Transcript for S10 E7 Exploring Storytelling in Communication with Preeti Macwan

Dom (00:43)

Hello and welcome to another edition of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Dominic Walters and I'm joined as ever by my colleagues, Jen Sproul and Cat Barnard. And today we have a slightly different guest because we're called the Future of Internal Communication, and our guest today has a real claim over that future because she's relatively early into her career. We're welcoming - and in a moment we'll hear from Preeti Macwan. Preeti has recently completed the Masters in Corporate Communication working with the IoIC. And as part of that did a dissertation on the strategic use of storytelling in hybrid work environments. And Preeti and I met a little while ago when we were doing some work around that. And we thought it'd be a fantastic topic for the podcast because it covers certainly at least two issues that are top on the list of things to do for internal communicators.

First of all, how do we use storytelling? I think many people now see that storytelling is a crucial and powerful part of a leaders and a communicators armoury. So how do we get the most out of it? And then secondly, this whole issue around hybrid working, which as we now know is not going to go away. And we're talking after the recent release of the IC index for 2024. And again, amongst a number of other things, the whole issue about hybrid working, what that means for people and trust and how people work has come up. So it's a great time for us to be talking with Preeti. So welcome to the podcast, Preeti.

Preeti Macwan (02:12)

Yes, thank you so much for having me, it's totally an honour. I had not imagined to be here to be speaking with you all at such an early stage in my career, but thank you so much for having me and thinking that my study was worth a conversation on a platform like yours. Thank you so much.

Dom (02:31)

Thank you Preeti and of course it is because I know that prior to that you studied literature, you came to this from a study of English and that's what prompted you to think about human relations and I think that's what also sparked your interest in communication - so you also bring an extra dimension, which is your understanding of literature I guess how stories are used and how they've been developed in the past. So as I mentioned, your dissertation looked at strategic communication as a tool within hybrid work environments. A fantastic topic. If it's possible, what are your top three key findings from what you learned?

Preeti Macwan (03:04)

Okay, so the findings, I had a few and a lot of them you'd be familiar with, but these are the ones that I believe were key according to me. One of them, which was a recurring theme in the responses that I received was the importance of training line managers. I know we talk about leadership and we talk about higher leadership a lot, but most of my respondents, they emphasised directly, indirectly, in different words, the importance of training line managers because they are the ones who employ it the most in the daily workings of an organisation. They are the ones who make sure that the message from the top reaches the bottom well. They are the ones who are breaking the bigger story into smaller pieces so that people at the lower rung of the ladder understand it and then those people take it forward. So the importance of training line managers - that was one reoccurring theme that I believe is worth talking about because we talk a lot about about giving autonomy to line managers and we talk a lot about delegating authority and all of those things. And now that I have worked in an organisation myself for about six to eight months, and I was an aspiring academic, so I had no clue how corporate works. But now I've finally seen it work. So I think I can attest that yes, we really truly need to train line managers and how much of a difference a good line manager, a trained line manager or line manager who himself or themselves are very clear about the message that has to be shared, the story that has to be told. They are key when it comes to storytelling in an organisation. That was one of my key takeaways.

The second was the values of honesty, authenticity and vulnerability. Now these three words, I know big words, however, like four out of six of my respondents repeated these exact words when they describe the characteristics of the stories that they would like to share and what kind of a storyteller, a leader or a line manager or for that matter, even any other employee should be or the kind of storytelling that they should be encouraging. And these were the characteristics that it has to be honest. It has to be authentic, as authentic as possible, and there has to be a touch of vulnerability to it because at the end of the day, you have to make the stories a bit personal for it to actually have an impact. The story has to touch a person at all levels in the management. So all the rungs of the ladder have to be balanced and all of them have to be connected, right? And these values are key in doing that.

And storytelling actually, when you're employing it, it's very important to not alienate your audience. To articulate it better, when someone in higher management employs storytelling, briefly, before the people down there become storytellers themselves, before they share the message themselves, they are the audience. And you do not want to alienate your audience. You want to be careful about how you're making them feel. So in that way, it's very important that your messages and your stories be authentic. And vulnerability helps in creating that bond, especially in larger organisations where the gap between higher management and where the gap is very large or if there's very little interaction between the top management and everyone else, even organisations which are spread out in different branches or very big organisations, it's very important that these values be taken care of.

And the third takeaway would be making heroes. This is how one of my respondents phrased it - that we need to make heroes out of people. We need to share success stories when someone is employing storytelling well. So once the story has been shared and you see that it's creating an impact, it is so important that you recognise the storyteller. It is so important to do it both virtually

and in-house because what my research also showed me and there are studies, one done by Meta in 2023, which is a more hip one that got a lot of people my age talking, was that in hybrid working, people feel that they are not recognised enough. In fact, if I'm not wrong, the data says that 38% of the respondents in that study conducted by Meta - 38% of the respondents felt that they weren't given a bonus because they were working in hybrid more. Yeah, it kind of takes away from the recognition that they should be receiving because it I think there's a preconceived notion that because you're working from home you're more comfortable or you're not putting enough effort so there's a certain prejudice there also. You see, so it's very important to be constantly recognising who's doing what and in whatever form they might be doing it and that is my third takeaway, making success stories out of people - out of your employees who are successful storytellers. Some of them have to be trained, some of them are natural at it. But either way, it's important to encourage this behaviour or encourage this way of working and sharing messages in an organisation. I mean, if one has to lead by example, and when you see that the example is working, it's important that you recognise it. It's so important, especially when it comes to line managers and everyone below them. But for starters, these are my key findings.

Dom (08:29)

I think some very useful starters and it'd be good just to look at one or two of those things in a bit more detail because firstly, I'm delighted to hear you say the importance of training line managers but I suppose I would because I do that - but I'm also particularly interested in vulnerability because sometimes when you're talking with line managers about vulnerability you can see the panic in their face because none of us like to feel about being vulnerable. So it would be good to get your experience from your research what that vulnerability looks like. In other words, what is "good vulnerability" if I can call it that.

Preeti Macwan (09:03)

When we talked about vulnerability, one of my respondents actually gave an example and I think that's a very beautiful example. And that was while their organisation was adapting to the hybrid mode of working. And I think it was their chief people officer. And when they spoke about their experiences and how COVID created a certain anxious atmosphere both at home and in that moment, there were so many changes that the organisation had to go through. There were so many changes that everyone at every level in the organisation had to go through. And there was, of course, this sense of disbelief, a wrong belief, I'd like to say, or maybe just a preconceived notion that it's so much easier for people at the top to adapt to things. And while that might be true in a lot of ways, when something as large as an epidemic strikes you, I think it scares people. Everyone's human at the end of the day, the CEO and the newest employee, the intern, you see. So it was very important for the Chief People Officer back then to be able to share her story and actually in a way express her fears of this transition, you know, of everything that she was feeling during this transition, to be able to not only console, but also reassure everyone else, even the youngest employees probably on board or the newest employees, because everyone felt that people at the top are more secure, but no, the entire organisation is going through an upheaval and it kind of

affects them the same way, not in the exact same way. I understand that we understand privilege. And yet it's so important to show the more human side of you.

(10:47)

And then the interesting detail that my respondent added was that the person who shared the story, the chief people officer, they were very anxious about it after they shared it. They almost thought it was problematic, but the responses they received in person later - the kind of reassurance that they created while they shared it, that was something that even took them by surprise. And it was so important in that moment to be able to express their fear and not just put up a strong face because well that's your job diplomacy it is and so on, and so forth. Just those ideas, I think you have to step out of the whole formal, step out of the formality that you're expected to sometimes - so especially when I especially when you're trying to communicate a big change that might take place or if there's some bad news one of my respondents said that the most difficult thing they had to communicate or the stories that they had to share in the hybrid mode were of those when they had to let people go. And that was one of the toughest parts. And there's a certain wave because not only do you communicate with that person, when you talk to other employees about it, and there's this general sense of fear about, what's going to happen to me now? It is so important to share what's happened with a certain level of humanity. And it's so important to humanise everyone to the point where you have to leave your formality just a bit aside so that when you're communicating something as tough as this, they don't think that you're so alienated from reality and you're so privileged that you're almost out of touch with what the other person might be feeling, the person who's leaving might be feeling, or the other employee who's unsure of their future might be feeling. So that's how our literary comes into play.

Dom (12:29)

I think you've given us a fantastic example there of how it is important to share how you're responding to things because yes, of course people want to know their leaders have got some plans and they've understood the issues and they've taken the right steps, but they also want to know they can share their feelings and that we talk a lot about psychological safety. I think one of the ways in which you can achieve that is exactly as you described. One more question for me, I'm going to pass over to Cat then, but it'd be good to know if there are any surprises, Preeti, because you looked at this, you had some ideas, I guess, as you went into it, what were the surprises?

Preeti Macwan (13:00)

Not any big surprise - so what would happen is I had a set of questions to ask and they were in a particular order, one leading to the other. So when I started asking, for example, if there were 10 questions that I would have to ask when I began the interview with my respondents - they would be very positive. Like the responses that I received about hybrid working were very positive, but towards the end of it they would always say that they are trying real hard to get people back in the offices. So even though it seems like we've really accepted it and they're also getting good responses from their employees. The employee engagement rate is high, people seem to have adjusted well. I

was pretty surprised that even big organisations, organisations which have really, really truly adjusted well to this transition are also desperately trying to get people back in the office. I mean, it wasn't exactly a surprise. And at the same time, when you're having an hour long conversation with an expert who's worked in this organisation for a while, and everything that they're saying is so positive, and they mean it, you know, they have incidents to back it up with, and they have examples and everything, they themselves seem so happy about it. But at the end of the day, it's like, no, we want people to come back. And I think that's always going to be there. I'm not entirely surprised. I think there's something different about having the room full of people and then communicating with them directly than it is behind the screen. As much as I'm comfortable with this, I'm pretty sure that us sitting on a table with our mics on would be a different experience. So yeah, no judgment there. I was personally surprised because it was like a crest and rope, right? Like the interview is going like this, plus, plus, plus, but no, we want them back.

And then, okay, I get it. I can understand why, but I did not see it coming after an hour of conversation. So that always took me by surprise. That was the main surprise. Everything else, I think we've always known, but because organisations are different and people work differently, some of my respondents were consultants, some were in-house internal comms managers. So they had different things to say, but the principle stays the same, essentially. So not entirely surprising, just that the insistence on having people back in the office is still there. They still want them back in the office. And I think that's going to stay. That's always going to stay. I can understand why they want that to happen.

Cat Barnard (15:26)

But it does jar, doesn't it, really? with many of the sentiments that were authentically, in inverted commas, espoused in the early months of the pandemic. There was very much a sense of a more humanitarian or humane narrative in the sort of the C-suite echelons around how we are all in this together and we are going to overcome the challenges together and we are going to become more close knit as a consequence of this once in a lifetime event and we trust you guys, we're going to become more flexible, we're going to become more team-spirited and yet three years later the narrative has shifted very much to, no, we want everybody back in the office. And in fact, there's some KPMG data that floats around. They produce an annual CEO outlook. And their last year research showed that something like 67% of surveyed CEOs were expecting a full return to the office by 2026 and that they would penalise people that refused to come.

So it's a real sea change from what was communicated in those early months to the point where now, I think, it's just that the messages that were conveyed in 2020 and 2021 are just construed as being completely inauthentic. And actually, the IC index research of 2024 shows that the majority of people don't believe the reasons that were given by their leadership teams for the return to the office.

I'm really intrigued by this because it's no secret that we have a productivity crisis in the UK. Our engagement figures, according to Gallup, are down as low as 10 -13%. I don't think I'm speaking out of turn when I say economically, we have been in the absolute doldrums for eight years now. So there's a whole bunch of complexity in this topic, but I agree wholeheartedly with what you say,

Preeti, which is that authenticity and honesty, and inclusive, vulnerable dialogue is a game changer. And it just is remarkable to me that we should be seeing such kind of dogmatic mandates coming from big organisations. And by the way, I'm fully aware that crisis communication sells. So some of these headlines that we see will be sensationalist because that's what gets clicks on news outlet websites these days. But I guess the question that I was really curious about was from when you were doing your research and from when you were doing the course, what were the situations where you felt storytelling had the most positive impact?

Preeti Macwan (18:49)

So there were a few, I'll try my best to articulate them well. Because my research particularly focused on strategic communication and how storytelling helps there, based on the answers received from my respondents, I believe it had the most positive impact in easing the people into the transition to hybrid working, or for that matter, even the organisation making peace with the fact that we'll be working hybrid. So out of the six respondents, and I had scheduled with more but due to time restraints I could only speak to six of them. Most of them said that they already had arrangements in place - that they had the technology for hybrid working but it was the pandemic that pushed them to be using it on daily basis. It increased the frequency and they almost had to train people to carry out virtual meetings and how to communicate strategy. A lot of things, they changed their channels of communication, the channels of storytelling and all of those things.

So in communicating changes and in that transition, mainly it helped in the transition from either fully non-remote to remote or hybrid, both. That was the main one. And one that I mentioned earlier actually, it was in communicating a lot of - I hate to use that word - but layoffs, and to ease other employees while they were taking place because that is something very difficult to communicate. And another value that my respondents stated, were transparency, but adding to what you said earlier, Cat, I believe we have to take that word with a pinch of salt. Corporates and transparency don't go hand in hand according to me, if we are being very honest.

I don't believe any company can be entirely transparent. But storytelling helped in those situations where they had to communicate, where they had to lay a lot of people off and let people go because there was a general sense of unease among everyone else who was retained. And when they had to communicate to those employees why people were let go or what the company was going through and why they had to make such decisions. That's when it really helped them based on everything that my respondents said. Yeah, those were the two scenarios where it really helped.

Cat Barnard (21:15)

That is a really interesting point that you raise because to some extent, I agree with your sentiment that it's impossible for corporates to be transparent, wholly transparent. And yet the workforce expectation is changing. And we're seeing now the rise of employee activism on key topics like social justice or social injustice and the organisational stance on the climate crisis and reducing carbon emissions and we're starting to see evidence of people voting with their feet and leaving

organisations that they believe aren't being transparent or authentic on the issues that are, you know, the existential issues of the day.

So I think that's going to be a really interesting, I think that's going to be a really interesting thing to watch play out because I suspect that organisations will have to increase their transparency, whether they may not wish to right now, because I think there is still in certain quarters, the belief that when you're in the C-suite, you are superior and all these people just need to do what they are told to do, but I'm not convinced that that is the reality of the 2024 labour market. So interesting times ahead.

Dom (22:43)

Well, picking up on that, Cat, I think Pretti you were saying that there's a lot for leaders to do here, but they've already got plenty on their plate. And we know from experience that sometimes when you talk to line managers and leaders and say, you've got to communicate, as part of that, you've got to tell stories, you've got to go out there and be authentic, you've got to be out and vulnerable, you can see that they're thinking, actually, this is quite a lot for me to be doing. And we know that where organisations get this right is where, as you were saying, they spend time supporting line managers, partly with training, partly in other ways as well. So based on your work and your research, your conversations, how do you think that internal communication practitioners can best help leaders and line managers use storytelling effectively?

Preeti Macwan (23:26)

Thank you Dominic. Okay, so based on the responses I received, these are the main takeaways. So one of my respondents actually had to say this and others did not say this directly, but I believe there was a need for it. So one of them was a consultant, so they had worked with a few organisations already. And they said that leaders, a lot of leaders do not recognise the importance of storytelling in the first place. These are very strong words, but this is what I heard. I believe they're as a consultant or as someone who's helping leaders communicate and helping leaders tell better stories. I think we've got to find a way, we as people working in internal comms, especially consultants, if not in-house internal comms people. We have to find a way to recognise the importance of storytelling in the first place in a way that higher management sees it. So a lot of leaders don't see it in the first place.

Then even if they see it, not everyone knows and not everyone is a natural storyteller. So one of my respondents said very clearly was that they had to train people and they had to train leaders. But it's quite amazing to me that the leaders agreed to it because now that I have a bit of corporate experience, I can understand how leaders are so averse to training. It's almost as if training is for everyone else, but people at the top. So if at all there is the space for that training, the space for growth, even for people at the top, I see practitioners can actually help leaders understand, okay, this is our strategy, this is how we're going to communicate, and this is how we need you to do it because the stakes are high, you're the face of the organisation, it's very important that you do it correctly for everyone else to follow through.

So formal training, if at all there is a space for it. And then of course, not everyone has the articulation skills, not everyone is a natural storyteller. And it's very important that you also pick and choose the right stories to tell. Because I think I said this earlier, there's a high chance when a leader starts communicating to a larger audience, briefly the audience and otherwise future storytellers or people who take the story ahead. They tend to alienate the audience because they are so high up, they're almost untouchable, inaccessible. So the stories that they tell, they narrate, are so difficult to grasp. I mean, people are listening, but they don't relate. So if there's a big transition that the company is going through, of course it's not going to affect the the leader, the CEO, and the newest intern in the same way.

It's very important that they pick and choose which part of the story they should be saying, which is why I also say the transparency. I don't think you can always inculcate that because when you do it, there's a, for a lot of people, transparency and the real truth is not something that helps. And I don't say it in a way to encourage dishonesty in an organisation, but discretion is something. And I think we have to read the room and leaders need to know that too. This is simply based on the responses that I received. There was this general air of superiority that leaders had and it is important to break through it so that they can communicate with everyone else with a sense of relatability and what I see practitioners wanted, at least the consultants - what they said was that they wanted to use storytelling when they were consulting, when they were helping these organisations and especially top management, they wanted to use storytelling to humanise the leaders so that if they're not accessible, at least they seem like it. That's my takeaway now.

This is me adding a bit of my own interpretation. Please take it with a pinch of salt, but that's what I believe. And all these things that I'm saying right now, they're not simply based on the study. They're the study that I carried out and my experience now. So I finally see it working. So it's so important to humanise them so that they don't seem so untouchable. But then another thing that comes into play is the leadership style. So it is so relative. It is so subjective. It's so important for people to know their leaders. It's so important for consultants to know their clients in this case and to know their temperament, to know their styles and then play accordingly. I guess that's about it, that's the main gist.

Dom (27:52)

No, I think there's a huge amount of stuff there, Jen, I'm going to pass over to you in a second, but just to pull out some of the key things you said there, I mean, I think discretion is so important - both in terms of your experiences. When we're currently saying this through a general election campaign, where I think some of the leaders have forgotten that, and related experience of their own, which has alienated their audiences because they can't relate to them, I think. And I think that's a really key point. And the whole thing about style - because if you think certain leaders, if they're known for their precision, they're not going to suddenly be waving their arms around and talking wildly about their passion with any authenticity. And I think that's really important to do. So you've outlined very clearly what we can do as IC practitioners. Make the case for stories, give people the skills, help them do stuff in their own way. And then I think sometimes be the devil's advocate and say not every story is appropriate and help them understand which stories fit and which don't. So thank you.

Jen Sproul (28:48)

Preeti it's been so lovely to listen and there's so much that you've said that, of course, aligns really nicely for what we talk about, as IoIC, and what we talk about on this podcast and the things that we think to be important. But moving on from your research, what I think is also lovely is to hear from somebody that's invested so much in their education and your learning and how you've got brought into academic and understanding and I think as IoIC education is obviously a fundamental part of our role as well and we make sure all the things that you're talking about, for example, are built into the competencies and the professional standards that we set out and then baked into the education.

We also understand that education is not accessible to everybody easily either. But I'm just keen to understand, I think, from your point of view, you said you've just started to understand corporate. I'm like, is that massively different from what you thought in your research? Is there a kind of an off? And obviously, you're that generation coming into the workplace as well. And based on what we've been through, what is actually your expectation of what that environment should feel like?

So I guess my question to you is, how has your education, I guess, helped you? And how have you found that now we're having a little bit in the corporate world? And also, what do you expect - you talked a lot about hybrid and that change, but where we are sitting right now, what do you expect a good working environment to feel like?

Preeti Macwan (30:13)

Thank you so much, Jen. Okay, you're right about it. And education is totally a privilege, at least in my case, I'd like to believe that. It has also something to do with the culture I come from. So I come from India and I was an aspiring academic, I was a student of literature, something I loved, I still love. And then I had to make the switch. I do not know what switched in me. I was like, okay, let's do industry. And I had some expectations. I know it is cutthroat and I know it's competitive. But maybe I was too naive. And I actually thought that competence and efficiency works. But no, there are so many other things at play. And for starters, I had no clue about corporate speak. Now I'm writing messages to my friends, which start with kindly and please. It has bled into my life to this extent. But apart from these tiny things. I think my education literature was one thing, but my minor was psychology and we studied organisational psych. Of course, it was not my major. So I did not study it and to the extent of someone who would - like a major in psych would.

But when you talk about leadership styles and you see them play out, I worked in an organisation where the leader was somewhat autocratic. And I saw, you know, you read about this and you have these figures, you have the Zeus model and the Apollo model, but when you see it play out and how greatly it affects motivation of very, very efficient employees, how greatly it affects not the will for an employee to stay in the organisation - how greatly it affects the desire to grow in the organisation, everything, like one person affecting a hundred thousand people under them. I've finally seen it firsthand. So I finally understand it also. That's one thing.

So when you study the society as a typical student of humanity, you become more perceptive, but I understood it. So I knew, for example, if I'm working with the three of you, I know you as people now. I can maybe predict your actions. I know who you are as people. I know your temperament.

What I had to learn based on that was how do I regulate my behaviour? And that came with a lot of trial and error. It took me a while to get there. There's so much, I hate to say this, but I believe everyone's always playing a game and I'd heard about it, but now I've seen it. I've finally seen it firsthand. It took me a while to get the hang of it and wrap my brain around it. I'll be honest. So that's one thing.

My masters in PR and corporate communications, it was very interesting as such and there were a lot of things which people would think are common sense but then of course when you study it, it's a different ball game together, when you study it in depth. What I loved the most about my degree was cross-cultural and internal communications, which is why my dissertation was in internal comms. And I really like how cross-cultural communications also helped it - helped my dissertation. It was not a point. It was not one of the key findings. But I had two respondents who had very specific views because it was not a recurring theme. It was not a big part of my findings so that I couldn't talk more about it. But they were so specific and clear about their views when it came to leadership styles and they had very specific responses when they had to differentiate the leadership style in the UK and America.

One of my respondents was based in Sweden and they had some really, I mean, we would know if you are very active on LinkedIn or in general, just pop culture, you know the image that American leadership has in all ways, be it governmental or be it corporate, how American corporates function even in their offices in other countries, there's a certain pattern of leadership they follow and how it works.

So one of my respondents had very clear things to say. And because I studied cross-cultural communications now, and in general, I studied societies. So as a literature student, I studied societies. And of course, I come from a more collectivist societies. And corporates work in a different way in my country, the ones based there. And corporates in individualistic countries work in a certain way. And then I have this respondent who in a way just affirmed what I had studied already. But in the corporate context, they affirm when it comes to leadership styles or about how working is in an American company or when a Swedish company has an American leader, how things change and how difficult it is.

There's a cultural conflict there because work cultures are so important. So it was those small things that I got to know this in my own company that I worked in, we had a diverse workforce, but the leader belonged to a certain culture. And they made it a point to remind us of that, that this is how it works. And I finally saw it work that way. I knew it because I dread about it, but I did not know that it still works that way, regardless of where the company is based. A lot of what the leader carries on from their culture and I don't mean it in a good or a bad way. It's kind of a neutral realisation - that you carry a culture with you. And it shows even in the way you lead. It also shows in your expectations from your employees at all levels. It also shows in the expectations of respect, the ideas of respect and authority for that matter, even not compliance - obedience, the words used and the language used by leaders, the style used by leaders or how accessible or inaccessible they are or whether they communicate to you directly or not, if they check up on you directly or not or if they

only appreciate a certain kind of corporate behaviour that is in alignment with their culture and small things like that. We don't talk about it a lot. It's just something you live through. These are small moments in your day, in your eight-hour shift, but they can really make or break an employee's experience entirely. It can either make them feel very appreciated, make them feel really valued, even if they are the lowest rung of the ladder. It can also make someone at the highest rung of the ladder with a big fat pay check feel really unappreciated - all because one person has a certain style.

They also make it very clear that this is the culture I come from. This is how we work in our place. So this is my style and it is how it's going to be no matter what. Even if I'm based in some other country. So in India, we talk a lot about how American companies - so we have the Big Four in India too. And when very young people join the Big Four in India, it's a matter of pride because in a way it is and for Indians it is a matter of pride. It's only now that people are finally talking about the work culture there. Yes, that the pay check doesn't match up the amount of work we do. And it has nothing to do with just the working hours. It's about employee treatment and all of those things about recognition. Sometimes even that recognition is not enough. Small things that make up your entire shift. I hope I was clear enough.

Jen Sproul (37:31)

Absolutely, Preeti, there's so much that you said in there as well and I think it's that thing of, you know, at IoIC you talk about education and education gives you the ability to have critical analysis, to reflect, to ask but why - and to dig deeper as well as learn all those models and those tools. But I think what's great to hear is then your articulation. And then when I'm landed, I'm sort of, well, I knew all of that. But then actually, even though you knew that theory, actually how I think it surprised you all that actually getting that right or wrong or that misstep can make you feel. And actually what you've described there is that you're learning but also your real-life experiences show that if there's that one misstep that it impacts your motivation, your productivity, your loyalty, your intention to stay. So it creates that sense of that business case.

And I think there's something as well, a secondary point you just made, which I thought was really interesting as well as about, I think there's something in leadership. We talked about earlier, talking about leaders leaning into their style and working within that. But there's also, I think, depending on your leader and your workforce and where you sit - and it was a multinational, global, et cetera, et cetera. I'd say there's another thing that leaders need is to become more self-aware. So self-aware of how my bias or my cultural background translates across my audiences and how that comes along. So yes, we need to work with who they are. But I think that there is going to become, and I think picking up on Cat's point as well as that increasing demand for transparency is going to be more aware of our own biases and our own backgrounds and our own way that affects our style so that we understand our impact.

Whether we need to adjust that or change that, I think it's a different conversation. But understanding ourselves, I think, is really, really important because clearly if that's not wrong, it is going to affect you and how you feel about the workplace you walk into and how you're going to commit to it. So I think that's another great point. I mean, Dom, I'm sure you're going to ask, how do we go forward with lots of great points from here?

Dom (39:36)

Well we do need to come into land Jen and as you say we have covered a lot of things around being aware of yourself. I'm trying to think who it was – I think it was Aristotle who said "know thyself", I could be wrong on that so I'll have to check it - someone important from a long time ago said that. Look, Preeti, to bring us into land, we've talked about leadership style. You gave us some great examples about authenticity. We've spoken about how we as IC practitioners can help leaders to use stories effectively. It'd be good to get your take as we look forward and say, what do you think, in a nutshell, are the key factors that are going to shape internal communication in the foreseeable future, insofar as the future is foreseeable?

Preeti Macwan (40:16)

So the main fear was that with advent of AI and with increasing use of technology in all sorts of communications - newer types of channels, there's two fears. One, over saturation, a lot of data information overload. And at the same time, now that we have more things to depend on and rely on, while it's so difficult in the first place to get humans to be doing the storytelling, we have more things to help them. So they'll find even more reasons, even more things to kind of give away the responsibility to and take a step back instead of taking up the mantle themselves. So that was one thing. It was a dilemma that my respondents were wondering about.

Apart from that, three out of six really felt that there is a chance that even though people do not yet understand the importance of internal comms and storytelling in itself as a skill in itself that has to be developed, they might start identifying it now. And I believe there is a certain truth in that because every time the internal communications in an organisation or when they're not prioritised or whether it's a lack of it. And I know it because I finally worked in an organisation. It's always nice to add it. I finally have some experience. So at least I'm not just repeating from a paper or a book. And I can finally say it with conviction. I believe it greatly, greatly affects the state of affairs. And I believe people might actually start understanding the importance of it in a way that It is a personal responsibility to be taken at every level in the management and not just at the top level, not just at the bottom level, at every level.

Of course, every level calls for a different level of responsibility. It's not going to be the same. And we've already spoken about discretion. It's not going to be the same story, but you have to get the story moving. I mean, that's how stories survived at the end of the day, right? They were passed down from one generation to another. So just that way, one level to another. I would like to believe that organisations will understand the importance of it. We can hope that they don't shrug the responsibility entirely. Now that we have more technological tools to assist us with it, we will still need humans to be doing the ideating. We will still need very human ideas because AI cannot imagine for us. And I don't believe AI can predict humans - I don't think a machine or a technology unless it's monitoring me all the time is going to understand how I should be acting with my colleague. It's small things like that. There was this general sense of fear - not fear, fear is an overstatement but a dilemma that in a state where people have a hard time understanding that

storytelling is so important as a tool, especially when you communicate strategy, especially when you share experiences so that your employees feel closer to you and closer to the company and there's an increased sense of security in such an atmosphere. You introduce a tool which gives people a chance to not take up that responsibility at all, to completely hand it over to a machine and a technology.

And so while you're constantly trying to humanise the leader or whoever you're working with, you again create a barrier in the bid to make things easier. That was also something that was repeated when people talked about hybrid working in general. The reason it is so important that we consider hybrid working is here to stay, or at least organisations understand that there's a reason why people want it to stay, even though they did not ask for it in the first place, is that for a lot of people it's a hindrance, but for a lot of people it's also a safety net, especially in an age where people are finally talking about neurodivergence more, especially when we are talking about people with different learning styles, there's a certain level of comfort that people feel in hybrid working.

Maybe that itself, that distinct itself is more humanising because not everyone thrives in a crowded office. So I think going forward there has to be an appreciation for individual temperament because like Cat said we already have a productivity crisis so I don't think it helps to overburden people or force them to work in a way that doesn't align with their personal temperament or values. You cannot put an extremely introverted and anxious person on the stage out of the blue or force them to be there while they're dealing with so much anxiety while they can get the same work done in the safety of their cubicle or their home on some days and produce great results. It does no good to an organisation to be forcing employees to go against their temperament, especially when they've seen that good results have been produced while people were working in hybrid mode. So that's one thing that my respondents had to talk about, that it offers a safety net and there's no other way than to really truly accept it and find ways around it instead of entirely challenging the ways employees have finally adjusted to the hybrid mode of working. So forcing people.

Dom (45:35)

No, that's fantastic. I mean, look, for what you've just said, three things strike me which I hadn't really thought about. Firstly, the idea that perhaps while we're encouraging leaders to tell good stories, they could hide behind AI and say, I don't need to do it anymore. And that's a take I hadn't really thought about in those words. I think the second thing was you talked about styles and we know styles are important. But I think what I take from that is trying to force leaders in inverted commas to adopt a style that's not natural, it's not going to come across as authentic. And finally this point about a view on hybrid working which is - it helps people play to their strengths. We have to be flexible to know that some people use it to protect themselves, use it to perform the best way and I guess giving them some flexibility to do that and trusting them to do it. So Preeti, I think we've learned a lot from your research. Thank you very much for sharing it with us. We'll watch your career with huge interest. So do keep us informed as it evolves and blossoms and flourishes. But for now, thank you very much indeed for joining us.

Jen Sproul (46:37)

Thank you so much, Preeti.

Preeti Macwan (46:40)

Thank you everyone for having me. Thank you.