Transcript for S10 E2 The Power of Strangers with Joe Keohane

Cat Barnard (00:41)

Hello and welcome to a fresh episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Cat Barnard and today I am joined by Dominic Walters. Unfortunately, Jen is stuck on a train, but she has left the podcast in our capable hands so I'm sure we will do swimmingly. I was thinking about today's episode - one of the things that I love about this podcast the most is that I get to choose who I would most like to have a conversation with, and today's guest is here because I read a book last year in 2023 that really changed and challenged how I think about how we show up for one another at work.

So, without further ado, I would love to introduce all of you to Joe Keohane, who is the author of an amazing book called 'The Power of Strangers'. Joe is a vet journalist, he's worked as an editor at Medium, Esquire, Entrepreneur and Hemispheres, and has written several books, a couple of books previously - but the book, The Power of Strangers, really grabbed me - not least because reading it in 2023, we are thick set into the hybrid work age, and I think it's not unfair to say that many of us are struggling with our relationships at work when we're working 'distributedly' and remotely. And of course, prior to the pandemic, we have all borne witness to a slow disintegration of social cohesion and fragmented politics. So, the book sang to me when I read it, and without further ado, I would like to welcome Jo and ask you to tell our listeners about The Power of Strangers and what it's about.

Joe Keohane (02:34)

Sure, thank you for having me Dom and Cat - a pleasure to be on here. So the idea of the book hit me a few years ago, probably around 2018 or so, and the genesis of it came from my realisation that I had sort of stopped talking to strangers. I think for a lot of people, that's fairly normal. For me, it's an aberration and a violation of a family tradition. In a lot of ways, my parents are pathological about talking to strangers. They're like the people who will reach across two tables in a restaurant to remark on something and will come away from that exchange, not hated, but with an actual friend, you know? They'll go on vacation, they'll come home with new friends. All of our holidays, there would be new people at the holidays that they had met, they brought bagpipers home one day. They'd talk to everybody, and so growing up, I didn't have the mortification that a lot of teenagers have when their parents talk to strangers.

It seemed normal and more than that, it seemed pretty healthy because I could see how it worked for them. Their social circle was huge, they made friends everywhere, they had a lot of fun. So, as I grew up, I was a talker too. When I grew up in Boston, which is, you know –

that's a talking town, my buddy called it a “walking ball of loudmouth soup”, that city. And I became a journalist and when you're a journalist, you're talking to strangers all the time. So, you get pretty good at it. But what happened back in 2019, is that all of a sudden, I realised that I had stopped doing it - that I was going into bars and I would just look at my phone, which is disgraceful. I would go into a pharmacy and I would skip the human checkout lane to go to the automated one. And bit by bit, I seemed to be withdrawing, right? And for me, a lot of key moments of my life came from incidental interactions with people I didn't know - a lot of opportunities, friends, all this stuff. There's no reason for me to stop doing this - and I didn't consciously stop, I just seemed to pull away from it a little bit.

So, I started to wonder what happened. And for me, it was twofold. One was my wife and I had just had a kid, and when you have a kid, you know, a baby is a black hole of want. You don't have any time, you don't have any energy. And when you do go out, you just want to sit there and stare at the wall. So that was happening, and the other thing that was happening is just the phone - I had an iPhone, and when you're of a certain privileged class and you have an iPhone, you can go the rest of your life without ever talking to another stranger again in person. You can handle everything on it. All the reasons we used to talk to people, like asking for directions or ordering a pizza, or whatever, all that stuff has gone out the window.

So, when I realised that, I realised that I was losing something. I was losing an element of serendipity in my life, all those chance interactions that went in completely bonkers directions and led to a better understanding of the world - new opportunities, new friends, or just entertaining stories - I lost that. And so, I started to think more about my life of talking to strangers, but also about what took me out, right? What made me stop doing that? And what was I losing by doing it? And to answer that question, I had to go down a hundred different avenues of research.

Cat Barnard (05:37)

And you did go down a hundred different avenues in the book. I mean, the book was literally gripping from page one. And for me, as I was reading, I was thinking - every single paragraph, I could relate to what you had written. And yet, you seemed to go all over the place, you seemed to travel across America, you referenced people who are located in the UK, who were addressing this issue of diminished communication. At what point in your journey of discovery, did you go from, “I need to find out why this is happening to me”, to “oh my gosh I've got enough here, I can write a whole book about this.”

Joe Keohane (06:31)

The first discipline I looked into was psychology. So that was early on - those were the first phone calls I made, basically - was figuring out the people who were doing this work, who was studying what the benefits of talking to strangers are, and what the impediments are - what keeps us from doing it. And it's a small community of people and they've only been doing this for 15 years or so. It's remarkable that you can make the argument that human civilisation is defined by strangers, by existing among strangers and not freaking out about it, generally. And yet it's only been the last decade and a half or so that people are starting to really look into these interactions, at least in the discipline of psychology.

So, that opened me up to some great research, research that's been replicated in different parts of the world - in the UK and the US, in the Middle East and Asia. But then, this is what happens when you study a specific discipline, there are questions that the discipline itself can't answer. And it's also really fun to do this because you get to call very smart people and be like, can you talk to me like I'm a four-year-old - can you talk to me like a complete idiot and explain this to me? Because I can't understand any of these papers because they're basically written in code.

But you get to a certain point - you ask all your questions, you talk to as many people as you can, and then all of a sudden, maybe the answer to the psychological question lies in anthropology, maybe it lies in theology, maybe it lies in history or politics or urban planning, all these different disciplines that I looked into. And in the end, my aim for the book was number one - to your point, Cat - make it really readable, right? because this material is impenetrable, much of it is so hard to read. So, to understand it myself, but then also communicate these ideas in a way that's both entertaining and graspable for normal people.

Cat Barnard (08:14)

I just want to add, because what you did, I think, was you synthesized quite an academic body of research and you made it accessible to your lay person. But I would say also, without fangirling you too much, or fangirling the book too much - what I think you also managed to do really succinctly, was to inspire the reader to want to go out and experiment with those serendipitous moments, those moments of connection with strangers.

I related to it specifically because a very long time ago I did my degree in European modern languages and the harsh reality of learning any foreign language is that the fastest way that you will learn it is to thoroughly immerse yourself, dive in at the deep end, which basically means going into a foreign country, being completely dependent on the kindness of strangers, and trying to make yourself understood using all kinds of non-verbal communication - hand gestures etc. So, as I was reading the book, I was remembering a time before smartphones where all of this stuff happened quite naturally. And, every page I

was thinking, “oh my god, you're so right - we've lost so much”. It was really revelational to me in that regard because you managed to bring it all together really coherently.

Joe Keohane (09:47)

Yeah, my background is a magazine writer, so I wanted to make it entertaining, it had to be clear – there had to be a story behind it, because if it’s just me recounting findings of 400 academic studies, it’s going to be death to read. So, I wanted to make it a journey, I wanted to try to be good company – I almost wanted to emulate a great conversation with a stranger, and hopefully I got close to succeeding at it. But just to be someone you want to hang around with. If you don’t trust me, if you don't enjoy the book, you're not going to listen to the argument - you're not going to engage with it. And it works on a literal basis and a metaphorical basis. Travels fantastic because it opens your eyes to other ways of living, but it also reassures you that people are generally fine, right? Everyone who's really travelled and gone off the map has come back with stories of total strangers showing them hospitality, being kind to them, helping them. And you can't go through an experience like that and come away with it thinking that people are garbage, right?

It's tremendously reassuring when you have a positive interaction with a stranger. And that happens in travel, but you can also travel at home just by talking to people you don't know. By having a conversation with someone you've never met before, you get to take a little trip around their world. And it doesn't have to be a four-hour conversation - it can be a quick little exchange that gives you a glimmer of a life that's not yours. But I think you do that enough and you become more wise, you become more worldly, you become more empathetic. I think it's almost a requirement of being a fully functioning human being - which makes sense on a developmental level too, we are hyper social beings.

Cat Barnard (11:21)

Am I right in recalling that you did describe in quite a lot of detail a train journey that you took at one point and it was - my knowledge of American geography is that I can look at a map but I can't get my head around the size and scale of your country because it is ostensibly a continent - but you took some long train journey, didn't you? and you described that experience.

Joe Keohane (11:45)

Yeah, I took the train from Chicago to Los Angeles, which is a 48-hour train trip. And you get your sleeping birth and all that stuff. A lot of this book was starting from zero and trying to

understand with a beginner's mind, all the moving parts of these interactions - how people initiate them and what they're thinking, what they're worrying about, how the conversations move, how to avoid problems, all this stuff. And I liked the idea of being trapped in a metal tube with total strangers for two solid days. And I wanted to see what kind of people were on that train, which is going through the middle of the country, and also how they did this, how they managed these interactions. It was hilarious - the people were so nice. I was having lunch and dinner with different people every night. They were from all over the country. They were completely delightful. They were really socially adept because they do this for a reason. You can fly from Chicago to Los Angeles in like two hours -it doesn't need to take two days.

So, the people who do this do it because they like it. They like the chance encounters. They like the feeling of being on a train for that long. It kind of takes you, it slows your metabolism down a little bit. And every conversation becomes a little like a journey within a journey. And I ended up having conversations with people, the likes of whom I'd never encountered before that went in completely unexpected directions. People were talking about infinity - it was amazing, it was great. So, it was very uncomfortable because American rail travel is terrible and the bed was horrible. And our tracks got wrecked by a tornado at one point. We had to take like a four-hour bus trip through Kansas to get back on the other side of the tracks. So, it was not without event. Interestingly, the people on the bus behind me, they started chatting. It's like two o'clock in the morning. These two women behind me started talking and they realised that they had both been hit by the same tornado like 15 years ago. And they were like “oh yeah, my house got, we got hit by a tornado.” It was like, “oh, so did I, where was it?” And they were in the same place, they got hit by the same tornado. So you get all these amazing little interactions. But yeah, I also just thought it would be fun to do.

Dom (13:54)

Joe, can I just ask you a question about that? Because being British with a certain amount of reserve, there are some people I suspect who are also British listen to this who are thinking, the idea of having to talk to people, or worse, perhaps people talking to us on a train journey is horrific. Because we know there are conversations - and there are conversations. And it's very different from having a conversation which is shared, where people ask you questions and take an interest, and where people hit you with information, just shower you with stuff, and you feel as though you've been in the boxing ring for a while. So just picking up on that experience particularly, what did that teach you about how to maintain and sustain good conversations?

Joe Keohane (14:29)

Yeah, first of all, we have family in London and Chiswick, and I used to work in London a lot. I think Brits should give themselves more credit for being more social than they seem to believe they are. It's a great talking culture. But, I certainly came up against it talking to people in England that they thought that this was a horrifying idea.

But interestingly, a lot of the research that had been done in the US - the early research on this had been done in Canada and the US. And these people would be sent out by psychologists with a mission of talking to strangers on say, a mass transit in Chicago, right? And beforehand they were interviewed and they were asked how they thought this was going to go. And even in the Midwest of the United States, which tends to be pretty friendly, everyone was just like, this is a nightmare, this is going to go horribly wrong, everybody's going to think I'm a psychopath. And their experience was overwhelmingly positive, like unanimously positive. There wasn't a single person in like 125 people of all ages, men and women who were sent out to do this, who had a bad experience, right? So it tends to go better than we think. We have poisoned ourselves against the experience to a certain extent.

And then Brits I knew would read that and just be like, well, that can't happen here. Like that's America, right? We don't act like that here. So the same psychologist who did the Chicago study - who were Nicholas Epley and Juliana Schroeder, who are fantastic, they replicated it in London - they did it on the tube. And the interviews beforehand were funnier because people were even more apocalyptic about how this was going go. But the results again were unanimous - even on London's mass transit.

They sent people out to chat up strangers and everybody had a much better experience than they thought they would. The conversations went on longer than they expected. The people were more interesting than they thought they would be. Importantly, the people were interested in them, which they didn't think - they just thought you're going to do this and people are going think you have a screw loose. You're violating a hallowed social norm by talking to someone on the tube. But it went very well. So that was very interesting. And I know the BBC has done some work in trying to get people to talk to each other on buses, on mass transit, to help deal with the loneliness epidemic.

But to your point, Dom, basically in order for it to work - you have to avoid doing what you just mentioned, right? Which is just talking at people. You have to avoid sort of pumping people for something that you're personally interested in, right? You'd be like, you like this, you like that, then you find the thing that you want to talk about, and then you just make it all about that. You have to relinquish control of the interaction to a certain extent, and you have to refrain from looking for stuff you're interested in, taking over the conversation, talking about yourself too much, and you just want to listen, right? So you notice something, you ask someone a question, you listen to what they say, and you really listen. And then just

follow up with questions like, “why do you think that happened?”, “How did that feel?”, “When was this?” - those sorts of things, open-ended questions. And people really respond to those because you're showing genuine curiosity. And I can talk a bit about pointers too, that I picked up along the way while doing this book.

Dom (17:33)

I'd love to come back to that, but I just want to go back to the open questions because we do a lot of training for leaders, and I think many of them seem to find it quite hard to grasp that conversation is a key part of being a communicator when it comes to leaders. And then many of them find open questions really hard. Intellectually, they'll roll their eyes when you mention open questions because of course we all know what they are. When you get them to practice it, it's really hard because they're not the way we communicate.

Think about when we communicate at home, we use closed questions. So it does require practice, I think. It's great to hear you say that about open-ended questions.

Joe Keohane (18:07)

It also, very importantly, it requires humility. So there is an idea among managers that they need to be know-it-alls and that asking basic questions of people like that is going to make it look like you don't know what you're doing, but that's the only way to understand what's actually happening, right? Is to be openly curious about it, to not ask leading questions, to try to get the answer you want, to not ask a question in a way that showcases your expertise - which is a sneaky little thing that people do all the time - but to really listen.

It’s really important and it's difficult to do. And I think it's even more difficult to do now because we're so used to having control over the pace of conversation because we communicate so much over digital platforms. So, you think about the three of us having a conversation - we have to be alert, we have to listen to each other, we have to be present, right? And we're in the line of fire, we can't just like stop for 30 seconds and think about what we're going to say because this is a conversation.

When you're texting with someone, you can actually stop for 30 seconds and think of the right response, you can think it through, you can take time, you can revise it, and that can be great in some ways because you're being clear - but it's not so great because it allows a lot of your social skills to atrophy right? You do that so much, you start to get bad at the improvisational part of communication, and also you have a very tough time relinquishing control because when you are communicating over text - and again, I love text, I text so much it drives my wife crazy - when you're doing that, you're in control of the conversation. When you're in person with someone, you are not, right? And when you're really listening

and you're asking open-ended questions, you are letting that conversation take you where the conversation wants to take you. It will take you somewhere great oftentimes, certainly better than asking leading questions would - but it can be a little scary for people, especially for younger people who are so habituated to digital devices.

Dom (19:58)

And especially for leaders, I think. Someone actually said to us quite recently, you want me to go and engage people, the risk of doing that is they'll get engaged. And I think what they meant by that was just what you said - I'm going to be put on the spot and they're going to ask me stuff I don't know.

Cat Barnard (20:13)

I mean, it is really interesting, isn't it? You know, the topic of the book has got so much application now in a work setting. One of the things that I do when I'm not podcasting with these guys is look at recruitment processes and look at why recruitment has become - why employment has become so ‘transactionalised’, and why recruitment processes don't work for any of the stakeholders - so they don't work for hiring managers, they don't work for job seekers, they tend not to work for HR, it seems fairly broken and defunct.

And one of my core arguments - bearing in mind that I was recruiting for tech firms before the internet proliferated to the extent that it did - obviously I didn't want to sound as old as I am, but there we are. The fact of the matter is that recruiters have stopped asking questions because they rely on algorithms to match a job description with a CV. And actually, my experience in recruitment - and this does go back to the early 90s, I know how could I possibly look that old? - I was working in the mobile telecoms arena, and it was a fledgling industry. And the only way you could get through it was by asking questions because I didn't know what that technology was. It took me a long time to learn but actually, what I realised reasonably early on was that candidates, job seekers are a mine of information and most people love talking about a topic that they are knowledgeable about.

And I love what you just said, Joe, about the fact that, that is the absolute joy and magic of a conversation is you don't know where it will lead when you are willing to ask open questions. And those nuggets, because they are smidgens of gold, they are, to my mind, the bits that bind us together that we remember that I can come back to you next year and say, “how's muffin your dog?" or whatever, because those are the bits that took us off script and gave us a magical moment of connection, right?

Joe Keohane (22:29)

I have many problems with using algorithms to make hiring decisions - but I think one problem is that, to bring it back to open questions versus closed questions, an algorithm is asking closed questions. An algorithm is built on a belief that you know what you're looking for. I'm not sure that any of us ever really know what we're looking for. We know what's worked in the past, but we don't know what we don't know. So open-ended questions put you in a position to gain access to that sort of information, that sort of knowledge. But again, it just takes humility because you have to admit that you don't know what you're talking about, which is something that few people are willing to admit, but I think everybody probably suffers from to some extent.

Dom (23:06)

I think an algorithm in recruitment is like a good lawyer in court. They want to close you down and take you to a certain point where they can make a decision, which is the very opposite, I guess, of what we're talking about, which is to get people to think about different things, open up, share experiences, change the subject perhaps, and open up the conversation. You mentioned very tantalising, Joe, a few moments ago, that there were other pointers that you had, and that, I guess, leads us into the area of the biggest, perhaps most significant discoveries that you found when you were researching and putting the book together. So, lots of different questions there. But let me start with what were the biggest discoveries that perhaps surprised you the most when you were doing it?

Joe Keohane (23:42)

Yeah, I mean, I'm not a pollyanna coming into this. I've worked in journalism for a long time. I was raised by funeral directors - I would not say that I'm naturally an optimist. And so I went into it assuming that this, like humanity's state of nature, humanity's default is going to be more xenophobic, right? Than what they call "xenophilia", which is you prefer strangers. And so, I went into it expecting that we were just going to be like a veneer of civilisation over a cauldron of xenophobia. And mainly going through the anthropological record, which was massive undertaking - I read hundreds of studies, field studies of traditional societies. And one of the things that almost all of these societies had in common was something that anthropologists call 'greeting rituals'. And what greeting rituals are, are a way to safely admit strangers, right? So we always assume we have a bias against, I think, traditional societies in Western civilisation - but we assume that they're huddled together and they hate everyone around them and they just fight all the time. That is certainly not the case. And the fact that independently of one another, they have devised these rituals to allow safe passage of strangers speaks to our nature as a hyper social being.

So what this would be is - you take the people of the Kalahari Desert, they would be in their band and if a stranger approached and the stranger wanted to talk to them in some way - initially I was just like, “they killed a guy, right?” Like no one's going to let this guy wander into their band, but what I was blind to is strangers as a resource, right? Of allyship, of information, potential marriage partners. Like there are all of these benefits - there's economic benefits to having a bigger band as long as you have the resources.

So it actually behoved a lot of these tribes to allow strangers to come in. Now they also had to reconcile the threat that strangers could pose with the opportunity that they could pose. So they created this multi-stage ritual and this would be in Alaska, this would be in Africa. These happened all over the places and they're remarkably similar in structure where the person would approach, and in the case of the Kalahari Desert, they would just approach, they would throw any weapon they had 20 feet away and they would just sit under a tree for as long as it took for them to convince the band that they were not chaotic, right? They weren't dangerous. And so they could demonstrate self-control. We do have a prejudice against strangers. We tend to believe that they're less intelligent and they have less self-control than we do. That's been studied by psychologists. So their fear, the fear of the band, is that these people are going come in and kill them - and so once they demonstrated sufficient self-control, the band would send out an elder, and the elder would walk out to the stranger, and they would sort of squat together without looking each other in the eye, which could be mistaken for a threat. They would look down and they would very quietly have a conversation.

And by doing it quietly, they both demonstrate that they have self-control, right? That they are fully human, that they are capable of engaging in a safe way with someone. And once they became comfortable, someone would bring out a gift or some food, and they would bring the person in. And sometimes the person would just be there for the night. They were travelling through. Sometimes they would stay. I saw this over and over and over again - that traditional societies would devise these rituals to allow them to expand the size of their bands and to interact with strangers. And so what happens when you do that? You learn about where more water is, you learn about where there's more arable land, you learn about who the other people in the neighbourhood are. If you need a favour, if you need to travel, now you have friends that you can go see, right? We have reciprocity where they'll do you a favour because you did a favour for them. And that's the way as humanity started to travel, that they just started expanding the group of who we are, who we consider us. And those contacts allowed people to spiral out of Africa and basically travel throughout the world. And why that was inspiring to me was because it showed that even if there's a threat, people understand innately the value of doing this, right. And you compare us to the other apes that we share most of our DNA with, one primatologist refers to us as the ultra-social ape - by the standards of nature, we are a phenomenally social being.

Now, when we feel threatened, when we're lacking for resources, when we're hungry, we can become ferociously xenophobic. And there's a reason why that happens, right? That was adaptive. But that's not the default, right? The default is to find ways to be social, to communicate, to cooperate. That is our nature. That's a huge part of our nature. And I think in a way, we don't give ourselves enough credit for how good we are at that stuff.

Dom (28:22)

You talked about the dangers of loneliness then. So, if we're wired - spring loaded to be social because it brings all the benefits that you've described, that must make it even harder for people who are not in the situation where they can meet people or socialise with people. So that makes it even harder, I guess, in terms of emotions.

Joe Keohane (28:40)

Yes, it's brutal. I mean, loneliness is not just a mental health problem, it's a physical problem, right? It can take a terrible toll on your body. There's research that shows that chronic loneliness is as bad as smoking several packs of cigarettes a day. It can break you down. It is a biological need that we have - it was basically coded into us because we had such success as a social being for so long because the only reason we survived as a species is our ability to be social. And so our body incentivises social contact. We need it to stay healthy physically, we need it to stay healthy mentally in a very basic way.

And so when you take that away, when you have people spending less and less time with others and they're experiencing chronic loneliness, it's the same as being terribly malnourished, right? Think of your social diet in the same way that we think about our physical diet - you need both of those things in order to be a fully functioning human being. And when you don't get it, you can become terribly ill.

Dom (29:35)

So I'll pass on to Cat in just a second, but there's one more question - when we're talking about leaders and organisations, one of the biggest challenges they face when they're talking to a dispersed team, is how do we get information to them? How do we make sure they understand? I'm not sure that everyone is always concerned about how do we create that sense of community? How do we make sure that people are feeling part of the team, they're feeling connected and so on. So that strikes me as something we should be talking to leaders more about, and helping them develop some of the skills that you've talked about in terms of just encouraging people to be part of the social network, I guess.

Joe Keohane (30:10)

Yes, so much of our social contact is done at work. When you're in your 20s and you enter the workforce, those are your friends. This is how you learn to be an adult. This is how you learn how to do a job - you do it hands on, you do it in a room with people. And so it sort of breaks my heart to see 23 year olds entering the workforce and they're just in their bedrooms all day. Right? This is a bad idea in a lot of ways. And I understand the appeal of it as as a parent too, it's, it's easier for me to work from home because I have so much stuff to do at home – but we are neglecting an essential human need by not pushing back a little bit on this or not being more thoughtful about trying to compensate for what's being lost by the lack of in-person communication.

We won't know for years which way the ball is going to bounce on this one, but looking at what we know from the rise of the loneliness epidemic and the rise of technologies that allow us to not be around other people for great stretches of time, we know that that's bad, right? That has harmed us in a lot of ways. And now we're accelerating it and we're doing it without really thinking it through. And I think workers are expecting it because it's easier - It's frictionless.

Cat Barnard (31:20)

And it's cheaper. I mean there's a lot of really tangible - I always get this time back, I don't have to pay my train fare, I can go for a walk at lunchtime. But your absolute point about people - particularly younger cohorts who learn by osmosis as we all did in that earlier phase of our careers, are we paying enough attention to what we lose? And by the way, I'm not advocating for a mass return to the office. What I believe will happen, because it must happen, is that the spaces that we design for convening and gathering in a work capacity are reconfigured and redesigned and recalibrated for sociality rather than desk-based 'worky' output activities.

Joe Keohane (32:23)

That's interesting - what's that look like to you?

Cat Barnard (32:25)

So we were doing some client work last year, and we were talking about what that could look like. Things like repurposing parts of an office space to become more of a lounge area,

but more of a kind of campfire, horseshoe-based lounge area so that people weren't sat in cubicles - obviously, they weren't sat at desks, but that they were sat more informally around to chat. And I think there's a really important piece here that we need to get on top of. Obviously, this podcast is all about the future of internal communication. And it's interesting that we're recording this right now because we're celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Institute of Internal Communication and I'm knee deep in a research project at the moment for the Institute where we're looking at the history of internal communication and the socio economic backdrop in 1949, when the predecessor to the Institute of Internal Communication - which was the British Association of Industrial Editors - first formed, and what the founding principles were, but also what the dynamics were.

And obviously, London was decimated by the war - it was, you know, for many years after the end of the Second World War, rationing was still in place. People had nothing – many parts of London were war torn and people were living in bombed out tenements and accommodation. It wasn't until the 1950s that the government was able to start building the new towns and migrate people out of London into more habitable accommodations. So there was a lot of coping going on. And the person - Dr Naeema Pasher, that I'm doing this research project with at the moment - she's asking me to think about, that was then - 75 years ago, here we are today, we have this inflection point with artificial intelligence that is only going to accentuate these issues of loneliness because of the trust issues that surround artificial intelligence. And if we are at this inflection point, what is the role of internal communication in the future of work?

(34:53)

And so, what I'm thinking about listening to you as you're talking on this podcast is traditionally - and Dom, you've got more experience than me, so tell me that I'm wrong - But traditionally, internal communication has focused more on disseminating information out from the epicentre throughout an organisation to make sure that the workforce at large understands organisation objectives - what's going on, news updates, etc. Now I feel that there is this golden opportunity for internal communicators to act as the community builders - to grow and maintain healthy communities at work. And we have to stop thinking about work and as leaders and managers - we have to stop thinking about are these people doing the work - and we have to start thinking about how we create the conditions for people to flourish in their work. And I think a lot of that boils down to taking an active interest in how people develop relationships, how people socialise, and going back to the threads of your book, how do we relearn how to befriend one another when we're mostly operating in settings that don't encourage befriending?

Joe Keohane (36:26)

Right, yeah, you're taking something that used to occur naturally, and now we have to choose to do it and make the effort to do it. It's tragic to watch previous generations – like my parents belonged to clubs and groups, and they went to church, and there were all these structures that allowed them to meet new people and be around new people and just work on those skills. And they didn't do it on purpose - they weren't like “we're joining this because we need human contact”. It was just the structures existed, right? Clubs existed, that way of socialising just existed. It was the framework that people lived in. All that has gone away and it's really unfair to people that now you have to rebuild all that stuff that society built over the course of 5,000 years. You have to build it yourself - you have to make the effort.

I had a conversation with a friend coming out of the pandemic - which we both spent the pandemic in New York City, which was horrifying - we both came out and we had a renewed desire to be social, right? We wanted to host more dinners. We wanted to have people over - we wanted to have people around all the time. And both of us were saying that it's not that easy to be like “let's just have people around” because it's actually difficult to get people out of their houses - it's difficult to get people to come to things because they feel like they're out of practice socially, but also because it just takes effort. And so, the amount of effort that we have to put into hosting Sunday dinner is probably four times as much as my parents would in order to host a dinner because people were just going to each other's houses all the time. Now it's like a thing, right? You have to will it into being. And so companies sort of have to understand that, right?

They have to look at older ways of those older social structures and try to recreate them in a way. And understand that this is a very complicated problem. In many ways, it's not going to be like putting people in a room and being like “here you go”, because those skills have now atrophied. People need to relearn those skills - so it has to be very thoughtfully done.

And also, I think companies need to be hands off about it. You know, it's like raising a kid. If my daughter's got a friend over - If I'm standing over them being like “what are you talking about? You should talk about this”, “why don't you talk about this?” - They're going to go crazy. You have to let them go off on their own and whatever comes of that group of people is going to be unexpected, right? And it's going to allow them to form a relationship. But you almost need to create the conditions that allow them to do that - maybe provide support where support is needed to replace those broken social structures - but then you just have to have faith that they're not going to go plot your demise when they're like talking to each other, you know? It's very complicated. But I hear from a lot of 20 somethings who will email me or if I do a reading or something, they'll come up and just be like, “I don't know how to make friends”. And so many professors I talked to - every one of them would have some comment about how they can't believe how difficult it is for the younger generation

to just make friends - to just talk to people, because they don't have a lot of experience doing it in real life.

But the good news is there's been a lot of research done with 20 something kids. And once they're sent out and given a push to talk to strangers, they find that they're naturally good at it because this is who we are as a species, right? It's not an aberration to talk to strangers, it's literally our nature. And so those skills do come back – but you need to get over the hump of people thinking that they're terrible at it, and you need to put them in a position to succeed. And then you have to let them do it, and then you have to hope that they just keep doing it. And I think that goes for universities, I think it goes for companies, and it just goes for society in general.

Dom (40:00)

Joe, we have covered a huge amount of stuff. I mean, I've been jotting down things - you've talked about the fact that we were socially wired to be social. So therefore, the hope coming out of what you've just said is that with the right promotion, help, support, encouragement, people can get back into social relationships. You've talked about the power of open questions - something which I think is often neglected by leaders. You've used the great phrase about Boston being "a walking social loudmouth soup", which has a fantastic metaphor.

Joe Keohane (40:29)

Bowl a bowl of loudmouth soup, yeah.

Dom (40:31)

That's fantastic. So as you know, this is about helping equip internal communicators primarily to think about the future of internal communication and what that means for them. So, as we come into land, I think one final question would be – if it's possible what's one key thing that you think internal communicators should be doing as a result of what we've just been talking about and your research, of course?

Joe Keohane (40:54)

One thing that I think is applicable to the working world is everyone needs to have a better understanding of what small talk is, right? because everybody hates small talk - you'd rather die than answer the question of "what do you do?" - it gets a really bad name. We've all

been stuck in small talk conversations that are horrendous. Small talk is only bad when it's an end to itself - if you're stuck in it. But an anthropologist named Kate Fox - she's English. She studied it, and what she found was that it's not a conversation, it's a gateway to a conversation. So basically, it's a greeting ritual like I was talking about before.

Small talk is a way to show that you're both in the same place, you both have your wits about you. Maybe you both notice the weather or you've noticed something else that's happening and you're just demonstrating that you're not an agent of chaos, right? Like I can stand here with you and not attack you - and I can notice that it's raining outside. And now when people do that, a lot of people will just be like, "oh God, this person is boring." But what that person is doing is establishing that they're safe to talk to, right? And so you can be at a networking event, you can be on a bus, you can be wherever - people will open a conversation with something that will be unfairly or mistakenly believed to be small talk. When you understand that small talk is just a gateway - it's a starting point, then it can be very, very valuable, right? As long as you do what we were talking about before, which is ask basic questions and listen to what people are saying.

So if someone says "this nice weather we're having", be like, "yeah, do you have any plans for the day?" - they'll answer that question because it's a specific question. It's not just like, "how you doing today?" Which is not a question - when you ask someone that you don't care, and they don't care, and the conversation goes nowhere. You want to ask something a little more specific - and then whatever they say about what their day is going to hold, you will get a little glimmer of what that person's life is like. And then maybe you say what you're going to do - and then maybe a conversation starts from there.

But it all comes from you know, we have like a small talk gag reflex. It's like overpowering the, training yourself out of the small talk gag reflex and just being like, "okay, this is the starting point, and now let's actually have a conversation". And a couple of great tips that are also applicable to the business world comes from a guy named Paul Fox, who's a CEO of a tech company in the U.S. And he's naturally introverted, but he has to go to a lot of networking events. So, when the question comes up "what do you do?", which it does - the networking events are just people asking each other what they do and no one caring or listening necessarily. He'll ask someone what they do and they'll be like, "oh, blah, blah, blah" And Paul will say, "geez, that sounds really hard". And they'll be like - the light will go on. And then all of a sudden, it'll all come out and you'll learn a lot more about that person. And they'll trust you because you've shown empathy and you've shown curiosity. And conversations can go in really great directions from there.

Another thing as an alternative to "what do you do?" is "what would you like to do more of?". That's a great question, right? That gets right to the heart of a person because you're getting to their desires. You're going to learn about their personal history - you might learn about their childhood, whatever. And then, you know, once people start talking, just ask open-ended questions. Like, "how do you see that going?" That sort of thing. And because

we do tend to think little of strangers, you will be shocked at the rich tapestry of that person's life that otherwise you would not have listened to because they just asked you what you did for a living. So I think understanding that fundamental piece of human communication can be really valuable for people.

Dom (44:33)

I think building on that, I'm going to set myself a goal, I think, that I'm going to try and speak to at least one new person a week, perhaps, using those sort of techniques that I wouldn't normally speak to. Because as you say, I think that makes huge amounts of sense. And we are a bit dismissive about small talk, and I think done well - it can be incredibly powerful in building relationships.

Joe Keohane (45:53)

Yeah, it's really fun. Let me throw you one more. So, there's a woman named Georgie Nightingale - who you should actually look up. She's in London, and she runs an organisation called Trigger Conversations. And Georgie had this idea of when someone asks you what they call a 'scripted question' which is like a meaningless question that you're just talking because it's weird not to talk. So you're buying something at a shop and someone says "how you doing today?" and you say "fine, how are you?" and they say "fine." and no one cares and no one listens - when someone asks you that question give a numerical answer. This is a genius idea - she's brilliant.

If someone says, "how are you doing today?" And you say, "I'd say seven out of 10, how are you?" And you'll see the reaction because you're dealing with someone in a service job, right? Who spend their days being mistreated by people and dehumanised. All of a sudden - you're paying attention to them - you're being sort of playful and you're engaged. Like there's a conversation that's happening and you can see the light go on when you do that. And every single time when you ask them how they're doing, they'll give you a numerical - it's so funny, it's an amazing innovation. And what Georgie will do is just be like, "well, you're an eight - what's it take to get you to a 10?" And they'll be like, "well, you know..." and they'll tell her something, and now a little conversation happens, and it doesn't need to go on and on forever - it can be a little 10 second thing while you're just transacting. You're just buying something, but you do that enough and you just get these little glimmers of people all day long.

And in the case of this book, I made friends with people who I'm still friends with while doing these off-chance conversations, just because they're interesting - everybody really is kind of interesting. And also when you do this, it's a bit of a corrective against polarisation

and, and discrimination and everything else, because it makes it virtually impossible to maintain the idea that people are simple, right? That people are only one thing. When you do it enough, you realise that people are very complicated, often in really delightful ways. It’s not everybody, but you're constantly being pleasantly surprised by the people around you. And that to me is a cure for the despair of the age. You know, it's a pretty powerful thing.

Dom (46:57)

Fantastic way for us to finish Joe. Thank you. I think certainly my case you've taken me from a seven well up to a ten - so I appreciate that.

Joe Keohane (45:04)

Thank you.

Cat Barnard (45:05)

Yeah, do you know what? I just want to say two things - one, Dom, don't stop asking me about the weather, okay? that's one. And the other is, when I reflect on this whole kind of 50 minutes of conversation, I also think, do you know what actually? Joe, you were a stranger, and I approached you and we struck up a conversation, and here we are. And the next time that you come to London to visit your extended family, we'll have to meet up and have a cup of tea and chat some more because this has been the most insightful, delightful conversation. And I really, really hope that the people listening get a huge amount of value from it because it takes internal communication to the next level, I think. And it feels me with excitement, and it feels me with joy. So from the bottom of my heart, thank you for making this such a stimulating episode. Thank you.

Joe Keohane (48:00)

That was my pleasure. Thank you for having me on.