



Transcript for S11 E2 Exploring a blueprint for better business with Sarah Gillard

Cathryn Barnard (00:42)

Hello and welcome to the very first episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast for 2025. Just before we came on air, we were having a little conflagration and I think it's probably fair to say that our intention this year is to continue to bring you, our listeners, values-driven, authentic, human-centred discussions about the importance of communication, if only as a little antidote to the age of misinformation, disinformation and fake artificially generated things. So without further ado, I will introduce myself. Those of you who listen regularly will probably recognise my voice. I am Cat Barnard as ever joined by Jen Sproul, Chief Executive of the Institute of Internal Communication and Dominic Walters, who is now President-elect of the Institute of Internal Communication. So I feel quite inferior compared to the both of them, but I don't imagine that that will stop me from trying to hog the mic.

Our guest today is somebody really special to really kind of tee up our thinking about the value and importance of business and the role that it plays in society or can play in society when its leaders are minded to. Sarah Gillard is the chief executive of the charity Blueprint for Better Business that helps businesses be inspired and guided by a purpose that benefits society and respects people and planet. So as much as we seem to be existing at a time where the world's billionaires are attempting to seize ever more power and control, Sarah's charity is a wonderful antidote to that ethos. And she's a passionate advocate for making business more human, which entirely plays to our sweet spot on this podcast. She has 25 years experience of leading fast paced commercial environments at some of the UK's largest retail companies. Those of you listening who are in the UK will recognise the household name, John Lewis Partnership where she was responsible for rearticulating and embedding the organisation's purpose to continue to be a source of inspiration, innovation and strategic differentiation. So I think she's going to have an awful lot to share with us today. And without further ado, I would like to say welcome, Sarah. Thank you for joining us.

Sarah Gillard (03:36)

Thank you so much for the invite. I'm honoured. First one of 2025. I'm really looking forward to the conversation.

Cathryn Barnard (03:42)

Yeah, exactly that. I just felt it was very important to try and kick off the year with something that was directive and encouraged us all to think about the importance of purpose and values, as I say, against a backdrop of seemingly rowing back on ethical, moral obligations. I felt it was a wonderful way to start the year.



So please may I begin by asking you to tell us more about Blueprint for Better Business.

Sarah Gillard (04:15)

I've only been there for two and half years now. So the charity itself that has existed for about 14 years, it came about really after the global financial crisis, where the role of business in society was being questioned overtly for probably the first time in quite a while, you know, up until then, it was just assumed that the role of business was to make as much money as possible within the law. And that was fine. That made a lot of people very rich. But the role of business in society wasn't really a matter of public debate. It was just sort of accepted. I think the financial crash really woke everybody up to the role that business plays in shaping our lives and our society and our economy and our future. And a number of people at all levels and from all sectors wanted to really question these assumptions that we'd had about the role of business in society. Is it simply just a thing that makes as much money as possible without any regard for the context in which it operates, society, environment, people, community? So is it just sort of a machine that is designed to optimise for financial goals or can it be seen differently?

And if you see it differently, what does that unlock in terms of potential for people, for the organisation itself, for society at large? It was an exploration in the early days, in 2010 to 2012, amongst business leaders. So it was kicked off by Paul Polman, was CEO of Unilever at the time, and a lot of his friends who were CEOs of big companies. But it also included academics, investors, philosophers, faith leaders, lecturers in ancient wisdom. I mean, was a very broad base group of people who were wanting to explore the role of business in societies. Not only because they could see the disconnect between business and society, but because they were experiencing the disconnect in the human heart, as they called it. So people often were feeling like they were coming into work leaving half of themselves behind at home. Their sense of self, their sense of values, because of this very sort of clinical, financially based model of what business was. And what they wanted to explore was, does it have to be that way? Is it like a law of physics? Or is there a different way? And through those conversations in the early years, the charity was set up to continue this space for people interested in this question to explore what does this mean? And really, there are sort of two fundamental beliefs at the core of it.

One is that the role of business is to create value for society. And if it does that well, profit's an outcome of that. So it's really important, but it's a bit like breathing to a human. It's a pretty important part of how I feel about being a human, but it's not the reason that I get up in the morning to do more breathing. But I wouldn't say breathing is not important to me. It's really important to me. Profit's really important to business, but if it's the reason that they exist, it creates a very narrow outlook for that business and it closes down a whole load



of opportunities. So this kind of framing around business being there to create value for society was one of the fundamental beliefs.

Sarah Gillard (07:19)

And the other one, which is not at all radical when you say it out loud, but is maybe a bit different from the reality, is that human beings have inherent value and dignity as human beings, and they should not be instrumentalised by businesses in service of financial goals. And I think that kind of clarity around how we think about humans. Again, it doesn't sound radical when you say it out loud, but when you think about often how business operates, whether it's thinking about its customers or users, whether it's about its employees or assets, whether it's thinking about supply chain or communities in which it operates in all future generations even, we can sometimes sort of dehumanise people involved in the great system that businesses operates in. And that has, unintended and often very negative consequences. **So these two ideas, business creating value for society and humans having inherent dignity, are at the basis of our thinking.** And then what we do is work with business leaders and others in the sort of broader system to explore collectively, well, what does that mean? What becomes possible with that framing? And what we see is that unlocks intrinsic motivation, it unlocks creativity, imagination, new strategic possibilities, new partnerships, new ways of thinking and being and doing that are generative and that create value of all sorts, economic value, yes, but human value, social value.

Hopefully natural value in that it helps us think more specifically around the impact on the natural world. All sorts of different ways in which it generates value, but it's explicitly, we're not consultants, so we don't actually help them do it, which is probably quite annoying for them. We just help them ask better questions and help them see new possibilities, I think is the way to best describe it.

Cathryn Barnard (09:06)

So thank you for sharing all of that. And one question that immediately arises, which is very, very topical and very, very live, because it literally has happened in the last seven, ten days, is that various American technology companies have decided to row back on their commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, which will inevitably impact on human dignity and potentially cause huge harm to underrepresented, already marginalised groups and so I imagine that that will have been front of mind for you and your colleagues as we've walked into 2025 and I don't want to put you on the spot in any way but do you have any thoughts or any reflections on those decisions. I know I do, but I'm going to keep quiet.

Sarah Gillard (10:08)

I think the landscape for business leaders to navigate now is extraordinarily complex and contested.



So whether you're talking about freedom of speech or DE &I or what countries you can operate within or with or how to think about health and wellbeing of your employees or what your role is in deciding what is good. You know, these are really contested areas and I think in all of these things, there are some ways that we can show up that are likely to lead to outcomes that feel more legitimate. So how do we know what's going on? Who are we listening to? Who's not in the room? So how are our perspectives being challenged or enhanced or broadened by listening to perspectives from people who don't agree with this? Or are we in a bit of an echo chamber?

What do we think good looks like? And is that just our own personal sense of what good looks like? Or are we listening to the people who are gonna be impacted by the decisions that we make around what good looks like? What's their version of what good looks like? And how do we know? Are we assuming or are we actually talking to them? So what role is dialogue and interaction and human connection playing in these decisions and conversations? And how are decision-makers thinking more broadly about the impacts that they're going to have and what level of curiosity do they have about others' perspectives. And then what might some of the unintended consequences be of these decisions and how will we know? So once you've made a decision as a decision-maker and these decisions often have to be made, somebody has to make a decision about many of these things. How does that person, first of all, try and hear from lots of different people? How do they create legitimacy and transparency and accountability and how they make the decision? The process is really important. And then how do they check that the impact that they thought they were gonna have is actually what's playing out and are there any other unintended consequences that they hadn't anticipated? And then how do they go back and check? So I think there are some general principles about how do we create legitimacy in a very connected, conflicted, increasingly polarised and difficult world that leaders are having to learn how to do because this is so different perhaps from being a business leader 20 years ago when really all you have to do is say here is how it affects my bottom line, here is the impact on the share price, this is my responsibility, everything else is outside of my responsibility. That's just not the case anymore. Society has evolved with very different expectations for business leaders and business leaders are having to navigate this much more contested landscape. It's really challenging.

Jen Sproul (12:56)

Just listening to how you say it and also just what you're talking about in terms of the purpose of the work that you do at your charity as well, I think would resonate an awful lot with the internal communication profession. At IOIC, for example, we say our job is to make people feel like they matter at work and therefore by being valued, by being heard, by being included, by being spoken to like an adult and involved in an organisation and the outcomes in that way does, therefore we will do better work, we will enhance creativity, innovation



and all those things. And it comes down to, I guess sometimes those fellow, those finer principles of how do we just treat each other like a set of human beings as opposed to a set of numbers. But all that being said, and picking up on the conversation that you've just had as well, we sit here, at the beginning of 2025, and we've just talked about one particular challenge we're facing. But I think we're sitting here with a... a sort of myriad of challenges and also a myriad of opportunities, challenges from a business leader point of view, competitive, commercial pace. How do we take advantage of technologies and efficiencies? And we're also then rolling back on our reputation and what we're doing for wider good and society and our planet. And then I think in the midst of all of that, whilst there are seen to be many process or policy or clear as you go back to that kind of finite, reasoned law of physics of business back in the day, well, if we pay less there or pay more here, we'll be okay. I think innately what sits around that is a huge human challenge. And a huge human challenge of how we treat each other, empower each other, enable each other, that none of these things will be achieved without a human collective to behind it.

And I think that picking up on that, we have a backdrop of tension, of challenges and lots and lots of content and conversations. So I guess where my ramble is trying to take this question is that how do we, as your charity's goal perhaps, achieve a mindset in organisations where we think about purpose and motivations and humans in a way that does benefit every party and we can put that human antidote where they might think it's just a financial and task-based decision will fix a problem where perhaps a more human mindset is needed in business.

Sarah Gillard (15:14)

I mean it's a great question. And again, taking a step back, if you're sort of a, I don't know, an alien from outer space to come and look at how we currently do things, it's a bit odd. First of all, designing an economy to optimise financial goals in the sort of hope that eventually that will lead to human wellbeing and planetary health is a bit odd. Why don't you just design one to optimise human wellbeing and planetary health? That seems like a much more efficient route is design an economy that actually delivers the outcomes that you're trying to achieve. And then if you look to human beings in the round, I mean I know economic theories moved on a fair bit from this, but the kind of idea of an economic actor as being self-interested, rational, financially motivated, or motivated at least by money, status and power, this very kind of narrow definition of human beings that has been included in economic theory for decades, versus every other study of humans, anthropology, sociology, behavioural science, psychology, neuroscience, whatever.

We are way more complicated than that. And we are motivated, of course, extrinsically, money, status and power is absolutely important, but we are also social beings, as you say, we want to feel like we are connected to each other, that we belong. We are motivated by wanting to achieve something that's bigger than ourselves, bigger than our own lives. We want to feel like what we do matters. We want to feel like we're growing and that we are



learning new things and that we're reaching our own potential. And all of these things are really important to us as human beings is intrinsic motivation and actually it's a much more powerful motivator than extrinsic motivation but for decades business has tended to operate in a well here is our role, maximise financial value, humans are selfish and lazy and disinterested in other people so the only way to get them to do what we want to do for maximising financial goals is to incentivise them by personal bonuses or whatever else and creating rules because their rational self-interested economic utility maximises. I think it's just a sort of very narrow understanding of us as humans.

Sarah Gillard (17:27)

And when you see organisations who've embraced this fuller understanding of our full humanity and what it really takes for us to bring our human capabilities to work, our creativity, our collaboration, our innovation, our risk taking, our curiosity, our desire to contribute intrinsically.

They create an environment that allows all of those things to happen. They don't have to be imposed on us. We're humans. We have this naturally. It's just that normally it's kind of kicked out of us in often quite kind of sterile and rules-based or incentive-based environments. So I actually think it's probably a lot easier than we think it is. It's just that for a long time we've operated in this slightly artificial business versus the rest of our lives. If you're thinking about maybe buying a house, you don't purely do a spreadsheet on how much pounds per square foot do I get and then maximise that one column. Maybe you do, but you're probably also thinking, well, where do I want to live? What kind of neighbourhood do I want? How close is it to the park? Or do I get to school easily and where are my friends? And how much sunlight is there in the house? And do I get a nice feeling when I walk in? In any other aspect of our lives, maximise for anything. We're always balancing a whole load of different things and we're always trying to work out what are the things that are going to help me find joy, meaning, fulfilment, whatever. So it's just kind of odd that we have partitioned business into this slightly narrow, slightly inhuman.

Jen Sproul (19:02)

And as you say it like that, yeah, it's kind of odd because you feel like there's two sides of yourself and the way that you organise your brain at work and the way that you do and I'm also a believer we need evidence and facts but I use my human instinct and what I think is right or wrong or when I'm making a decision it could be something really futile, it could be something really big and that's trying to square peg round whole, trying to put the things together.

One of the things I wanted to pick up on the work that you've just talked about and this is a lot of work of what internal communicators are often charged with doing is often their job is to explain strategy. There's a new purpose. There are new values. There are new things that we're going to put out there in the hope that, we're going to be judged on that's going to



drive up engagement. That's going to drive up all of those, those outputs and outcomes for the organisation. Do you think we go wrong somewhere in that purpose versus reality differentiation in terms of what we say and what we do in creating that environment? Have you kind of had the experience of when purpose has been done really well?

Sarah Gillard (20:02)

Yes, the time I led it, Jen.

Jen Sproul (20:04)

Excellent. That's why I was hoping you go because I'm like, well it was in the brief there, so you know.

Sarah Gillard (20:10)

So I think there are a whole load of different pitfalls here. And so just to sort of describe two of them, I think there is a pitfall that I see many organisations do where they might spend, I don't know, a year, 18 months, two years, having really in-depth exploratory conversations as a board or as an exec team.

What really matters to us? How's the world changing? What do want our legacy to be? How do I feel about this? How does it relate to my personal values? How do we craft this organisation into something that's gonna be fit for the future and relevant and all these things? And then after that 18 month process, what emerges is some seven word magic statement of purpose with some values underneath it probably. The thing is put on posters and splattered around the organisation with a good news people, you've got a new purpose and values and here they are.

And often what is ignored is the fact that the people at the board and the exec had 18 months of relating to it as a human and talking about it and working out what it means for them and seeing does it resonate, does it not resonate? And yet they expect to splat it on posters and everyone else is just going to sign up and go, yeah, fine. Okay, that's not how, how we are. You can't impose meaning on people. You have to create the conditions for people to discover whether or not something is meaningful to them. And hopefully, with the way that you do that and the conversations that you're able to enable and support and a whole lot of other things, people will find a connection and make their own sense of meaning from it. But you can't impose it. I think a lot of organisations, because we've been, again, for decades, operated in quite a top down hierarchical, do what the person above you says. We thought we could do the same with purpose and meaning, and you just can't. So that, I think, is one massive pitfall. And the other one is often as a result of that process, even if it's done very differently with big conversations and everyone getting engaged, an



organisation can set itself a very deep, profound, meaningful aspiration that bears almost no resemblance at all to what they do and how they do it.

Sarah Gillard (22:09)

Now there should be some gap, right? Because if the way that you're talking about the purpose of your organisation is just the description of what you do today, I mean, I know that's not really a purpose, that's just a description of what you do today, and it doesn't drive innovation or ambition, it doesn't stretch you, it doesn't make your synapses fire off with, oh, what could this mean that we do? It just describes what you do already.

But if that gap is so great that it bears absolutely no resemblance to what you do today, it actually isn't just neutral, it is negative in that people look at that and go, I see none of that where I am right now. I don't see that in how we behave and how we make decisions and how we measure success and what we're trying to do and where our money gets spent and in how resources get allocated. And that drives cynicism and disengagement. And that's a negative spiral because then, people are looking for evidence of all of the ways in which this isn't true rather than being inspired to think of new ways in which it could be true and then what are they going to do to make it true. I mean there are many pitfalls but those are the two of the big ones that many organisations fall into because they think this can be done the same way as many projects get done, but it's not really a project. It doesn't really fit into the typography that businesses normally are very good at delivering. It doesn't have milestones and checkpoints and measurable deliverables so much because we're talking about what it means to be human and how you relate to what you do every day and how that feeds your sense of meaning. It doesn't really fit into the Gantt chart template.

Dom (23:34)

Well Sarah, can I pick up on that? Because I saw you speak July 24 at Bath at the leadership dialogue session. It was, and I have to say, I don't want be over-complementary, but I thought you were fantastic because you spoke a different language from many other people who speak about engagement. Now that's no reflection on the other speakers on the day, but I think it is a reflection on how we have a conversation about engagement and purpose.

And I think what struck me was you were very practical. And I like the fact you route everything in the fact that, A) profit is not a bad thing, and B) people have a human dignity. And those two things are very, I think, great fundamental principles to go back to. And I get the impression that sometimes the whole thing around engagement is sullied by the fact that some people say, well, profit's a terrible thing. Any organisation pursuing profit, they shouldn't be doing that. And I think that's not a good way of approaching it. So I guess building on what you've just been talking about with Jen.



And I'm making an assumption here that we don't always get the conversation about purpose and engagement right. And in some ways it becomes a little bit ossified and people have hard opinions about it, they don't necessarily break those opinions. So if you accept that premise, what do you think's gone wrong? When we talk about purpose and engagement in general, what have we got wrong and what we need to start doing differently to have meaningful conversations about it?

Sarah Gillard (24:54)

I think it comes down really to fundamental intent. Because again, as human beings, we sense intent. We have intuition. And just to give you an example, not in the purpose space, but if you imagine two companies, both of whom are going to roll out a employee wellbeing programme.

One company is doing it because it's done the maths and it reckons it can reduce absent days by 1.2 days over the course of a year on average and that's going to increase the income by blah and the ROI therefore of this programme is X and therefore it's hit the business case and the ticket gets done. And the other company is doing it because it's got a genuine desire to improve the lives of its employees.

Sarah Gillard (25:36)

The programme might be exactly the same, but the intent will be felt differently by the employees of that organisation. But the communication might be the same, way that it's been, all of the things might be the same, but the intent feels different. And it's really hard to say, how do we know? But we just do. And I think this is, yeah.

Dom (25:50)

I was going to ask you that, sorry to interrupt you, I was just about to ask you that. How do you sniff out the intent? What sort of things give it away do you think? I know it's a tough one to answer.

Sarah Gillard (26:00)

I think there are lots of things. So for a start, to what extent do you see consistency in what's being said and what's being done? So one of the things that often goes wrong is an organisation will spend a lot of time and effort and money, whatever, thinking about its purpose statement and say, this is what we're trying to do in the world, but then change nothing. So people inside the organisation are still only measured and incentivised based on their sales figures or their the numbers in some way, and there's absolutely zero reference to, but here's our purpose and here's the change we're trying to make in the world. And so



already an employee, you just see a disconnect between was saying one thing over here and yet everything that I see is pointing in, if not the opposite direction, in a different direction. Right, we say we care about this, but actually all of our KPIs are based on something else.

So that creates a lack of consistency which tends to breed cynicism or suspicion. I think also inconsistency where organisations say they care about something, but as soon as it's going to cost them any money, they suddenly don't anymore. And again, that lack of resilience, follow through, courage, vision, whatever it is you want to call it. Now, again, I live in the real world, I know that organisations are having to make balancing decisions all the time about stuff. But if you're not transparent about that and you say, here's our purpose, or we've made that decision over here, which doesn't really align, but nobody point at it or talk about why or the process that we went through to make the decision. And actually, it's far better to say here is a challenging decision, here are the things that we considered, here is our long-term goal which we are still very committed to and here is the decision we've had to make in the short term acknowledging all of the trade-offs that that implies but we're going to reiterate our commitment to try and progress towards that long-term vision in these other ways. Again we are all human and we recognise that it's never black and white and it's never perfect and again there's organisations who I've seen who've kind of gone we're trying to achieve this, here are all the ways in which we're failing. Help us, and are transparent about it, get far more trust and advocacy and engagement internally and externally than those who go, everything is awesome, we're perfect, we're doing this fantastic thing, don't look over there.

Dom (28:16)

So it sounds like explaining your motives and reasons, explaining the barriers and the challenges you're facing and having conversations about how we can attack them. Build trust, but also get people engaged, to use that phrase, but get them more engaged in how they can have a better work life, I suppose.

Sarah Gillard (28:31)

Yeah, totally. I think previously organisations really, for understandable reasons, were focused on optimising for efficiency. Because the context was relatively stable and what they were trying to do was just do what they were doing a bit better. I think the context is now so very disrupted and so unknowable and unpredictable and volatile and all those acronyms that we all know.

Organisations, if they optimise for efficiency, are going to not be resilient. They're going to have to focus on adaptability and trust. And the way that you build adaptability and trust into your DNA as an organisation is by increasing transparency, increasing legitimacy for processes, increasing accountability across all levels of the organisation, increasing



distributed decision making, which means increasing data and making sure that information is passing. So all of these new ways in which organisations are having to evolve to a very different context again comes down to, how are you relating to the human beings inside your organisation and those outside of it? Are you relating to them as humans and giving them what they needed in order to do their best work, or you're relating to them as bad robots, or financial abilities, or some other version of a sort of less than human. And then you'll get those results. To be honest, it's a leap of faith, right? Because if you've grown up in an environment that's taught you to think about the success of the organisation and how to manage in one way, it feels like a big leap of faith to say, well, all right, I'm going to show up differently, going to lead differently, I'm going to make decisions differently, I'm going to be much more open and transparent and whatever. That feels risky. But I guess the pitch, which is becoming increasingly, I don't know, relevant, is that that might have worked in the past, but the future looks pretty different to the past. The present looks pretty different to the past. So what got you here is not going to get you there and what it takes to thrive in that very disrupted future is probably going to require some new skills, so learn them quickly.

Dom (30:37)

Just picking up what you saying there. I get the impression, we were talking about this previously, that the word purpose and the word engagement are becoming boo words, they're becoming negatively accepted, I think. So what can we do to try to overcome that? Because I'm picking up what you're saying about the whole thing about better business, about the quality of work, etc. How can we help get over that negative perception?

Sarah Gillard (31:05)

Well, we knew this was going to happen. Basically every word at some point gets hollowed out by overuse or cynical use or whatever else. I think, choosing the language that is relevant to the context in which you're in is really important and that's going to be different for different people. The language that I find is often less rejected is stuff around what has meaning? What's a meaningful challenge for this organisation to tackle? How do you find meaning in the work that you do? What are you going to find meaningful when you look back on the impact that you had? Again, as humans, we are meaning-seeking individuals. This isn't an unusual concept for us, but applying that to what we do in our organisations can help people bridge that gap between who am I as a person, what do I care about? And then what does my business do and how does it make money? And what we're looking for is ways of people authentically and themselves, rather than being told to them, finding a link between those things.



Cathryn Barnard (32:07)

It's really interesting, isn't it? I do find myself wondering if this year in particular is going to be the kind of the springboard year where I think we're in the fourth year of this podcast where we've been having conversations around what lies in store for the future of the profession. But it feels increasingly like this is the time now and what was running through my mind as Sarah was speaking was that, we have to shift direction away from the roles and responsibilities that were traditionally held by internal communication. That will now be enabled if not overtaken by next generation technology, generative AI, et cetera, et cetera, towards the new things that need doing. And I feel, and I felt this for a long time, that the internal communication is so much more than singularly kind of content and channels and circulating mandated dogma from the exact or whatever those messages are, there's something really fundamental here about how we achieve shared consensus on the things that matter. And one of the things when you were talking there, Sarah, I was thinking, how do we build shared meaning? I personally think that a great starting point is by convening groups of people to listen, to find out what does this mean to you. So rather than start talking about, and I agree wholeheartedly with overused, over-appropriated words that just become very sterile and meaningless, I guess, great starting points are what does engagement mean in this context or even more poignantly, what does it feel like? Because that's a really potent enabler of intent, I think. I guess one of the questions that brings me onto is what role do you think communication within organisations plays in helping those organisations adjust the mindsets and their heartsets to do business better.

Sarah Gillard (34:43)

Well, great question. And I think one of the interesting things about this topic is that every single aspect of the business has a role to play. So that's a good thing because it means that purpose isn't just situated in one team. It's across the entire organisation because it's got implications for HR, strategy, finance, brand, communications, procurement, supply chain, mean, just literally across the entire organisation. But having said that, every function has a particular superpower that they can bring to the evolution of the sort of business as a machine, maximising financial goals to business as social organism embedded in society creating all sorts of value for all sorts of different stakeholders. If that's broadly the evolution that we're talking about of how do you survive as a business in the 20th century versus how do you survive and thrive as a business in the 21st century, then it feels like a much more connected, adaptive, dialogic human thing that you're part of. And I think internal comms has a really significant role to play and how does it feel to be in this organisation? What's the tone? What are the opportunities for dialogue? Is it there no opportunities for dialogue? Is it just a one way communication that's coming down from the top? Or has this become a listening organisation where actually viewpoints are explored, where decisions are not necessarily all done democratically and you know having worked in the John Lewis Partnership but there are pros and cons to that level of democratic decision-



making. Actually I'd say broadly pros despite some of my initial reservations having come from a very kind of fast-paced directive top-down organisation when I went to the John Lewis Partnership I was thinking goodness me how on did you get anything done because there are 80,000 people here all of whom own the business.

Sarah Gillard (36:42)

And the deliberative democracy and the conversations that happen, doesn't that just slow us down? Well, of course, what it turns out is it may be slower to get to a decision, but then once that decision is made, everyone's behind it. Whereas, the traditional way of doing things is you make a decision a very fast way, and then you spend years trying to get everyone to actually do it. So again, it depends where you see the value and what's going to be relevant for your organisation. And if you can see that your organisation is going to have to be much more adaptive, agile, responsive, innovative. What you're trying to build is networks inside the organisation across all different levels and departments and functions and whatever. And the opportunities for connection is where I think that a lot of the focus for internal comms goes. It's less on a messaging and more about opportunities to connect.

Jen Sproul (37:35)

I totally agree and I think that this is a really interesting conversation in terms of there's so much and we talk well actually we took this opportunity for ages and I don't know if you've got a different reaction or maybe even Cat and Dom you've got a view on this as well is that I think what sits to me here and concerns me thinking about our community about the profession that we look after and we sit here at the beginning of what's probably going to be another difficult year let's just say in one way or another, I'm not quite sure, on many fronts is, how do we articulate the business imperative or the business value of that when particularly when you're faced I think, because when you're faced with fear as perhaps a leader or something like that, you'll think is right, lockdown, cut budgets, create efficiencies, hunker down as my friend would say, hunker down, grab a bottle and pray for daylight and we'll get through it by taking all those things away. Whereas actually what they need to, and we've talked about it, isn't it? We're not saying we're in a recession, but often you say if you want to get through it, you spend more is a good way to get out of a situation as opposed to pale back. Do you think we're articulating that value and that need from a business imperative point of view? And I wonder if we need to, as a reflection for our own community, work on how we, I guess, go back to your phrase, articulate our superpower and it's there for value economically, societally, etc, etc, to an organisation where they're perhaps thinking we can use AI or efficiencies for that. We can't position ourselves in that way.



Sarah Gillard (39:04)

I mean goodness me, the state of the world is challenging, as you say. Again, as humans, we broadly operate into two modes, fear or growth. And in fear, like you say, you shut down, you hunker down, you kind of go, how do we get through this? And you can see organisations do that and they become very insular and they focus on the controllables and it tends to shut down creativity and imagination and long term thinking and a whole load of other stuff that you actually need right now. Whereas an organisation that is operating from a mindset of creativity and growth, not necessarily financial growth, but you know, potential is able to unlock vision, long-term thinking, intrinsic motivation, passion, joy. You sense as a human what sort of unfurls in your mind and the connections that you're able to make with others when you're operating not in a position of fear. And I think the more turbulent the environment is, the more important it is that the internal narrative of the business is not one of fear and restructuring and cost and we'll get through this because it tends to create a sense of, I don't know, it sort of minimises our capabilities.

What you're trying to unlock is a sense of rebirth an opportunity to reimagine what this thing could be. Everything is shifting, which is everything is up for grabs opportunity. So let's imagine this organisation in 20 years time. What's going to make us proud? How do we want to feel about that? What's our contribution now in making the road towards that possible?

Sarah Gillard (40:44)

And again, you have to do this carefully. You're not talking about this at the same time as making half the workforce redundant. You've got to be thoughtful and sensitive and appropriate and all the rest of it. But if the overarching narrative is one of fear and reduction, that's what you'll get. I think if the overarching narrative is one of transformation, reimagining a new future, a different way of interacting with people, the world, the planet, society. It can inspire people to do extraordinary things. I mean, we have literally all lived through an extraordinary global pandemic where nobody inside a business was told innovate on behalf of your customers to make sure that they're healthy and you'll get a big bonus. But people did it anyway, right? Because they were powered by a sense of I can improve the situation here and I really want to and I'm going to throw myself at it in whatever way I can. And we saw extraordinary things happening in every single business, new ways of working, new collaborations, reinventing a factory to manufacture a whole lot of things it never thought possible. Incredible innovation because people were intrinsically motivated by a sense of how can I help rather than what's in it for me or what am I being told to do or what might I get in trouble for or what's my bonus dependent on that just didn't even feature so we've seen it we know it's possible what might all of that energy do if it was directed at building a better future rather than surviving a turbulent present



Dom (42:13)

Sarah, we've covered a huge amount. We've looked in detail at how internal communicators can help achieve better business. I love some of the phrases like unlocking joy and helping start to plan the future, the rebirth, helping to establish the narrative around the rebirth, establishing a listening organisation. There's a huge amount for us to consider here. So I'm to ask you a tough question. So one of the things we aim to do in these podcasts is to equip internal communicators to have great conversations with their senior leaders. So bearing that in mind, what one thing out of all that we've discussed, do you think you would like them to take away from this conversation, for our listeners to take away from this conversation?

Sarah Gillard (42:55)

So this is going to sound probably just like naively basic because you're all experts and I'm definitely not in internal communication. I think genuinely it comes down to what matters to you as a human. Not as a leader or a finance director or a head of whatever. What matters to you as a human and what do you really care about? And then how do you translate that into what is it you're going to do? Find out also what matters to other people because what matters to them might be different to what matters to you but you need to harness their sense of meaning in order to achieve extraordinary things. Businesses are just groups of people coming together to achieve stuff they couldn't do on their own. So let's remember that and go right well we're just a whole lot of interesting human beings with all of our own stories and narratives and whatever else but we've come together to achieve something collectively that we can't do on our own. What is it and how do we find meaning in it? But I think it genuinely starts with more what matters to you as a human. Going back to that alien from outer space the environments that we tend to create in business don't really allow us to be fully human and I think I'd probably just start there because amazing things happen when we show up as human beings.

Dom (42:02)

It sounds like asking some fundamental questions.

Sarah Gillard (44:06)

Totally, and ideally not in the corporate setting. So when I first took this job, this might be a bit dark, but when I first took this job I was exploring how do you get into this conversation. I was speaking to somebody who does this in Australia who's brilliant and has been doing it for about 50 years. And I said, how do you do this? And he said, well, I take a CEO to the top of a mountain or a beach at sunset or sunrise, and I talk to them about death. And I was like,



right, okay, that's method. I don't go that far, but I do try and get to, let's just talk as humans, somewhere outside of the corporate setting, what really matters to you? What's gonna drive you to really, lean in on this? And how do we use that in a intrinsic motivation to achieve something extraordinary.

Dom (44:47)

I guess bearing in mind that the average tenure of a CEO in the top 100 and footsie is less than three years I believe. So maybe not literal death but maybe thinking about your legacy is a good way of starting.

Sarah Gillard (44:58)

Yeah, and what is it that you're, what acorns are you planting now that even the people in the organisation at the moment who are the youngest may never sit under the shade of the tree that they eventually become? Because a lot of this is about cathedral building mindset, not how do I demonstrate in the next quarter that I've been an awesome CEO? This is about how do you create the conditions for the thing that needs to emerge to create a positive future, emerge. That may not happen in your tenure or, your living memory tenure, this might be a long-term thing that you can look back on and say, I helped catalyse that, but my name will not be associated with it. So this is not about personal glory, it's about a sense of deep meaning that you contributed to something that was genuinely, you know, had a positive impact.

Cathryn Barnard (45:45)

I love that. It's just put me in mind of Clayton, the late Clayton Christensen, who was at Harvard Business School, co-founded Innosight, was one of the world's eminent thinkers about innovation and how we create new things. And one of the books that he wrote was called, which was much more of a sort of personal quest but one of the books that he wrote which I just is very profound is called How Do You Measure Your Life?

Sarah Gillard (46:20)

Yeah, and honestly reading that book, I don't know, 10, 12 years ago was one of the things that led me to change the direction of my career. It was just a moment of, you just reflect and go, well, hang on, what am I doing?



Cathryn Barnard (46:34)

And this is it, isn't it? You know, here we are in January 25 and California is on fire and we are under increasing threat from misinformation and disinformation. And there are those that fervently believe that we are in the midst of cyber wars and the world has never seemed less stable. But what is really, really grounding is to take that time and to have a conversation about what really matters at a micro level. And I genuinely and wholeheartedly believe that when we have those conversations, we will discover that we have a lot more shared humanity and things that unite us more than divide us. And with that, I remain hopeful.

Jen Sproul (47:28)

Absolutely. Sarah, this has been absolutely fascinating and I've really enjoyed this conversation. I think it's a great way to start the podcast for 2025. And I think that we can all reflect and all that's changing is that but internal communicators, you have an amazing superpower to make a difference. And it all comes down to humanity and we as humans, with all the things around us, we'll be the one that shapes the world, our outcomes and everything that we do. The power is in our hands, should we say.

So thank you so much, Sarah, for your time today. And I hope listeners, you've enjoyed this kickoff episode, and we'll see you for the next one.

Sarah Gillard (48:01)

Thank so much.