:34)

If I had to choose one thing, as I mentioned previously, it's make sure that you are in a place where you show up in the way that you want to. Because how you show up affects others' voices, it affects the way that they think. So if you can show up more spaciously with those kind of sometimes with some of the bigger picture in mind. Then that will impact on the people that you have conversations with and that will trickle out through the organisation.

Dom (01:00)

Thank you very much, Megan. Thank you John. I shall particularly bear that in mind when I put the key in the door when I go home later on for that speed bump or speed block you mentioned. So thank you very much for a fascinating conversation. And perhaps we can meet again to build on what we've talked about at a future date. But for now, thank you very much indeed.