



Transcript for Using conversation to navigate uncertainty with Margaret Heffernan

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.

Cat (00:01.482)

Hello and welcome to our latest episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Cat Barnard, as ever joined by Jen Sproul and Dominic Walters. And today we have a special guest who's going to come and chat with us about navigating complexity. So without further ado, I would love to introduce you to Dr. Margaret Heffernan. For those who don't know her,

She produced programmes for the BBC for 13 years. Then she relocated to the US where she spearheaded multimedia productions for Intuit, The Learning Company and Standard & Pause. She was chief exec of Information Corporation, Zinezonal Corporation and then ICAST Corporation. She has been named one of the top 25 by Streaming Media Magazine and one of the top 100 media executives by The Hollywood Reporter.

If you enjoy reading business literature, you will have come across her work. She has authored six books. One of the most celebrated and well-known is one called Willful Blindness, Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril, which has been named one of the most important business books of the decade by the Financial Times. In 2020, literally just as the pandemic was hitting,



She published her book *Uncharted, How to Map the Future*, which quickly became a bestseller and was nominated for the FT Best Business Book Award, has been one of Bloomberg's best books of 2021 and was chosen as medium best of the best business book. I certainly have referenced it on this podcast in the past. Earlier this year, she published a new book called *Embracing Uncertainty*.

how writers, musicians and artists thrive in an unpredictable world. And I actually went to the RSA in London to see a live conversation between Margaret and the RSA's former chief executive, Andy Haldane, in the summer, which is kind of the catalyst for Margaret agreeing to come onto the podcast today because amongst many other things,

Cat (02:26.74)

the panel at the RSA were talking about how artists in particular just accept uncertainty as their normal. And it kind of triggered some thinking in my brain about how all conversations are indeed uncertain because who knows where conversations will lead, right? And it seems apathetic to be having that conversation against the backdrop of what seems to be an ongoing

fixation with stability and security in the business world. So without further ado, Margaret, thank you so much for agreeing to join us today.

Margaret (03:07.26)

My pleasure, I'm absolutely delighted to be here.

Cat (03:10.586)

I am delighted to have you come and talk to us because I know that you are in your writing and you write on Substack very eloquently, you seem increasingly frustrated with the inertia of the business world to embrace the...

complexity and the ambiguity that is our new normal. And so I really was hoping that we could tap into that. *Uncharted* was a really catalyst text for me because it outlined the extent to which many organisations today seem to have become addicted to efficiency, prediction, uncertainty.



that was published in 2020. The world has moved on in ways that probably the most foresighted of us all couldn't have predicted. You've used the work of artists in embracing uncertainty to explore how they dance with the unknown to fuel their creativity.

Why do you feel acknowledging and learning to play with uncertainty is such a vital leadership skill today?

Margaret (04:41.618)

Well, I guess the idea of the book came to me really from two different sources. The first was I had mentored at any one time probably for chief executives of very large global businesses. And I couldn't help but notice that they were all complaining a great deal about the lack of creative thinking in their senior leadership teams, their executive committees, in their workforce overall.

Everybody was in very new situations. Everybody was equally new to the pandemic world and the post-pandemic world. But what they weren't hearing were any new ideas about how to respond to them. Everyone just kept talking about what used to be going back, going back to normal, even though it was kind of obvious that normal had sailed off into the sunset some time ago.

So I thought it was interesting that whether I was talking to people in financial services or the media industry or biotech or wherever, you there was this complaint that people seemed very, very stuck. And at the same time, I was very alert to the experience I had had when I worked with artists. So when I worked at the BBC and radio, television and film, I worked with a number of people who always seemed to have

a really uncanny sense of what was going to be needed. And this was somewhat obvious in radio, but it was really obvious in television because television takes a lot longer to make. And although you can make it faster now than you could then, nevertheless, to have an idea, really work it up, really find the financing for it, and get it on air.

was typically an experience that would take two or three years. So it's a really long product cycle. And yet so many of my colleagues seemed to have this extraordinary knack of starting something two or three years before anybody was ever thinking about it. And having them go out pretty much the moment that they were exactly what everybody wanted to think about or to hear or to see. And I kept thinking, how do they do that?



Margaret (06:59.378)

And in particular, were some who were clearly much better at doing it than others. And I think that is a problem I've been watching since then. So on some level, it's a book I've been thinking about for a good 20 years. Very interested in what's the process that leads to this. And that's very much what the book is about. About the degree to which artists are frequently ahead of their time. They certainly start their projects, be they paintings or

pieces of music or movies or plays or books, they start them before there is any evidence of demand and they keep going in the face of uncertainty as to whether or not when the work is finished it will mean anything to anybody and anybody would be interested in it. And I would have to say without wishing to sound immodest,

I now realize that that was true of almost every book I've ever written too. Which is, you I wrote, my first two books were about women's corporate careers and the rise of female entrepreneurship. And they both came out at a time where people thought there were no more work issues to be resolved at work. They were done. You know, we had equal pay, we had equal rights, we were done. Until it turned out, well, we weren't quite done.

And you know people are just now, I was reading in the New Yorker this weekend, starting to think about the female entrepreneurship as a route out of corporate traps. And I thought, wow, I wrote that book in 2007. And of course, Willful Blindness just seemed to capture the zeitgeist when it came out because we were surrounded by the phone hacking trials and...

parliamentary inquiries into what on earth News International had been doing with phone hacking and all sorts of similar things. And so I guess what I've come to the conclusion is that actually if you're very alert to what's going on in the world and allow yourself the uncertainty of what I call deep hanging out, so just moving towards what seems interesting or different.

Margaret (09:23.302)

or unknown, that you can over time accumulate a lot of what I think data scientists would regard as random data, through which you can start to discern patterns if you're alive and curious. And then I discovered that actually Andy Haldane, when he was chief economist at the Bank of England, used specifically to go



wandering around, I physically wandering around the streets of London, talking to groups of people that had nothing to do with the Bank of England or economics because he felt he wanted a greater sense of what was going on in the world before he made really critical decisions about it. So I just started to think, well, if we're lacking in creative thinking and creative decision-making and opportunity spotting,

Maybe it's because we're all trying to be too highly organized, too spectacularly efficient. We are too regimented and narrow in our application of curiosity. And maybe we are creating some of the problems that bedevil us. And so it's very kind of counterintuitive argument in an age where everybody thinks we should become efficient like machines.

Margaret (10:48.422)

I think we should start being creative in a way that machines absolutely are not. And if we don't, then continuing to focus on efficiency will, it'll be like we're digging the hole that we're stuck into.

Cat (11:08.416)

Gosh, there's so much there that I am thinking about as you have described it. Sometimes I wonder if the internet has been our worst enemy by documenting all that can be documented. given us the permission to be lazy and to not think and to expect a playbook for any situation, regardless of how novel and when you were talking about Andy Haldane and the conversation that you guys had at the RSA in the summer was really, really interesting. But you reminded me of a book I read recently by Gary Stevenson. I don't know whether you've read that book, The Trading Game. So he's like a young guy who was hired by I think Citibank in 2008 and of course,

He was literally hired months before the financial crash started to unravel. And he talks in the book about how he was on a trading floor with a bunch of guys and they were trading Forex for an exchange. And all of these guys were, because obviously there were no women there, right?

Cat (12:26.368)



All of these guys were highly educated and had been to all these very prestigious universities apart from this one guy, who was the best Forex trader. And he was some scouse guy that didn't seem to have any particular educational cred, so to speak. And Gary went to this guy and said, tell me what's going on.

Cat (12:52.766)

Why are you the most successful trader? And this guy said, look, if you want to understand economics, you can read as many textbooks as you like, but actually what really matters is going out onto the shop floor, going to a pub on a Friday night and understanding what people think about the money that they've just received in their pay packets and how they are going to make their ends meet. That is economics. The rest of it is all theory and very elaborate, but it's not real world lived experience. And that's kind of what I was thinking of when you were describing.

Margaret (13:37.813)

Well, I think if you want to do something that matters in the world, you have to be in the world. And I think it's rather alarming that we would ever imagine otherwise. I mean, and I think part of what happened with the pandemic is we got sealed off from the world. We got used to it. We're finding it rather hard to do a successful reentry. And we mistake what we see on our screens for reality.

Margaret (14:08.404)

but it's only little bits of reality. Most of it's totally irrelevant to the community I live in. I mean, it's fantasy, it's distraction, but is it a reflection of their lives? Not even remotely, not even remotely. And it's very interesting to me, you know, as I listen to people in governments talking about, what the economy needs.

And I think, just wonder when you last walked into a shop and you saw how much things cost. I wonder if you had any idea that one reason that people are cutting back on their spending is because they don't feel the economy is secure. And you may want them to feel that way to keep it buoyant, but you can't persuade them that's what is happening to their pay packet.



Margaret (15:04.976)

is untrue. And I have people who work in the hospitality industry, , who say, actually, the reason many of our companies are in a bit of a mess is because, people just aren't buying as many drinks, which has a huge impact on the bottom line when you start thinking about millions of people. But, this is the stuff I think it's, , by the time it ends up as data.

the world has changed again. So if you really want to feel that you know what's going on, I'm not saying don't read the newspapers, although there's not very much in them anymore. I'm saying just go out and talk to people. Get a sense of what their life is like. Sit next to them on a bus. On a bus. Take your headphones out and listen to their conversations. It's astounding what you'll hear.

Cat (16:02.912)

It's so interesting, isn't it? I remember Bill Gates publishing a blog article in the, it must have been the first half of 2020, as we were all going into lockdown. And he wrote about how the pandemic and the lockdowns would have profound societal consequences that would take us decades to make sense of, because some people would go.

into their houses and they simply wouldn't re-emerge for whatever reason. And I think what you're talking about is you're pinpointing that we've become de-socialised on so many different levels, haven't we? And actually also to say, and we're obsessed with data, but we're not interested in the stories behind the data.

Margaret (16:55.636)

We're obsessed with data, but we're not very interested in life. It's funny, I spent, I had a very lovely weekend this past weekend, and on the Saturday I went to the theater with some friends, and on Sunday I had some friends over, and I was really struck that sort of between activities that we were doing in both places, all of these people, given a lull, pulled their phone out. Now they're not emergency medics.

They are not first responders. They don't have very young children. They don't have any of those very urgent exigencies that make looking at their phone necessary. And I thought,



apart from anything else, to me, it looks rather socially maladroit is the nicest way I can put it. But I thought, what are you doing? You're here with us.

What are you doing looking at your phone? There are no crises on your phone. You don't have anything to worry about. At six o'clock on Sunday night, your very grown-up kids are probably putting your pretty grown-up grandchildren to bed. What are you worrying about? And I'm not sure they're worrying about anything. They just sort of feel that if they don't look at their phone, they're cut off from the world, but they're already in the world. They just don't notice. I don't know. mean, both days were lovely days and we, you we saw two fantastic plays on Saturday and two wonderful movies on Sunday and we had some marvelous conversations. But I just thought, wow, it's a pause so frightening to people that all they can do is pull their phone out. This is a conversation killer.

Cat (18:58.014)

I'm going to hand over to Dom because he and I have been having some in-depth conversations about conversation recently.

Dom (19:06.239)

Yes, yes, Margaret, fascinating by this whole idea about deep hanging out, about how you can find out a huge amount about the world you're working in just by going out and seeing how people are living it and talking. I was thinking about how we could apply that within organisations. And, funny enough, there's been some stuff on LinkedIn over the last week or so, and about this Nick Timothy report into the Home Office. You may have seen in the Times last week, which was leaked, and I think it was two years ago, but nonetheless, he was deeply critical of the Home Office. And one of the things I personally took umbrage with, not that it's going to bother him, I'm sure, but is that he criticised listening circles, and he used listening

Dom (19:46.752)

listening circles as an example of an organisation that was out of touch. And I think the debate around that was surely listening circles is one of the ways in which an organisation can keep in touch. And what it did was make me think we as communicators are faced with this problem. We know that conversation is incredibly important within organisations and of course externally too. But often we find it really, really hard to make the case to convince people that conversation is



not just a waste of time, that conversation is something that should not happen and people should be working in inverted commas, whatever that is. And so it would be really useful to build on your experience and help communicators make the case for conversation as a key way of building resilience and also helping organisations start to look forward. And I was really taken by what you were saying about the ability of artists to...

Dom (20:44.939)

my words, but leave aside the shackles of normal thinking and see things in a different way. So I think it'd be great to just talk a bit more about how we can use conversation as communicators to help build resilience, to help organisations be more effective.

Margaret (21:00.786)

Well, I'll go back a little bit to what Andy Haldane told me about his version of deep hanging out. So he would go and sit and talk to people and listen to people in environments that were not his native terrain. So he would go and talk to community groups or faith groups or local charities.

He would go and talk to artists and to scientists. And eventually he reached the point where he was so struck by how good these were for his own thinking that he then sort of flipped it and started inviting these groups into the bank. And he said he did that because he wanted people to be having richer, deeper conversations between them.

He wanted that sense that he was getting deeper sense of the world that he was getting to be something that all of them were getting. And so he started inviting ballet dancers and scientists and astronomers and artists and novelists and all sorts of people into the bank to talk about what they did and how they did it. And...

It's certainly his sense that this loosened up the culture of the bank so that people would be more open, if you like, to each other, be more open to new ideas, to feel that they had license to explore and to wander more widely. And I think that, you know, it's very interesting. I remember being at a conference of young city makers in Germany a couple of years ago.



and we did a workshop and afterwards a young woman came up and approached me and she said, I ask a question? I said, yeah, of course. She said, how do you make conversation? You say it's so important, but how do you make it? And I said, well, actually you do what you've just done, which is you ask a question. That's it, pretty much, that's it. You act on the basis of your natural curiosity that we're all born with.

Margaret (23:26.104)

and then you get a reply and then you think about that and you respond to it. And then you may find yourself in conversations that go on for hours and hours, hopefully generated by questions from both sides. Now, why does this matter? I can hear the corporate voice saying, look, madam, this is not a social club, there's work to be done here. Well, I can say two things.

The first is a very fascinating experiment which I've talked about on one of my TED talks. This is in a call center because it's easily replicable in terms of what's going on there and how you measure productivity. And they divide the call center in half. One half of the call center operates as it does normally, which is everybody has breaks scheduled at different times.

so that at no point is the call center on demand. So they just carry on working, you know, nine out of 10 people are at their desks constantly. The other group actually log off for 15 minutes every now and then and take a break together. At the end of the experiment, the group that logs off and talks to each other

is ten million dollars more profitable. Now what's going on there? Well part of it is people getting a break, that's important. Part of it is they're releasing a lot of tension, very important. The big thing that's happening, people exchanging information. You know, my caller doesn't know how to do this, so I keep getting this call about such and such. so there's what we call collective intelligence.

being developed within the team, which means everybody is getting smarter together. Now, I don't know, ten million dollars may not mean a lot to some companies, but I'm pretty sure it's not money you want to leave on the table. But my observation is that nowadays most organisations I work with operate on the first model, where yes, everybody's always working, they've all got their heads down, and they think talking to each other would be a waste of time.



Margaret (25:51.123)

Well, I don't think they can quantify what's being wasted if other ways of working are so much more profitable. The other thing I would say is, there's a very close parallel between the way that artists work and that entrepreneurs work. I've written about entrepreneurship at length for years and obviously I've

been an entrepreneur in the three tech companies that I started. And, mostly entrepreneurs get their ideas, lo and behold, from being in the world. I once interviewed Jack Dorsey, who's more famous probably as the founder of Twitter, but he talked about one day he was in Texas going to a craft fair with an old friend of his. And the friend was exhibiting his glass sculptures.

And he was really annoyed because there was a very, very big, very expensive glass sculpture which a customer had wanted to buy but couldn't because the artist didn't have a credit card reader at the time. And Dorsey goes away and thinks, well, that's stupid. But of course, at the time, only kind of significant merchants, right, commercial businesses had these things. So he's got an early smartphone and he thinks,

Well, if I could hack the headphone jack, couldn't that just be used to turn the phone into a credit card reader? And he goes away and he invents Square. I haven't talked to any entrepreneur who ever got an idea sitting at a desk. Not ever. I interviewed Eileen Fisher, an enormous, important clothing business in the US.

How did she get her idea for the business? By noticing that mostly as more women were going to work and working full time, they didn't have time to go home, get changed and go out. So they needed a whole style of dressing that could effortlessly transfer from one location to another. That is the essence of the Eileen Fisher brand. So.

Margaret (28:14.26)

this is where we sensing the world come up with ideas. Part of what the CEOs that I mentor were complaining about was that their people are not coming up with ideas. I would argue that the curiosity that they're all born with has been kind of numbed by performance management systems and a great desire.



to get a good evaluation so they can climb up the hierarchy, which pretty much suppresses original thinking. And I think it's also suppressed by the sense that they're not spending much time with their colleagues with whom they might have those great two-way conversations that make them suddenly think either, now I know how to fix the problem, or actually, why do we always do it this way? Wouldn't it be better if we did it that way? All that continuous improvement stuff.

that happens when we actually reach out and communicate with each other.

Dom (29:13.453)

I'm going to pass over to Jen in just one second, but I want to pull out a number of things, but let's pull out one phrase, which was ask a question, because it's something that's come out of lots of the conversations we've had on this podcast. And it's one of the fundamental things, I think, that from what you're saying, leaders need to be able to do, because it's hard, very hard for them.

to have conversations. do lot of training for leaders and one of the candid things I'll say is I find it really hard to get conversation going because I'm the boss, people don't want to talk to me. I think what you've described is either benefits but also how to do it or at least how to go about asking a question.

Margaret (29:51.325)

And I would say just briefly in response to that, probably the most adored business leader I've ever encountered is Jamie Dimon at JP Morgan. And it's very fascinating to talk to people who work with him about him because they will say, it's incredible. He seems to know to really remember stuff about us.

He said, know, one of them said, you know, when my mom was ill, he sent her a note in hospital. And she told me all these other stories that he has done for people. He's very affable. He's very approachable. He is like all leaders must be sensitive to how much power he has. But I remember we had a wonderful conversation where I think we were, I think we're in Singapore. I can't remember. And I, and it was a Sunday evening and I said, so what have you done all weekend?



he said yesterday, I spent the whole day by myself. And I said, gee, do you get to do that very often? He said, almost never. It was fantastic. It was really revitalizing. So we had a whole long conversation about kind of the tension between definitely needing alone time to think and recover and having time to be sociable and available to people.

Now, I remember that conversation for a number of reasons, but one was because it was very easy to have that conversation. So while I do think power is really difficult as far as talking to people goes, I'm persuaded it can be overcome.

Jen Sproul (31:40.383)

I agree, I was fascinated to listen to you. There's so many things that you said, Margaret, that stick out to me. And it worries me how little time we spend just observing and being around humans, just to see who they are and how they be. You were talking about your weekend and I went to just the local pub for dinner with some friends.

on Saturday night and there was this group of people just having the most animated conversation and like what's all this FTP, ChatGTP, they're to menopause and work and life and you sort of listen to that and you kind of get the sense of where I guess humans feel or where humanity sits at different points. And I think another thing that strikes me is worrying that we just don't spend enough time observing or being in a room or just

Jen Sproul (32:29.8)

seeing what people feel or how that's generating and I worry as well that work between colleagues and between relationship has become so transactionalised, the obsession with a to-do list and ticking it off and a task and I need that from you and you need that from me and let's get this done that we're missing this

Jen Sproul (32:52.732)

intelligence and these things that sit within all of us as humans and I think it strikes me as well I was when I meet people people always say what do do and you try to explain a membership body and then you try to explain internal communication and it doesn't seem to all takes a while to gel really and when I meet people I sort of go how how do people listen to you in your organisation and they don't



Jen Sproul (33:16.968)

I've told so many people if they just moved the truck from here to here or just made this process from here to here different I could save them money but they're just... they don't care they're not interested

Margaret (33:27.956)

Well, I think one thing that's really important here is that people, the whole basis of organizational life is that people working together can see more opportunities, execute more effectively, come up with better ways of doing things than individuals working alone. But that only works if they get to know each other. And I see people being very reticent.

Margaret (33:54.727)

about this. They're afraid of making friends at work. They think somehow it's going to be compromising or they'll never get rid of, that bore down the hallway. I think the British in particular are quite diffident and withdrawn. They're not actually very interested in other people. Certainly they give that impression. I mean, in striking contrast to other nationalities. And I remember working with a group of people who all of them were super interesting, super smart.

the group was quite fractious. And I thought, because it's when I was doing a lot of research into social capital, which are the sort of norms of generosity, reciprocity, and trust that all organisations really need. And I thought, okay, well we meet once a month. I think every month we meet two people are going to do a bastionized version of desert island disks.

They're gonna talk about some books, they're gonna talk about some music, and they're gonna talk about one event in their life that they think will allow you to have some insight into who they are. Now, I don't think this is a particularly original, brilliant idea, but I can tell you that after the year had passed, the way people related to each other was radically different, partly because it absolutely

I can think of one chap in particular. So he was a former CFO, literally tall, dark and handsome, always really tidy. So of course, what was in my head about this guy is he's, classic numbers, numbers guy, straight line, probably really conservative.



pretty rigid, pretty cold. And after he spent time talking about having done all the Wainwright Lake District walks three times and why, and some of the catastrophes he'd had along the way, and various other things about his life, I thought, you know, Margaret, you've got this guy 100 % wrong, 100%. Now that shows you.

Margaret (36:22.152)

how biased you are and how easy it is to stereotype people. And now you can see that this guy has really got so much more to him. And it's a fantastic discovery. And so when we came to do work together, which we occasionally did, I did it with joy instead of thinking, God, the CFO. Because he wasn't a type. Nobody is a type unless we turn them into one.

Jen Sproul (36:50.4)

We all feel so misunderstood in so many different guises in life. And I worry is when we tap into really what would make the workplace or working life better, it's an understanding of each other. It's a safety of dialogue. It's place where I'm heard and I'm listened and I'm exchanged and we're equal and we're just human beings trying to do our best.

Margaret (36:56.476)

and it makes us angry.

Margaret (37:13.78)

Yeah.

Margaret (37:18.206)

Yep.

Jen Sproul (37:19.552)

course hierarchy exists, of course there are structures, of course there are things that need to be done. And I worry now that we're in a place where particularly with leaders that it's become such a fearful place to have a dialogue that we're almost walking back from that which is going to fundamentally cost the organisation in one way or another in the long term whatever means or data point that looks like.



Margaret (37:32.722)

Hmm.

Jen Sproul (37:47.009)

And when we talk to people that just don't feel there's that, feel like communication has become with leaders more of a dissemination than an exchange. And when we're not leaning into the need for the exchange, which would benefit in so many ways. So I guess how can we make, impress it on leaders the criticality of their communication style and then stepping out because they probably feel so misunderstood, as you say.

how can we get them to commit to sort of convening that sense of dialogue in a business?

Margaret (38:20.062)

Well, I think they can only really do it if they're interested in other people. If they're not interested in other people, then it's going to be phony. Now, I don't know how you get to be a leader of people if you don't give two hoots about them personally. I think it is pretty important. But it's interesting because I can remember a mentoring client I had who was super smart, really smart.

Margaret (38:48.668)

and a very nice guy and I could ask him about his senior leadership team and he could tell me everything about all of them and I was really struck by that and how much he thought about them and then I said do they know it? He said what do you mean? I said like well you said so and so is going through a divorce and you're concerned and you know hope she's okay have you ever said anything to that effect? No.

And you're saying, think so-and-so is really brilliant and you hope he's just not feeling stuck or bored. Have you ever had a conversation about that? Nope. Why? Well, I'm afraid it might become inappropriate. And I said, well, I'll tell you one thing. If you don't have a conversation with people about themselves as people, you'll get the work, but you will only get the



and if you want this to be a great organization, you need more than that. You need people to think that they matter, that you know who they are. And actually, lots of my clients, they don't know who anybody around them is, but you do. So just, all you have to say to the colleague who's going through a divorce is, I know you're going through a tough time, let me know if there's anything I can do. There's nothing wrong about that.

she will feel, God, there's someone here who knows what I'm going through. I can't tell you how motivating that is. Somebody here cares about me.

Jen Sproul (40:26.228)

And I absolutely, and it feels, and I'm as well, going back to your earlier point as well around the sense of curiosity and the things that we're missing. Obviously we need foundational relationships where there's nothing better when you reflect back to show that you truly listened and you're truly there and you're truly with something. But with this sense of your work with artists and with it, they're digging into that curiosity element. I worry that sometimes we're looking for something big when actually it's all in the small.

Margaret (40:54.568)

Yeah, I think that's a very, very, very good insight. That it is often the small details in people's lives that are incredibly interesting and make you remember those people forever. And taking an interest in people need not be intrusive or impolite. I have to say, however, I think...

Margaret (41:22.14)

I mean, I've just sat through about three and a half hours of training videos produced by the university where I teach. And I have to say, I think any white minded person would come away from those, absolutely terrified to say anything. You know, because I'm originally from America, I am constantly asked, where are you from? And this is now being positioned as an excluding question, which nobody should ask.

Do I sometimes resent it? Yes, I do. On the other hand, I know my accent isn't a normal British accent, so why wouldn't people ask about it? So I think we have kind of scared people, a lot of this stuff. my head is just spinning with things I'm not supposed to say. I



mean, I think it's cause for a certain amount of common sense, but I do think it's really, really important.

to be curious. Because if you're not curious about other people, then you're just self-centered. If you're self-centered, you're not going to make a great leader. I can promise you that because everybody will sniff it from a mile off. So, you know, I mean, some people do this naturally. If it doesn't come naturally, sit down and think of 10 questions, each one of which does not, cannot be answered with a yes-no answer.

What did you do over the weekend? Or how was your weekend? Or have you read any good books lately? Or have you seen anything great in the movies or on streaming or whatever? Or what are you thinking your plans might be for Christmas? I mean, these are the most banal questions in the universe, but they start something. What are your family traditions for Christmas?

it's just not that hard, but if it is hard, if it feels hard, prepare.

Dom (43:30.017)

Margaret, just looking at time, it'd be great just to pull together some of the threads of the fantastic stuff that we've been talking about because obviously one of the things we try and do in this podcast is to equip internal communication professionals so they can best help their organisations. And I think we've looked at how organisations need to future-proof themselves and you've very clearly highlighted the value of getting out and talking to people, starting conversations. That captures innovation but it also makes people feel part of an organization. And it gives you more information. I love the point you make about the more you know about people the less... There's this thing called the unknown plonker syndrome I'm sure you've come across which we've talked about before. And it's really hard to dislike someone if

know them. It's easy to say people in accounts they're all a waste of space but if you know them and know what they're interested in then you start to want to have connections with them. So really as far as we know that organisations need to capture this stuff, we know that organisations need to be ever more robust and ever more equipped to deal with ever quicker changing circumstances and we know that conversation is a great way of doing that. So from your experience what can internal communicators do to help build this



Dom (44:40.939)

future proofing, build this resilience in organisations that we've been talking about.

Margaret (44:47.11)

I mean, every time you send out a communications, I would do a profile of somebody in the business with something about them that's interesting.

Dom (44:58.357)

Yeah, and make them human. Yes.

Margaret (44:59.156)

Yeah, I'm just making a sort of random draw. Who knew that, I don't know, Jenny in QA is a professional breeder of Cocker Spaniels? I don't know, whatever. But I do, because I spend a lot of my life interviewing people, I have an absolute belief that everybody's interesting. And if you approach the world that way, you discover that they are.

Margaret (45:29.522)

and they may not become your next best friend, but that doesn't matter. Let's imagine you're stuck on a train that isn't moving for several hours. You have the choice between sitting there and saying nothing, and your phones run out of battery and you didn't bring a book, or you could have a conversation. How are you going to stop? Do you really want to sit there for four hours as the train gets colder?

Dom (45:56.366)

And it goes back to your point about asking a question.

Margaret (45:59.048)

Yeah, always. Always.



Dom (46:02.487)

Margaret, thank you very much for sharing your experience. I think also for lot of people, hearing it from someone like you who's been out and done this stuff and been very successful at it gives it even more weight and importance. So I think you've probably inspired a great number of communicators to go out and ask questions and help encourage other people to do so as well. So thank you very much indeed.

Margaret (46:20.244)

Fantastic. Well, very nice to talk with all three of you. So thank you for an hour well spent.

Jen Sproul (46:21.386)

Yes.

Cat (46:27.41)

Thanks Margaret, amazing.

Jen Sproul (46:27.69)

Thank you so much.

Margaret (46:30.183)

right. Take care.