



## **Transcript for S17, E4 – Defining the future of internal communication with Chris Coburn**

**Intro:** Welcome to the future of internal communication podcast. I'm Jen Sproul, CEO of the Institute of Internal Communication.

Since we launched this series in 2021, the world of work has been disrupted by event after event. A pandemic, geopolitics, AI, extreme weather events, remote and hybrid working, generational shifts, inclusion, diversity - the entire nature of how we work needs transformation.

This podcast explores opportunities for internal communication in the future of work. Internal comms is a critical function that helps organisations achieve lasting change, building trust and relationship between people, in pursuit of shared goals.

Please, join me, Dominic Walters and Cat Barnard as we dissect what this means for internal communication.

With relentless change the new norm, it's time to reimagine our profession.

---

**Jen Sproul (01:01)**

Hello and welcome to another episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. And as always, I'm Jens Sproul and delighted to be joined by my co-hosts Cat Barnard and Dom Walters. And today we're gonna talk about, I think, a topic that has always been a big debate, thorny issue for us as internal communicators. We're gonna be talking about how we define the future of internal communication. And we have a brilliant guest who I think I have known for we were trying to work it out, but we think it's at least a decade. And I'm going to introduce today Chris Coburn, who is someone I met many years ago, who has served on the IOIC board. We have had many interesting conversations about what is internal communication? What does it do? How do we define it? How do we create great internal communication practice? And Chris, those that don't know, is currently a senior culture and engagement leader with 20 years experience in internal communication and is currently serving as assistant director of culture and engagement at the Samaritans. Now Chris's career includes a decade in comms at John Lewis Partnership, where he was elected director on the partnership board and led strategic engagement for 85,000 co-owners. He's also built and scaled global internal communications functions from the ground up during high periods of growth at some of the biggest fintechs.

And I know Chris is also a passionate advocate for equity, diversity and inclusion and has a track record, I would say, to build sustainable infrastructure. So, Chris views culture as the operating system of an organisation and champions the concept of the trust taxed through radical



transparency and robust employee listening loops. So you do a lot. There's a lot of things in there, isn't there, Chris?

Chris (02:44)

Yeah, that sounds pretty flashy, doesn't it, actually? Yeah, get that on LinkedIn.

Jen Sproul (02:47)

But also we work with you, don't we now, Chris, on a day-to-day basis because even though you do in-house roles, you also are part of our academic teaching team here at IOIC, aren't you? I know you take great care of our advanced diploma students and facilitate them through that. And you've also just recently joined the teaching team for the Masters in Internal Communication Management. So not only, as a guest, we talk about defining it, have you got a wealth of experience, you're also there working with students and helping to build that learning every day. So welcome, Chris.

Chris (03:16)

Thanks, thanks for having me.

Jen Sproul (03:17)

So that was a very long intro for a wonderful person that we've had many chats with that were going to go on public records. So we've already checked ourselves before we get here to make sure we keep ourselves on track. So Chris, as if we've never met, tell me about your career and how did you actually get started in internal communication?

Chris (03:34)

Yeah, like most people, I fell into it is the short story. And it started in more of a journalism internal communication with internal magazines, journalist partnership. Brilliant company gave me that opportunity. Discovered I just had an ability and a passion to sort of connect people and help people understand each other, whether that was, somebody who is maybe in a boardroom, someone in a warehouse and sort of act as that interpreter so people could, yeah, understand each other and connect. Really loved that, loved seeing people feel part of something, feel



recognised, feel understood and be able to contribute. So, and I just worked my way up really in John Lewis.

I've experienced in like some big change programmemes, some nice change programmemes, some not so nice change programmemes, that's the world of comms. And then I spent some time in some fintechs. I studied my masters with IOIC as well. That was an intense year. Set up, yeah, it's an intense year, still got the scars.

Jen Sproul (04:26)

I hear that. Intense but rewarding, right?

Chris (04:27)

Set up, yeah, it's an intense year, still got the scars.

Intense but rewarding, sorry. Very rewarding and worthwhile intense. I would absolutely recommend it, but yeah, you go into it with your eyes open. And then I set out for myself really. So I've worked across a range of industries supporting small businesses, big businesses in the world of nonprofit, in the world of biochemistry, technology finance, everything, and actually gathering that experience over the last few years across different industries has really helped me have a sort of broader view of communication, I would say. And right now I'm at Samaritans. I love it. It's an organisation that tries to do a lot of good in the world and support people in their darkest moments. And, that's rewarding in a very different way.

Jen Sproul (05:14)

I bet. And I also know you spent some time in Brazil as well and I always forget that you can, whenever I hear that as well, can speak Portuguese. It always throws me off, Chris.

Chris (05:23)

Yeah I did. spent six months living in Brazil, which was amazing. I then came back to the UK, was less amazing, but I'm here now and I make the most of it. And in fairness, we have had a pretty decent summer.



**Jen Sproul (05:37)**

Yeah, it's not been too bad, has it? Just picking up on that, because when you talk about your career, is because you came in through John Lewis, which is kind of a well established known, originator of internal communication from the way the partnership was born in terms of the bedding in of the feedback loops and the way that it's the partnership model and such a large, also complex organisation to then all those different industries from fintech to charities to all those things.

Working in all of those different industries, all of those different perspectives, what do you find is different about internal communication organisations and also what's the saying when you walk in the door?

**Chris (06:13)**

Oh my God yeah, I mean there are big differences some of the challenges are the same some of the conversations are the same but ultimately you've got all of the organisations, even when they're in the same industry, they have their unique challenges and they have their unique cultures as well. So if you sort of connect culture to communication, they're very closely connected if you think about attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours in that sort of culture way, and you think about what communication is trying to influence attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, you have to understand that organisational culture and context as well. And I guess it's part of the reason I started, getting my thoughts down on paper when I was trying to define internal communication because actually every organisation has its own flavour of it. And of course, some things are the same, but in terms of its purpose and where the energy and effort and resources are focused, actually that's where it can be quite different and therefore have a different impact. I think back to my time in the John Lewis Partnership, and you have Waitrose and you have John Lewis, and actually communication, even though part of the same company, was very different, because culturally they were very different organisations. You can look at it from a very tactical level of what's the same. Most people have an intranet. Most people have similar channels. But I think where the real difference is, is attitude towards it. In some organisations, it is just a way of sharing information as quickly and as broadly as you can in some organisations, and I'll put my cards on the table where I think it should be focused, is it's more about creating meaning and understanding so people can sort of work together and help the business and the people the business serves benefits. Benefits,



**Jen Sproul (08:05)**

I'm going to pass over to Dom now, but I bet that when you walk into an office where you feel like the energy and the attitude aligns with you, that makes therefore then the opportunity to deliver the impact far greater.

**Chris (08:15)**

Yeah, for sure it doesn't. And actually, one of the things I've loved about joining Samaritans is having an executive team and a staff base and a volunteer base as well. Almost everyone open to the conversation or open to maybe thinking about communication in a different way. And the other thing I would say is I don't think any organisation does it perfectly. I think it's more about, does the organisation recognise that it could be better than it is today and are they open to redefining it, reshaping it and actually listening to the internal communication professional and being open to reshaping it or is the organisation quite close to this is how it should be and therefore that's it.

**Dom (08:59)**

Chris, I'm fascinated to hear more about your experience with the Masters, but can I go off-piste a little bit? Because just want to pick up on, and I know probably there's a limit to what you can say, but it'd interesting to a bit about some of the challenges you're facing at the Samaritans, because it's an organisation I guess not many people would know about the inner workings of, and know you obviously can't say too much because it's quite confidential, but what some of the big challenges there?

**Chris (09:24)**

Yeah, I think some of the broader challenges there are actually challenges that the entire third sector is facing. There's like increasing demand on charities with dwindling resources. And there's so many macro trends happening in terms of, people being able to give less, I don't just mean financially, but volunteer time.

And if you think about Samaritans as an example, everybody who picks up a phone and listens to someone is a volunteer. They're freely giving their time at 2 a.m. It's a phenomenal thing, extraordinary people. But actually, people have less time to give. So there's a lot of pressure right across the charity sector and Samaritans feels that as well. I think a unique challenge to Samaritans though is there's 20,000 volunteers. There's only 300 staff to service that. It's actually quite a small staff number for a national big charity. And it's a 24-7-365 operation. So, trying to reach everybody isn't realistic. So it's more about giving opportunities to people to connect should



they wish to connect. And actually, if they would prefer to just come in and, save lives, frankly, that's what they do. That's what our volunteers do without connecting and talking about strategy, then that's okay because they're happy and they're satisfied. So it's more about creating the opportunities rather than trying to force people into it, yeah.

**Dom (10:38)**

Yeah, I guess, and so, and I guess a lot of it's around building conversations, getting people involved in conversations. I guess you're right, volunteers, some people are going to say, I volunteer to do a specific role.

I'm not particularly interested in all of this. I know that's an issue we all face as communicators, but it's writ large when you're with a volunteer community. So I can see the focus on conversation. And I guess we heard about your career path. You're very well equipped to do that. And part of that being equipped has been doing the masters. We have this debate quite a lot, obviously, as the professional organisation for internal communication. One of our roles is to advocate for great communication, internal communication, but it's also to equip communicators and would be communicators to do it. And we have a lot of debate about how valid academia is in this, whether it's a practical thing around training or whether we should be focusing as we do around academia. So I think it'd be great firstly to get your experience as a student. So you did the Masters in Internal Communication Management. How did you find that? And how did it add to your professional work as a practitioner? That's a big question.

**Chris (11:44)**

Yeah, that's question. Yeah. We've done the warmups now. Yeah. So look, I'd been in John Lewis for 10 years, right, doing internal communication. And I would argue that John Lewis is seen as at the top end of communication and engagement of employees. It's sort of renowned for that. I worked with some brilliant people. I felt like I learned so much and I was considered, I was considered pretty good at what I did and that was reflected in terms of the projects I was on, the promotions, all of those things that you would maybe measure, decent internal comms professional? And I think about two hours into the masters, I was like, my God.

There is so much I don't know. What have I been doing for 10 years? Now, some of that stuff I've been doing was the right things to do, but actually it was all on learning through the people you were working with or, you read a blog, you listen to a TED talk and all those sort of things, and you form your own ideas by learning. And, it hasn't gone horribly wrong, it's probably right, but it's not the case. So for me, what the masters did is it exposed me to so much in terms of knowledge from studies, whether that's more academic papers or different authors and different views. And the other thing it really made me do, and I think this was the game changer, it really introduced me to



more critical thinking. I remember Liz would give me feedback on some of my things of who says that? Why do you think that it really made me like stop and think and question things a little bit more? So when you have those conversations, something feels familiar and simple like we should managers are very important in the internal communications and everyone goes. Yes, of course they are. Yes, that makes sense completely makes sense. But how do you know that and they're they always important in every organisation and in every context and just sort of like stopping and checking yourself. That might not be a good example because I do believe managers are pretty important, but just having that stop and like questioning yourself or other people rather than just sort of accepting that, I would say that was the biggest change. I hear this from students on the advanced diploma, the masters as well. People are really surprised just how much information is out there that they've never been exposed to. Because you don't really get into internal comms and then have like a set training programme. You sort of pick it up as you go along. And that's why I think, particularly the professional development courses from the IOIC are so important.

But the real key is how you practically apply that learning. So it's not just theory for theory's sake. And I think we do a decent job of helping students do that.

Dom (14:29)

Yeah, and we're a profession where often we talk about imposter syndrome. And I think a lot of that, from my own experience, I've been working in internal comms and various related fields for a long time, and I could see that because often there's no clear template. I guess if you're a finance person or an accountant, there's a set number of things you have to do in order to do the role, which gives you a template and a structure and a framework. And we've not necessarily had that as a profession in the past. I mean, we're certainly working towards that now. And I think it does help with that sort of imposter syndrome insofar as I know I'm doing some good stuff and I've got some tools now to help me understand what is good and how things look and so on. So I get that as well. But I think it's also about another idea about critical thinking. We have a lot as a nation, we have a debate about what academia can do and how it adds value and the whole debate about qualifications and do they equip people for work? And I think what you're saying is it gave you a way of challenging stuff, of testing stuff. So it's not just about learning things, important though that is, it's about a way of thinking. I get that. So it must have had an effect because you then went from being, now I'm not sure if it's poacher to gamekeeper or gamekeeper to poacher.

But it's even crossing the floor. I don't know. I'm probably using imperfect analogies here and the wrong metaphors. But you went from taking doing the course to doing the programme to being one of the teachers. So I think in 2023 you started teaching on the masters.

And I've dabbled a bit on some of the aspects of the masters as well. And I guess one of the questions we must get asked quite a lot, and I know that we're going to come onto this in more detail, but what exactly is great internal communication? Our premise as a professional



organisation is that great internal communication unlocks organisational success. But I think we need to understand a bit more about what is great internal communication. It's a bit like, I think we know it when we see it.

But what can we start to do to build it? What are the steps we take to try and make sure it happens within our organisations? So what's your take on that? Again, it's a massive question and we can spend all day on this, but what do you think some of the key parts of spotting great internal communication when you come across it?

Chris (16:40)

Yeah, I think that gets to the heart of the issue we've got because actually everybody's got a different view. There's quite a personal, almost a personalised view of what is great internal communication or great communication in general. And actually, I think that's okay. I think different organisations and different people like to have their own flavour is kind of okay if it works for them. The bit then I sort of think about more is like, but is it working for you or do you just not know what difference you could make if you adopted something else? So for me, the biggest difference I think that makes communication effective and impactful, so it makes a difference, is when it becomes more focused on impacts and outcomes rather than just the inputs that you're putting in. So less about being busy, more about making a difference. And I think it's really quite telling that if you speak to communication professionals and talk about where they spend their time. There's one particular client I had and I spent a decent proportion of my time in and around their board.

But even things like helping constructing board papers. So conversations at board level were more impactful and joined up and meaningful. And the further you can get up that stream, if you like, the more chance you've got of having an impact. If you're way down the end of the stream and you're just communicating decisions and outcomes and things that have already happened, then you can only really do so much in terms of the impact you can have. So I think it's where you spend your time. I don't think there is one overarching definition. And I think there's multiple stakeholders who have a view and have an input into that. I think where it becomes dangerous is when we try to simplify something that is exceptionally complex. So not to go back on the conversation of imposter syndrome, but one of the things I find uncomfortable is when I see people, particularly on sites like LinkedIn, talk about like, this is such an easy problem, and it's all your fault, you're not solving it. Here's five reasons you don't have a seat at the table, and you should do this and this and this. And they try to simplify it. And I'm not questioning their intents, but I think the impact is then it builds on that imposter syndrome of, well, why am I struggling? And actually, if you're in the internal communication field and you are struggling and you do have a bit of imposter syndrome, it's because it's really hard. Because you've got competing priorities and definitions of what good looks like from whether you're C-suite, you're employee base, you're HR team, all of these things, and the IOIC as well. And you might have your own view and your manager's view depending on



where you sit in the hierarchy. And it's really, it's pretty difficult to do and I still, 20 years later, still have imposter syndrome. 20 years later, I still make mistakes because there isn't that template. There's not that do this, do that, do this, and this is the outcome. You're dealing with like human behaviour and unpredictability and on top of that, we're now in a world that's probably more unpredictable than it's ever been, with all the things that happen. And so to answer the question, when do I see good communication? It's more about when communication is actually having an impact way beyond how many people have clicked on your story or what have you. And it's an impact that you set out to achieve at the beginning. So you've decided what you want to achieve. You've constructed all your communication around it to give you your best opportunity to achieve that. And you've used your theories, experience, organisational context, and you achieve that or you don't achieve it but because you're measuring and testing all the time, you understand why you're not achieving it and then you sort of adapt and get there. So it's a very long answer to quite a complicated problem that we face.

Dom (22:30)

That's a good one. I'm going to pass over to Cat in a moment to look more into this definition of internal comms, which I know what you've been working on. But the interesting point you make, I think it's simple to point out what we have to do in order to be taken more seriously. It's very hard to do it because it's about, as you say, relationships and credibility and conversations and confidence. And I think that's going back to our previous conversation about things like the masters.

I think it's about equipping us to deal with different situations. And sometimes, well, let's give my own experience. I've been guilty of approaching problems by saying, here's what I need to do. Here's a bit of communication practice. Here's a channel we may need to do. And that can or cannot be the right answer. But I think more importantly, it's about how I approach it and the conversations we've had and the questions that we ask and the way we build relationships. And as someone said to me, and I know we've talked about this before on the podcast, it's a difference between a bookkeeper and a finance director. There probably isn't a huge amount of practical knowledge that's different, there will be, but it's going to be experience and it's going to be application and it's going to be thinking and that's what going back to your point about critical thinking. So yeah that's a very rambling way of saying I agree with you.

And I think it is much more about how we behave, how we ask questions, how we approach problems, rather than exclusively our practical and professional knowledge around what good communication practice is. And I think that's going to be even more the case in the future from what you're saying as we approach stuff. Which is a lovely but unplanned segue into a question I think Cat wanted to ask.



Cat (21:56)

Right on. I've got so many thoughts on this and Jen and I were chatting the other day and I was doodling while she was speaking and I drew a wall and my view is like if an organisation was a brick wall then internal communication is the cement that sits within the bricks. It's non-binary. It's all manner of things. And as people that hopefully listen to this podcast know, I'm not an internal communicator. So I come at this from a sort of adjacent point of view as a linguist, because a long time ago I went to university, studied modern European languages. And my view of communication is there's three aspects to it. There's how we speak, how we listen, and how we write. And what I always think about in terms of internal communication, having worked now with the IOIC for seven years, very interested in the history of internal communication projects. And it was just fascinating to see the genesis of the discipline. One of the things that I find myself thinking about a lot is that before I started working with Jen, I worked in recruitment and staffing and specifically in technology recruitment and staffing, which was ridiculously fast paced, still is ridiculously fast paced. Like we aren't capable as humans of keeping up with the pace of change in the field of technology, which is why we're all slam dunked by AI at the moment. But if you take it all back, jobs and the work that we do, there are lots of jobs within all organisations that aren't professionalised. And because there aren't rules and regulations that guide those jobs, they then get subject to scrutiny like, well, where's your value? Where's your impact? How are you measuring this? And so on and so forth. And some things are really, really hard to measure. And before I ask my big question, I just want to tell a story because this book changed so much of what I think about the world and obviously as you know I like to read a book or two. There is a research programme in the United States and it's run by a psychology professor called Barbara Frederiksen. She operates out of University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and in 2014 she wrote a book based on the research. The book is called Love 2.0, I believe and she wanted to understand what love is, almost like neurochemically and she basically, they've done all this research and they've deduced that when two people come together and have a really good conversation like there's all this stuff that goes on within your body, like it triggers your vagus nerve, which goes on and boosts your immune system and all these kind of like neurochemical physiological benefits, et cetera. But the point that she made was, it's really, really hard to define what constitutes a good conversation, but you absolutely know that you've had one because you are left buzzing for the rest of the day and you can have those moments of connection as tangentially as like going down the corner shop and getting, I don't know, packet of jelly babies or whatever it is. But you know when you have lived with someone, you know because you feel it in yourselves and you feel good. And I think as we go into these increasingly turbulent, unpredictable operating environments. Although the Genesis and the legacy of internal communication is broadcast journalism, we can't forget that there are these three parts, writing, speaking, and listening. And if we focus on how we would hope that the person that we're communicating with would feel in response to what has come out of our mouth, if even we focus on that, we will do a better job than if we don't focus on it.



Chris (26:41)

Yeah, and the extra bit I would add on that is like how we behave. So the symbolic communication is how I would describe it. Right. And again, it's kind of back to Dom's previous point where I saying where you spend your time. Like, do you spend your time feeding back to leaders about the impact of their behaviours and actions, not just their words? I've probably added more value in organisations doing that than I have tidying up an intranet or writing a speech or, sat there creating content. I remember CIOs to work with and he's one of my favourite CIOs ever, but he was just very shy. He'd walk in every day, earphones in, heads down, and just some of his actions and behaviours that he was completely unaware of just were sending the wrong message. And it's, your words can take you so far and you're right, those conversations, but I think those conversations, I think the the difference in that is you're with someone having a conversation. It's not like transmit, receive, retransmit. You adapt the conversation and of course at that point, you get the personality and the connection and it's a human connection. And I was in the office yesterday actually with some of my team and we ended up working a little bit late and we're like, should we go to the pub? And we sat in the pub and we were like, when was the last time?

This just doesn't happen anymore. And I'm not advocating for all off to the pub every night. But if I think about when I started my career, I'm not saying it was every night, but it was a few nights. And those conversations, those everyday conversations, make such a difference in terms of connecting people within their organisation. And how do you as the IC professional build the conditions for that to happen, which is increasingly difficult in a hybrid work environment. And frankly, when people are exhausted and they would just almost rather work from home most of the time. I know that's a sweeping statement, but that's my experience. So how do you build those conditions? And again, that goes back to what does a good internal comms professional do? It's not just content. You're almost this architect of connection and meaning and sense making and how do you find the time and space to think about these things, let alone do them when you're probably got dwindling resource and increased demands. Back to my point of it's difficult, so you shouldn't feel guilty.

Cat (29:07)

And that does segue, doesn't it, into the conversation about like defining internal communication. And one thing that I want to convey to listeners, and this is based on my experience of working within and for organisations for 30 odd years, like a really important question to ask yourself as you reflect on what the future of internal communication might consist of is who decides what the future of internal communication will look like? And who decides who decides? Because if you think about this logically and you take an organisation, let's say you take a large corporate, 10,000 people, and I say that singularly because the resources are likely to be there. Somebody within that organisation will have a mandate to decide and determine what the future organisational structure should look like. So somewhere in that mix, they will be looking at a matrix of skills and



you would hope, right, this is aspirational, you would hope that somebody would be looking at the skills and competences that the organisation is gonna need across the next five to 10 years and to some degree then clustering those skills and competences and putting them into jobs and assigning roles and responsibilities and then grouping people into teams and functions. Somebody is designing and developing the nature of the organisation. How much does that individual know about the specifics of the work that you do as an internal communicator? One, the specifics of the thing that you do every single day. What do they know about what you would aspire to do if you had more resources available to you? And are they really best equipped to make those distinctions and definitions and parameters on your behalf? Because that person cannot possibly know, because you think about they've got to do that for every single role within the organisation. You can't possibly have that depth of expertise, right? So, I mean, it is a bit of a mind game and we do like rabbit holes don't we but you know that that's the that's the gist of it

Chris (31:36)

Yeah, yeah. So I don't think they're very well equipped to do that, but go on Jen.

Jen Sproul (31:40)

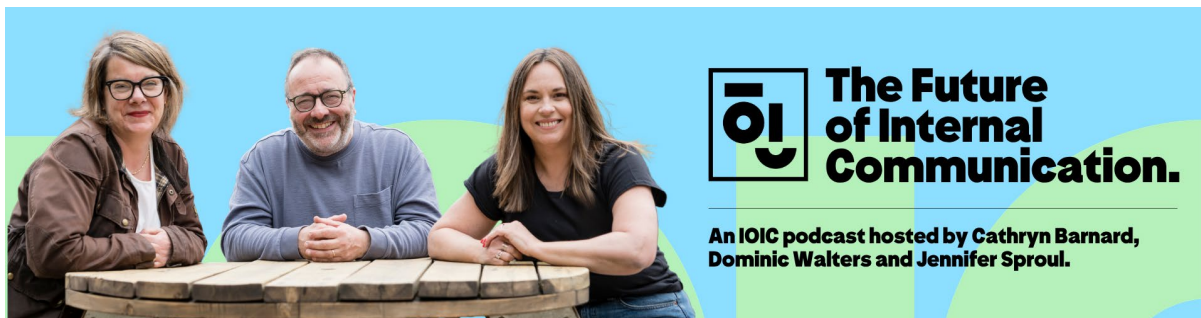
I was going to say but also as well I'll add to that as well but yes that might be happening but are we doing that for ourselves or are allowing that to happen to us? And I think that's the fundamental question Chris I don't know what you think.

Chris (31:51)

That is the question

Cat (31:55)

That is the question. So maybe another question to accompany this, which again is a mental jujitsu, but what is getting in the way of defining internal communication? Because my view, when I wrote the white paper last year, the Future of Internal Communication, and of course that paper includes a short list of the future roles of internal communication. And it also includes a short list of the skills that internal communicators ought to be thinking about developing. And when I was writing the paper, what I was thinking about was how is AI going to disrupt this? Because the thing that we have to remember about AI is anything that is routine and repetitive, algorithmic rules will be created to try and automate that. Because if it's predictable, you ought to be able to replicate it using some kind of computer code. So effectively, I think the professional is the best person to



define what the future of internal communication could look like, but it seems like loads of stuff gets in the way of that. Sorry, no pressure.

Chris (33:10)

Yeah. Welcome to my world of pain because all of this started with a very what should have been a simple conversation with me and Jen and Jen saying, we've done our rebranding. It's been nice to just refresh the definition of internal comms. I was like, no worries. I'll have it back to you in an hour. And I sat there and about an hour in, I was like, can't like I need more time. I spent months just trying to understand the problem of defining it. And actually I think it comes down to, I think if you're an internal comms professional, you'll recognise this, everyone is a comms professional. Everyone thinks they are a brilliant communicator. No one is banging down the door of the IC practitioner saying, I could really do with being a better communicator. Can you share your expertise and skills? That just doesn't happen. Again, it's another place we should spend our time. Maybe that's for another podcast.

So for me, the complication comes with your question, who decides who decides. So as I was trying to define it, I was like, well, who decides the definition? Hold on, who decides who decides? And it is a horrible, multiverse of places and rabbit holes you can go down. I agree that ultimately the best person, to define slash agree the definition is the IC professional if they are qualified to do so. So if I go back to myself 10 years ago, I probably wasn't. I would have had my definition and I would have sat there as the IC person saying, yeah, this is the definition. And that's why I think particularly the academic qualifications are so important because they open your mind to so much else. But I also appreciate the challenge that IC Pro has got, right? So you're in your organisation, your CEO thinks comms should be one thing, your HR team another thing, your marketing team or your external press team another thing. Then you've got the technology input from technology team, I accept that's more about channels. Then you're scrolling on LinkedIn.

You've got a range of IC professionals all giving their own advice to you on what you should and shouldn't be doing. Then you've got the IOIC with its own set of things and rules. And actually when you consider all those different definitions, by the way, none of which align, it's really hard to define it. So I think to your point there, Jen, I think you were getting at, we can define it or we can let other people define it.

Now that's a very simple sentence for me to say, but in an organisation where you have low power, low influence, perhaps, and again, there'll be internal comms professionals sat there going, yes, that's the reality of it. How do you define it? And that's why I think IOIC comes in, in supporting you, not only in creating that definition, but how you get that buy-in within your organisation. And then the last point I'll make is that, I don't think there is one definition that covers every single company and every single organisation or context. I think there need to be some core things that are the same, but I think there needs to be a degree of flexibility in context where you can define it so it



suits, serves the purpose of your organisation within that specific industry, context, culture, whatever. You can't define it in a vacuum just through the lens of communication which is why it's so difficult.

**Cat (39:39)**

But I will add to that, that is absolutely a foundational statement, apropos of the future of work made by arguably the Grand Dame academic on the future of work, Linda Grattan from London Business School. When she wrote her book, *The Shift*, 10, 15 years ago, that was absolutely my number one takeaway, which was that moving forward, there would be so much change taking place all over the place, impacting every single organisation in so many different ways that the one thing that would be clear throughout would be that there was just no one size fits all, that every single operating context is entirely unique and everybody will be in the same boat of needing to figure out what is actually going on situationally in as close to real time as possible.

So that's the lovely juxtaposition as I see it is that the IOIC has this beautiful opportunity to make some bold statements about what good looks like and about, raising the standard and keeping those standards high and looking at ethical parameters and what a well-qualified internal communication professional ought to be thinking about. And that's like the constant in this sea of ambiguity, because everything else is completely in the lap of the gods.

**Jen Sproul (38:18)**

Can I pick up on that as well, just to probably come back to it as well? Because I've just been listening and I know I've had many conversations with you Cat, with Dom, with Chris, sometimes separately, sometimes together, sometimes in parts, but here all the four of us are and I think there's more, because I agree with everything that's being said and in every session I've run, whether that's trying to look at profession map to try and define ethical standards, to try and make this argument about you can't follow a formula that's the same everywhere because fundamentally context, culture, all those things are key. That is, and I think we need to, because if you over formalise some formulae, you know I'm trying to go with that. Like no equation sits the same outcome. It's not like in the world of maths where if you do this equation, it gives you the same answer every time, it is different, right? And our job, I think, as internal communicators, is to know that, to be able to understand that and make use of that context when we walk into any organisation to give the best possible advice for whatever impact or outcome that they're seeking. But going back to a lot of what you were saying as well, this just struck me as a thought earlier. We talked a lot about the path, right? Where we've got to as a profession and I think sometimes we've tried to oversimplify to make a path or and history hasn't been simple either. I get that we're in complex, fast change times now. That's not new. They're just a new set of things, right? And it was really interesting as well at the history project, the last workshop we did, Michael



Heller said something, the professor who was running it. He said, communication is an organisation. And what it makes me think about is through all of that, what is it that we're there to do? Are we there to protect and navigate core assets of an organisation that don't change with time. And what do I mean by that? I mean, well, I want to feel trusted. I want to be able to contribute. I want to be able to do those things that an organisation delivers. And that sits right smack bang in unpredictability. And we keep trying to make something predictable with a formula that doesn't exist in unpredictability. Whereas what helps you to help navigate an organisation to protect it through times of trust or change or transformation or to help it navigate those things. So it comes out with, it's never going to win 100%. That's not possible, but it comes through that in the best possible way with a practice of communication, which is really important, which is far greater than the written word. It is a feeling, a sense making and understanding in all of that.

And therefore then what makes you a better practitioner to do that is someone that can display judgment, critique, thinking, context, understanding. And that's where, for me, yes, our future lies, but I guess my question, because that's a very long ramble, isn't that also our past?

Chris (41:12)

Yeah, I don't think this is new. I think this is where we should have been all the time. We should have been having these thoughts and conversations for ages. And actually, if you look at the IOIC index, the stuff that's in there was in the index before and the index before and it's conversations you and I have had for 10 years. And probably it would have been longer if I'd met you before. So I don't think any of it's new. There are new things like the acceleration of technology, but the underlying challenges for me is still the same. And you mentioned trust. For me, trust isn't separate to communication. It's such an important part. Culture isn't separate to communication. It's such an important part. And it's back to, you can't just think about communication in a vacuum. It's all of these things. I know Dom is sort of the leadership expert. The critical nature of trust, if you trust your leader, everything gets easier for that leader, right? Because then you don't have that person going, what are you hiding? What aren't you telling me? You've just got this trust. And that's why I describe it as like the trust tax. If you've got low trust or distrust, everything's harder. So if you're in an organisation as an IC professional and there's low trust or distrust, your first challenge should be addressing trust. Because you could do all the other stuff around communication and you're going to have to work very, very hard to not get very, very far.

Now, the challenge with trust, like communication, is that it's very personal in terms of definition and all the dynamics around it. So, do I trust my leader? And one of the questions we ask ourselves is, do I trust my leader or do I trust that communication? You compare it to what you believe a good leader should look like.



Now in organisations where we've got much more diversity, by the way, I'm not saying diversity is a bad thing, it's a brilliant thing, it just provides an additional challenge. If you've got an organisation of 10,000 people, you've probably got 10,000 definitions of what a good leader is. And you've probably got 10,000 definitions of what good communication is. So then when you look at some of the context of the IOIC index report, and you see an absolute correlation between good communication and engagement in terms of it's indisputable that when communication is great rather than just good, people are more engaged, more willing to stay at the company, et cetera. But what it doesn't unpick is what is the definition of great communication? Which comes back to the challenge we're trying to solve of defining it, but ultimately everybody will have their own version of it. What's a great pizza? Does it have pineapple?

No, it doesn't by the way, but it depends who you ask Cats nodding Cats great pizza it does but But like you know, you can't say, great pizza and assume that everybody's version of that is saying it's just not the same and that complexity makes our jobs really really difficult. So then it's about how do you like have that time and space to really sit and think about these challenges rather than just firefight, you know all the time and Again, if you look at sort of like the data I see professionals a time poor.

Jen Sproul (44:23)

I get that and I think that you picked on a point around data as well and I'm going to pass to Dom because I think otherwise we'll be hearing this podcast and people will be tuning out forever because I think Dom is an expert at bringing it into land on podcasts. But this also is my point because I agree with you, right? I get that. And we are also really harsh on ourselves. I sometimes think as a community, like you don't measure, you don't do this, you don't do that. And we seem to go around these kind of really dorny things that we never seem to come out of.

Because we're trying to still apply something we think we should have a formula to, which is really difficult, right? But I guess my question is, one of the things I keep talking about is if we're gonna be a function that helps an organisation navigate, become resilient to achieve whatever those goals might be. Where you know Samaritans will have different goals to, John Lewis to whatever bank to whatever that might be. But fundamentally, people are fundamental to how an organisation navigates, whether it succeeds, et cetera, in any operating condition.

Do we need to just go with this measurement thing in this formula way and think about in all the things that you do, what is the intelligence that you can find in an organisation that helps you understand the trust in that context or the issue in that business? Do we just need to come at that? Not my wish to have a podcast about measurement and data, because I do think we could be a more intelligence-based, advisory-based service to help navigate that but it's not always that you can just put a dashboard in the same organisation that's getting the gear to help you navigate it in the same way. Are you getting what I'm saying, Chris? Because I'm not sure I am now.



**Chris (45:56)**

Yeah, yeah, yeah, no, I mean, look, please don't invite me back for the measurement podcast. I think one of the questions for that is like, why are you measuring? Like, why are you measuring? And actually a lot of people are measuring to sort of demonstrate their impact and prove their value.

Go and have a different conversation. If people are asking you to prove your value and impact, actually, I think that's a completely different conversation. And again, measurement is complex and it takes time and we don't have a lot of time. So if you're gonna do measurement and you're gonna do it properly, so way beyond what I would describe as vanitory metrics of hits and clicks and stuff, get into it and do it properly.

If you're trying to do loads and loads of things and you can only do them so well because there's so many, are you ever really going to measure in a way that solves the problem? So what problem are you trying to solve? Are you measuring to demonstrate that impact? To answer your question there, Jen, I think the key, the starting point is to understand the business priorities and the challenges and opportunities it has and then to put your thinking cap on and the question you ask yourself is, what can I do or not do that gives the business the best opportunity to either mitigate or remove those problems or grab those opportunities and add value that way? There might not be metrics behind that, by the way. And again, the other challenge you have is, different organisations, their priorities change almost daily. So again, it's in the context of the organisation. But if you don't understand what the priorities for the business are and how you can contribute to them, then actually, where are you spending your time? So for me, that's about proving your value in a different way rather than producing a monthly measurement report. Does that answer your question?

**Dom (47:46)**

Yeah, Chris, look, I mean, we could talk about measurement, but we could go on now. But I think it is time to bring us into land. And I think one of the things you said earlier really struck a chord with me. You said internal communications about being, I think, architects of connection.

Unfortunately, architects connection does sound like a mid 90s German synth pop band. I can picture them there in black polo necks and rimless glasses. But it's a great phrase because it's right. I think there's obviously more about it, but it's a baseline for what we're doing. It's about building connection. And as you've been talking, I've been just jotting down some, not all, but some of the component parts of that. It's about leaders who can talk with people, ask questions, establish connections with them that way. It's about clarity. So it's always about important messages, about getting messages across the way that people can do something with them and



establishing that meaning. I think it's about helping people understand where the organisation's going, it's about understanding what their role is, all that stuff that we know. But it's also about giving people the opportunity to raise things. And Jen was talking about our role as being intelligence agents, if you like, understanding what's going on in the organisation. So that then takes us back to who defines internal communication. And what you said, which I also thought was really good, is again, my words, but it's really down to your organisation. The person who defines what internal communication needs to be within your people are those who make decisions. It's demand led because senior people know what they need from the organisation to do what they need to do and I think what you were saying is our role as communicators to understand that and then marshal our abilities, our skills, our channels or whatever it might be to deliver that. I think that's really really helpful.

Cat (49:25)

Can I? Sorry, I know you are trying to bring us into land, but I just wanna add, this is turbulence, mate. Just, yeah, we've got like one, one wheel's down, the other wheel's up.

Colleagues matter here as well. So for me, like if there were only two stakeholders, which of course there aren't, but let's say you've got those in charge of leading the business, setting the direction of travel, identifying what the North Star is, co-creating a narrative that is going to hopefully take people on that journey.

But the people that are expected to go on that journey, they matter as much because if they are not part of that equation, they're gonna put their brakes on and you're gonna get precisely nowhere fast because you haven't got the goodwill and the interpersonal dynamics that you need for high team performance.

That's the dance, isn't it? And all of this, I think, is a dance. When you guys were talking, I was thinking about the time that we had Margaret Heffernan on the podcast. And she's written various books, uncharted, like How Do Leaders Make Their Way Through Complete Uncertainty? But also her most recent book where she looked at how people in the arts navigate uncertainty and how they make progress with the creation of artwork when nothing is clear. So back to that point about like if you're an artist and I was asked to lead art by Mr. Avery in my third year, I've still got issues with that. So let's just park that for a moment. But if you are making art, you're not sat at a canvas going, there's a brushstroke. now let me measure it. Are you? I don't think that's how art works.

Jen Sproul (51:25)

But I think that what I was trying to say earlier as well is it's about what it provides as a continuum and then how it delivers along that, right? So if you've, this is my personal point of view, if you've got great internal communication, which will be judged differently by different people to Chris's



point, right? But isn't our job going back to our history and our future through social cultural change, through periods of difficulty, through periods of disruption, is to provide going back to your thing, a glue and an intelligence and a feedback, because you're point is right, your biggest stakeholder is your colleagues, is your workforce.

But they are also humans, back to Chris's point, that think, feel, interpret, connect, make meaning, make sense in very different ways. But it is your job as a great internal communication to know that. That's what you bring to the party, to know that, to interpret that, to help navigate through that and provide that sense of resilience and trust to all of those changes and that's because we can argue that communication as a profession didn't go anywhere but we're certainly communication is going somewhere perhaps as in broadcast as in that's going but do you think we can make the argument that communicating in organisations is disappearing? Dom, you probably need to get the other wheel on the tar back. Get the blade down.

Dom (52:43)

We have some disruptive passengers on board.

Chris (52:43)

This is why it's so hard But this is why it's so but this is why it's so this is why it's so hard because you're asked one question that you think you want. So problems another question another question another question you we are at the intersection of so many things if you're the IC. You're a business , human behaviour corporate reputation, operational needs, you are spinning a ridiculous amount of plates and trying to do this all at the same time. And I guess that's my key point. Like it's not as easy as there's a definition, off we run, why aren't we doing it? It's just a very complex and messy thing, but it's worth trying to tackle even if you haven't got, a complete 100 % piece of clarity on it.

Dom (53:21)

Absolutely we need to have some succinct things to say to people who make decisions to get permission to have the conversation which then means that we can bring into play all we've spoken about, part of which is how we get people involved, how we make people feel as though they want to take part, how we get people to understand their role. So I think the starting point is having that conversation with people who make decisions and I hope that's one of the things that this paper is going to equip us to do which takes us right back to the start about how we



can help internal communication professionals do their job to the best possible way. Chris, thank you very much.

Chris (54:17)

Thank you. Thanks everyone.