



Transcript for S16 , E5 – How to have difficult conversations at work with Neil Hopkins

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.

Dom (01:00)

Hello and welcome to another edition of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. Today I'm joined by my co-host Cat Barnard. Jen Sproul can't be with us today because of other work commitments. But we're all very excited about our guest today, Neil Hopkins. Let me give you a bit of introduction. In fact, Neil and I met, I think originally last year when he was a guest on the Southwest IOIC networking event, speaking about crisis communication, talking about his role in managing the communication after the Sussex Air Disaster, I think, about 10 years ago and a more. And we had a conversation, we both live in Bristol, we had a great cup of coffee, in fact, Neil introduced me to a couple of fantastic cafes, which I can remind people of, tell people of, perhaps if they're interested. And over that conversation, had some discussions about some key issues, and we'll come on to that in a moment. But a bit of background. So, Neil's a writer by trade, but describes himself as a strategist at heart and a geek when it comes to behaviour change communications and I think that's the word you use there Neil. Insatiably curious, his specific interest is in building the systems and growing the soul of great communication which he's developed during the 20 plus years leading communication agendas mostly in the UK public sector. His projects have won awards, he's secured industry accolades for a wide range of organisations and definitely steered the response to multiple crisis events as I mentioned earlier. For fun he



reviews submissions for international social marketing conferences and creates a LinkedIn community for secret social marketers to which everyone is invited. And if you want to get in touch with Neil after this, he's available on LinkedIn or through his website, which is www.interactor.co.uk. Neil, welcome. How does that grab you as an introduction?

Neil (02:39)

Thank you. It's absolutely fantastic to be here and lovely to hear lovely to hear those words spoken. Are you talking about me?

Dom (02:45)

Well, yes, because what particularly impressed me when we had the initial conversation was about your knowledge of ED & I and how that affects communication in particular, because we know that great communication unlocks organisational success. That's one of our driving things as an institute to bring that point home to organisations.

We also know that great communication depends upon connection. I think we've talked in the past about the future of internal communication is very much around building connection with an organisation in lots of different ways. And we also know one of the key components of great connection is having conversations. Feel comfortable having conversations, connecting with people informally and formally. But increasingly, I think speaking to members of the Institute and people on courses that we run, people were saying, communicators were saying, and leaders were saying, it's sometimes very hard to have a conversation because for whatever reason, people feel that there are barriers. They're fearful about what they might say, or they're fearful about engaging into certain subjects in case they offend someone or say the wrong things or create an incident, I think. So this led to you and me talking about the fact that this was an understandable response, but not necessarily one that should be inhibiting people. And there are ways around these issues and these barriers.

And that's what led us to the conversation. And earlier this week, you did a webinar based upon the white paper, the document that you've produced with lots of guidance, drawing upon lots of expertise, including your own around that. So it'd be good to talk a bit more about that, particularly in terms of what we as internal communicators can do to bring down those barriers and encourage those all important conversations. So I think it'd be great just to scope things out, Neil, first of all, and get your take on, first of all, is it right



that it's become more challenging to have conversations in recent years? And if that is right, what do you think has contributed to it? A big question to start with.

Neil (04:40)

Let's start with the easy ones and move on to world peace afterwards. I think you're I think you're right, Dom. And we've had discussions over the last year about this. It does seem that conversations have become more difficult. There's a lot more polarisation going on, and that is mirroring itself into the workplace. And from my perspective, and certainly doing the research for this white paper, and I do just want to say thank you for the opportunity because I absolutely loved geeking out with all of the amazing research and people out there who are looking at this.

There are quite a few different strands to it. And the ones that spoke most to me, and others will sort of pick up different things, there's the meta-context that we're in. So there's the massive, rapid social change. And if we look at one element and come back to my equality, diversity and inclusion background, just talking to people about pronouns, let's say, that wouldn't have been a conversation we'd have had 15 years ago, 20 years ago, maybe even five years ago. But that's changing. And because our workplace demographics are also changing at the same time. I think we've got something like five generations of people in the workplace at the same time. You've got all these different conversation styles, things that one generation might feel is a bit off limits. Sex, drugs, and rock roll to people who joined the work workforce in the 70s is a very different conversation to where Gen Z and some of the geriatric millennials, as I apparently am, are at the moment. And so you've got this clash, this rubbing up of different people coming from different backgrounds, massive social change coming through at the same time. We are more connected. And that's a great thing, don't get me wrong. It's amazing to be able to have conversations with yourselves, whether you are in the country. With I've got friends all over the world and we jump onto varying kind of Teams platforms and so on and have those conversations. But that also means we've got access to more information than we ever have done before and access to more opinions than we ever have done before as well. So I've got friends for example in America and they've got different views perhaps to the current president over there. I've got friends in war torn areas of the world and they've got really interesting, nuanced views on what's happening there that we maybe don't get here. And so sometimes it's quite difficult to navigate those conversations. So it's all of that swirling around and how to address it. And certainly from my perspective when I was in NHS adjacent role, we had real internal



conversations about how to approach the war in the Middle East, in Gaza, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict there.

How we could balance the needs of our staff and the needs of organisation as well. And that just comes down to that interconnectedness and trying to be able to say the right thing, part trying not to cause offence, trying not to get it wrong. All of those things feed in. And again, going back to the EDI narrative, we've seen so much in the media about especially normal human beings. That sounds terrible.

But yes, people who are not famous, shall we say, accidentally getting it wrong. And also then people who are famous coming out and saying something that they truly believe in their heart about specific issues. The trans rights conversation is one of those ones. And then there's this culture war, there's the cancel culture, and that feeds into some of those issues. At the same time, at the same time as all of this is happening, there is what I'll grandly call a collapse in trust. So the Edelman Trust Barometer, I think the 2026 version was saying something like 70% of people are less trusting of those from different cultural backgrounds and lifestyles than themselves. And we've also had the 2024 Khan review that came along and said 75% of the UK population fear what Khan called freedom restricting harassments. So if someone said something and they're then this I will call it culture war in air quotes, using the term quite advisorly, happened. Other people might watch that and think I want to say something on this topic, but I'm gonna back away. I'm not gonna say that because I've seen what's happened to other people. I mean I've experienced it myself over over time. Someone said something or I've been in situations, someone said something to me, and I thought, I better dial back that element of my personality, I better dial back that particular opinion because I don't want to get shouted at, or whatever the the situation was. And so it's all of this is happening at the same time. And I think it feels important to say as well that a lot of it comes from, and certainly my experience, a place of good feeling. So if we go back to some of the EDI conversations, it's so often around people, let's say such as myself, I identify I'm a a white cisgendered male and you don't want to cause offense. You don't want to ask someone something, gosh, how do I how do I phrase it? I don't want to cause any more hurt, because you understand that the person on the other end of that conversation, if they're from, let's say, a global majority background.

I might have been asked the question of where are you from throughout their working life. And for some people, and I'd say such as myself, that question comes from place of genuine interest and intrigue. I'm fascinated to know where people come from, whether it's the town next to me, if people come from Bath, I'd be like, have you always lived in Bath? Tell me everything about it. Or if they've lived somewhere I've never visited, I'd be like, I want to learn about this culture. But of course so often that question, that question of where do



you come from, has that cultural side eye to it. So well where do you really come from? What's your background? And that is so often rooted in structural and systemic racism, to take that particular question, that it's quite difficult then for someone like myself to be to have that curiosity and I don't to cause offense because I know this person has got that weight upon their shoulders. I don't want to add to it, even though I just really want to learn about the culture. And so you've got all of this layering in and layering around and of course then you've got the technical challenges. We're talking over Riverside which is a fabulous platform, do love it very much. But we're not in the same room, so we can't pick up on some of those nonverbal cues. I can I can see you're smiling and nodding, so I'm thinking I'm I'm going in the right direction. But for all I know under the desk you might be shaking a fist and thinking, no, no, no, no, no, he's going somewhere we don't want him to go. I can't pick up on that. And that also makes conversation more difficult. I can see your hands, awesome. But that also makes that kind of conversation more difficult. And that digital discussion, that that digital environment is more tricky.

The whole return to office, it's not going to save all of the ills, but it is difficult to pick up on those little cues that let's be honest, since we were folk who lived in in caves and wearing animal skins to keep warm, we've picked up on those subvocal cues to keep ourselves out of danger, to create community. And so we're having to learn a new communication skill on top of all of that. And if we take it back to the digital platform, just as a slighter side, which isn't in the paper, I was talking to someone recently about the little thumbs-up emoji. So you're having conversation on Teams or having conversation on social media and you say something, so I don't know. It's a hot day today, and so I've made sure I've got my dog and ice cream. Doggy ice cream, obviously. And if someone thumbs that up, I'm taking that. I'm 44, I'm taking that to mean, yeah, that's a good thing. Younger generations, apparently their thumbs up can be quite a sarcastic response as well. And so you then have this kind of layered interpretation of, I'm interpreting one symbol as one thing, it's meant as something else.

And that can also create a difficulty in in conversation.

Dom (11:33)

Gosh, as you're talking, I'm thinking of all these pitfalls I've fallen into, particularly the thumbs up thing. I've got young daughters who roll their eyes, metaphorically, and via an emoji, actually, when I do the thumbs up thing. And you say, I mean it to be a very positive thing. They take it as being not a positive thing, or sarcastic, or dad condescending. Let's put it that way. But I was having a conversation with a fellow communicator I've known for a



long time. And we would work in the same office. We had slightly different political opinions we'd often come in early and we would have good what I thought was good discussion, good debate, quite a vigorous debate but then happily put that aside and move on to the rest of the day and we were saying that does seem to have changed to a degree now because of all the factors that you've talked about people won't even probably get into that because and I wouldn't get into it now I certainly wouldn't be doing that now so it is interesting how that has changed but I guess the key thing is also being aware of it because it's like everything this is my contention. If we're able to talk about our fears and talk about our concerns, they start to dissipate. And most people have the idea of positive intent. They probably know that people don't want to offend. They are willing to change the way they approach something, so they avoid that. But that starts with a conversation. What's your experience of that, about talking about these issues and saying that you're finding things difficult? How does that work?

Neil (12:53)

I think personally I think it can work well. I've seen it work well and it often requires a different balance in a conversation and sometimes that conversation is necessarily performative. So what I mean by that, I worked for an organisation and I was supporting the EDI team and specifically supporting the team who were advocating for the rights of folk from global majority backgrounds.

And actually, we had to be quite careful in how we positioned the work that we were doing again. As a white man, this was a space I was being invited into. I had no sort of background in it but we had to work with people who were willing to say, I don't understand. And almost that kind of comment of, well, I'm not racist meant from a very well intentioned point of view, but because people didn't understand that weight of systemic racism, they didn't understand the hundreds of years of enslaved people and that heritage and history that was coming to that moment of conversation, being brave and actually putting your hand up and saying, Can someone help here? Can someone kinda point me in the direction so I can go and learn? And then equally from the other side of the conversation. So I identify as a cisgendered male. I'm also a gay man and I'm very happy to talk about my experience of that for people who want to listen. Because some folk, and in my experience, some folk have never come across out kind of out gay people before. And they're like, I didn't realise that X, Y, and Z was a thing. And so that kind of small E education. So it requires on one side people being willing to share. And that can be quite scary. So some organisations I've worked in, people were willing to share their stories, but I couldn't use their names or their images. Other people were like, no, I want to face this up.



I'm happy to be the face in the front for this conversation. So it's understanding where the folk who are contributing their lived experience are.

But also on the other side, the people who are willing to learn and actually able to put their hand up because no one in my experience, very few people relish being the person in the room without the answers. Everyone's like, yes, I know something about this. But to stop and say, no, can we just can we pause? Can you just make it really clear for me so that I can genuinely understand and take this on so that we meet at a level? That that also requires some bravery.

In terms of businesses, there's so much around the around leadership and leaders always having to have the answers that especially for leaders, it's quite hard to say, I hands up, I don't understand. Please can you can you help me understand because they also carry that weight, and middle managers certainly carry that weight of people looking to them, looking up to them, if you will, to lead them on some of these conversations. And the people at the the top of the hierarchy often expect.

People in the middle to already know all these things. So you've got that that pressure within organisations as well. It does require some bravery, and I think it does require an ability to build psychological safety across teams as well. So you have that safety to put your hand up metaphorically or literally and say, I don't understand but also to get it wrong. And there have been times in the past where I know I've said said things and it's come out of my mouth, and I was like, that was not what I meant those words to sound like and you can see it in the other person's eyes and actually own up to that. And Cynthia Falklidge contributed some amazing pieces for the white paper around that. Contributes to the understanding, to the fixing, to the repair and the moving forward as well and I think that's that's really important and takes takes some energy and takes some bravery.

Dom (16:02)

It does, and in fact, I will hand over to Cat in a moment, but you've mentioned some of the people you worked with on the white paper, and obviously a lot of it was down to your expertise and experience. But just moment, would be good to tell us more about the people who contributed and what they do, because they have particular interests and particular activities, don't they?



Neil (16:27)

Absolutely. So I was really delighted to be connected. Actually by yourself, Dom. You are the the man with the connections, to Dr. Christopher Owen, who's the founder of CoLiberate. and they offer inclusivity and liberation, coaching, consulting, and speaking to individuals as well, and really focusing in on organisations wanting to improve their impact for social, positive social change. Also with Cynthia Fortlidge. Now Cynthia's her own bio, globally recognized award-winning speaker on inclusive leadership, gender diversity, and intersectional human rights. So it was amazing to have conversations. It was one of those conversations where we put sort of 40 minutes in the diary, and an hour and a bit later, we're like, we really need to go and do some actual other work at this point. But they really brought lens and brought intersectional lenses to the work as well. And I think just the concept of intersectionality, which you called by Kimberlé Crenshaw but it's about that layering of different experiences and that overlapping of different experiences as well. So one is not simply a white male, taking my case, but one is also a white male in this context, in this place with an educational background, and all those things, how they they link together to create an experience and actually feed into those conversations as well. So it was amazing to be be connected with them. They're fabulous human beings. Contact details are available certainly through the white paper, and I'm happy to share as well.

Cat Barnard (17:44)

This is so interesting. I'm thinking so many things and strands intersect with other conversations that we've had in the past year or so on this podcast, Neil. One of the things that I was thinking about as you were describing the modern operating context, one of my points of fascination is how quickly the internet has changed the culture.

And then on top of that, how social media has changed the culture and how quickly it became the case that opinions became click bait and one of the most notable characters, not so prevalent thankfully in more recent times for that was Katie Hopkins. I mean, do you remember that kind of era where she would open her mouth or she would appear as a columnist and it was very clear to me that the entire content was designed to enrage and to anger and to drive clicks. And of course, we've seen that in the political sphere as well, part of the operating MO of one of the most powerful leaders in the Western world is to tantalise, titillate and to enrage. And that in turn has reminded me of a conversation that we had last year when John Amaechi came onto the podcast and he introduced his concept of sonic libertarianism, which I've just looked up as you were talking, because I just think it's



worthy of repeating it here. So he has written on his sub stack that sonic libertarianism is a cultural condition where people feel entitled to speak whenever they wish, in whatever manner they wish, regardless of accuracy or consequence. It's framed as the purest form of free speech, but in practice, it rewards volume over substance. The loudest and most persistent voices dominate. Cautious or thoughtful contributors are pushed aside and poor quality, evidence free ideas thrive unchecked.

Now, I will say of John Amaechi, he packs a punch with his words. Like when you read his books, they are just so pithy and compelling. But that idea of sonic libertarianism totally resonates with me, as does the idea that seems to be increasingly prevalent in our public narratives, the fear of getting things wrong.

So there is a trope that I see a lot as the mother of two young adults that, Gen Z grew up digital, use social media in a very different way, have quite extreme views, et cetera, et cetera, and it's their communication skills that are to blame and that are causing problems in modern workplaces because older leaders don't know how to deal with them. And yet, in another conversation that we've had recently, the idea has been presented to us that young adults have been raised very differently and gone are the days where children should be seen and not heard. And actually one of the biggest barriers they face to performing well when they start out in their working lives is knowing how to communicate at work because they don't know what the rules of engagement are. And when you have leaders who are refusing to engage because they don't want to get it wrong or they don't want to have a difficult conversation, the whole thing gets more and more messy and compounded. So I guess, and perhaps you've already started to answer some of this/

I think one of the issues that compounds the inability to have a difficult conversation is kind of knowing what constitutes a difficult conversation in the first instance. Like what are the areas that we collectively feel able to venture into together and what are the areas that we absolutely must stay clear of.

Even by asking that question, like thinking out loud, I think, God, what a nebulous, difficult question to ask Neil. But having worked in this space, what are some of your thoughts on what constitutes a difficult conversation?

Neil (22:33)

Wow, what a what a question, Cat. Thank you. What constitutes a difficult conversation? I was thinking about this actually immediately before jumping on on the recording. And I think and I can't work out if this sounds glib or not. Let me let me put it into the air and we'll



we'll see what happens. But any conversation where one party feels uncomfortable, where they feel like getting it wrong, and they feel like they can't break through or work through a barrier with someone else. So if we take the multi-generational piece, there's definitely some good research out there and it's linked from the the white paper around topics that would be kind of off limits or had been off limits in the past. So Dom, you mentioned kind of politics with someone you'd work with. Quite a few people don't want to bring their political views into work. Those people I believe tend to skew to the older end of the workforce. Sex and relationships, that's not a workplace conversation, someone might say.

But of course, as human beings, we turn up, we walk through the door in the morning, digitally or otherwise, with all of this weight of of stuff that's going on in our our lives behind us. And some people want to try and find those conversations. Some people want to be able to talk about the their experience of of growing up, potentially different to the community around them and so yeah, what makes a difficult conversation, it kind of depends on the actors and the players within that, if you will, within that that conversation, where they can find a middle ground and a comfortable middle ground in between. So it might be it might be something where you I've tried to think now of a good example of course it all all jumps out of my head, but working through some of the EDI work, working with the LGBTI QA plus communities, rather than kind of jumping straight into this is the experience of someone who is trans, has grown up trans, etc.

Where necessary and where needed and appropriate, finding sort of middle ground, talking about experiences of perhaps when everyone felt a little bit different. And then you go, okay, yeah, we all we all felt a bit different in this situation because of specific factors. Well then imagine what it would feel like for someone who already was identifying differently perhaps to how they were presenting and finding those almost like conversational ladder into those and trying not to beat the whole elephant all at once, I think, find points of commonality and move forward from there because we'll find them. We'll find those points of commonality. I think again, that what makes a difficult conversation, lots of people don't like talking about money. And so just in a a really classic workplace scenario, it can be quite hard to ask for a raise. Lots of people I know find it really difficult to go into a meeting, an annual review meeting or whatever with their boss and go, look, this is what the market's saying, this is how brilliant I am, these are all the great things I've done. I think I'm worth more money than you're paying me. That's a really hard conversation. Certainly it was a conversation I was never taught at school. That's kind of sounds wrong. But kind of working up through through my career actually how to have those. And so it's what constitutes a difficult conversation. I think there's a piece of kind of a dynamic. There's there is that fear as Dom said of of getting it wrong, of saying something different or difficult that could land wrong. There's often an overestimation of the discomfort someone else will feel at being



asked a particular question. It can be really hard to gauge that. And I think a lot of listeners and on the internal communications side of the world will know that as you start telling stories throughout the organisation, going back to my work with the LGBTQA plus folk in in Brighton, as we started to roll out interviews with folks who identified as a gay man, a gay woman, a trans person, et cetera, you then have other people coming going, I read that, and can I share my story? And so it's the finding that key to to unlock those pieces. And of course then that second conversation is a little less difficult because that first person has put their hand up and said, I'm the person who can have that.

And so someone else has got something to latch on to then some so said this. I'd like to talk about my experience in this area. And that reminds me of when I did X, Y, and Z. And so slowly, slowly, I think there's that familiarity with it. It's how if it gets into the organisational DNA, if you will, it's how the organisation talks. We're okay with these difficult conversations. We put the training in place so that people understand how to have them, how to hold them. Be comfortable with discomfort as well. And that's that's a real skill.

I think there's an alliance internal communicators can make to really help with that and yeah, it's it's just difficult. And I think there's something really amazing that Cynthia contributed with the paper and it's acceptance without understanding. and it's something that that she's been working on. And it's actually got a little trademark after it as well. It's quite amazing to talk to her about this. But talking about how this messy middle, right?

So we want to have this conversation, we're dancing around it and we're like, would I offend someone? Someone's like, I'm not sure they're gonna ask me this question. How will how will it play? But actually, if we can approach it as acceptance without understanding. So acceptance is not tolerance. This is the point Cynthia makes. Because tolerance implies endurance, but acceptance is inclusion. So we can turn around and say, actually, I accept you as the fully formed human being in front of me. There's things that we will find different, we might find difficult, but let's have that acceptance that we both come into this conversation as these whole human beings and not just the white man from Bristol, for example, or whatever personality part might be there. Have that understanding. And that works both ways. So acceptance implies inclusion, as Cynthia said. And that really works both ways in the conversation. It invites people to get things wrong without being ashamed, so have that back and forth, that respectful back and forth as well. Being able to kind of correct, nudge people in the right direction, or throw in new ideas and go, I've never thought about it like that. Let's explore that a little bit further.



Cat Barnard (27:14)

I think this idea of getting comfortable with discomfort is really compelling. And I think, the current global economic and environmental backdrop means that we all have to get comfortable with discomfort. And one of the things that I think about as I'm listening to you in this conversation is that we do need to get more comfortable with having difficult conversations, but we don't need to over complicate things by becoming fearful, that's the challenge, isn't it? It's the fine tightrope by over focusing on difficult conversations. Do we exaggerate our own predicament there? I'm fascinated by this topic because many moons ago I did my degree in modern languages.

So I started Italian from scratch in university. I did a degree in French and Italian. I spoke no Italian until my first year. And of course you do your first year, your second year in the UK, your third year, you go overseas. So you spend part of the year in France, part of the year in Italy. And all of my language skills up until the point at which I arrived in Italy had all taken place in a language lab in a very sterile environment in the UK. And so the point of cultural and linguistic immersion was the point at which I arrived in Italy and I had to do it for real. And of course, if you think about that, you are riddled with mistakes, riddled with just things that really would make me cringe now to repeat to you. I could repeat some of the horrors of what I got wrong, but I would do that off air because I wouldn't want to offend anybody in this conversation. The willingness to put yourself into that situation and get things wrong is something that stands out for me. But also the other thing that stands out for me is the absolute compassion of people, of absolute strangers when you are trying to make yourself understood, the willingness of strangers to find shared meaning and shared understanding. So the way in which I might have to communicate back in the day would involve nonverbal communication because if I actually lacked the vocabulary to make myself understood, I would seek to make myself understood, using hand gestures or some such. So I think there's a lot that we naturally possess as human beings, as social creatures that can aid us and facilitate us in this move towards being able to successfully have difficult conversations. I wonder if, and it's just an interesting reflection, but I wonder if the internet has disabled us to some regard because the internet is full of easy hacks how to do this in three steps, how to do that in four steps, do this in this very prescriptive way. And it kind of stifles the oxygen out of the room and inhibits creativity and the imagination that might, a difficult conversation might entail. And then the last thing before I get onto a question that I just think about in this context because I think it is so fascinating. I cannot remember where I read it, but I read a fascinating story about the end of the troubles in Ireland. And most people will attribute the end of the troubles to the Good Friday Agreement. And of course, that political agreement did play a primary part, but this underlying story that I read about, which is not as well documented in any way, shape or form is the work that women did to



rebuild the communities that were absolutely ripped apart by religious factions and what have you. And I've got goosebumps telling this story. And I read about these women who desperately wanted to mend the frictions and fragmentations of their local community and they were brainstorming how to get that peacemaking process real on the ground and they discovered and agreed together that across the divide the one thing that they could agree on whether you were Catholic or Protestant was the right to get your children to and from school safely.

And that point of unification underpinned all the ensuing peace process that followed. When I think about internal communication and when I was listening to you speaking before, I was really struck by the fact that if leaders focused on all the points that unite the people within an organisation in a shared purpose, a shared vision, a shared set of goals, et cetera. And starting there, that is the glue, isn't it? Starting with the pieces that unite us, because there's always more to unite us than there is to divide us. I hope in even articulating that, that that helps anybody whose job it is to lead that feels challenged by the difficulty of leading. I think, just focusing on the things that unite us rather than the things that disunite us might be an easier starting point. I have lots of thoughts on this next question, but I'm very curious to hear your point of view. Why for you, Neil, is conversation at work so important now?

Neil (33:57)

That is a beautiful question. And thank you so much for what you've just said and brought as well. That example from Northern Ireland, I hadn't heard it like that before. And it's yeah, as you're talking, I was prickle's going up my spine. So thank you. Thank you for bringing that. Why is conversation of work so important? From my perspective, we're all human beings and we all show up into a workplace. And it is where we spend most of our time, whether digital or real. We spend a lot of our time in there with people who we don't choose in the majority of cases. And for me, getting to know those people as those multifaceted human beings, on one hand, it just makes the day go go better. You understand who who you're working with, you understand those human beings, and it makes the day pass better. It brings some of that social element into into the workplace. But that conversation for me it ignites an understanding of diversity. So you start having start having those chats and and whether it's politics, whether it's where have you lived, I've lived in Bath amazing, you start understanding a little bit more. You can start probing into the things that make those people the people you see in front of you and you can sort of start reflecting on your own experience. There's exposure to others and that familiarity. So again if you're looking at different groups in the organisation whether folks with additional access needs for example



or global majority background, having those conversations it lifts the understanding. I understand why it's a bad idea to organise a meeting at 3 pm on the second floor of a building with no lift, and actually we're inviting the person who's leading a disability forum to that. You don't have that without the conversation first and just sometimes asking those open-ended questions. How can we make this better? What do I need to think about? And there's for me there's trust as well. So conversations, when people show up to a conversation, they show up meaningfully to a discourse, a discourse and an intercourse between two or more people.

It builds trust. And there's lots of research out there. There's some in the paper, but trust inside companies builds productivity. It builds morale. It lowers turnover. So from the bottom line spreadsheets, we must go because we must keep finance and the C suite happy. But the bottom line spreadsheet, having conversation, it builds trust. **Trusting organisations are more productive, their people are happier, there's lower turnover.** And so you get you don't have to do so much hiring. When you do do the hiring, people can get up to productivity much faster. And all of that comes from that willingness and that openness to start having what I call real conversations. Because they're the important ones. The sort of glancing corridor, hi, how are you doing? Not so much of a conversation, but having those real sit down conversations, having the space to do it. So there's a really good study I was listening to on a podcast was in a factory in America and I cannot remember embarrassing, I can't remember the factory or the which podcast it was. In fact it might have been an IOIC one. Because I've been bingeing, I've got to be honest, I've been bingeing the podcasts and been absolutely loving them. But they were talking about the fact this factory, and there was an experiment where one team of workers basically were having to work all the way through the day and through the week. So they did their seven and a half hours, whatever it was, at the machines at the desks. And the other ones they were given something like half an hour a week as a networking, as a stopping to chat.

Just sitting back, literally with a cup of tea, having a conversation with the people around them. What they found was that there was this enormous productivity boost. And it wasn't because it was a fifteen, fifteen minutes, thirty minutes, something like that. It wasn't because they were given this extra time to just sit back and given a cup of tea and a biscuit. But what they found is that people got to know each other. And so they could help each other out a little bit more. They interacted more as humans. They built that trust. But also as they were just chatting about what they were getting up to and I saw this on TV or I used to live there.



They're also starting to problem solve. And so problems that came up in the factory setting. How did you get over this? I tried this and it didn't quite work. That conversation led to I've just got them productivity hacks, let's be honest. And the conversation group, the group we were given this very short period of time in the working week, to sit back and just chat to each other to have that human-to-human conversation, it was massive. And I think it was something like a double-digits performance increase.

Whereas the people who are just at their desks at the machines, just plowing away, not really talking to each other apart from the occasional kind of glancing corridor, quick conversation about whatever was on TV last night, they didn't get that. And it's just this beautiful piece. And that comes because people were talking to each other and because leadership saw the benefits of letting of giving people that time just to sit back and be human beings, have conversations.

Cat Barnard (38:24)

Well, that just reminds me of the amazing book written by Daniel Coyle. It's called The Culture Code and he explored the underpinning dynamics of high performing teams. And one of the organisations that he profiled was Pixar and how psychological safety, trust and psychological safety underpin all high team performance. So before I hand back to Dom to close us down, I will say with my future of work lens, the absolute imperative that all organisations, regardless of sector or industry, will need to focus on is adaptation to novel, unprecedented scenarios and continuous innovation of their goods and services to meet new market context as they arise and no organisation will be able to adapt or innovate without that very foundational layer of high trust. So everything that you've spoken about in this conversation really does play to that. Dom, I'm going to leave it to you, the maestro, to bring us into land.

Dom (39:34)

Yes, well, thank you, Neil. You said you'd listened to a few previous podcasts, so you will know that this is the point where we do start to put the wheels down metaphorically and come into land. So listening to what you said. I mean, there's so much here that we can do as internal communicators. This is our primary work and contribution to organisations. And one of, I guess, what you say is making the case for getting this approach right. And I'm thinking, actually, what really persuaded me, I suppose, in some ways, is Stuart Lee, the comedian. And I'm going to paraphrase what I think he said, and apologies to Stuart Lee, no



doubt he's a listener, and let us know if I misquoted him. But he did say that when people say this has all gone too far and ED &I is too much one way or political correctness gone mad, he said when he hears that, the repost is always, what's the alternative? And the alternative is we go back to the 70s.

And thinking back to the attitudes prevalent in the 70s, the level of safety that people would have, the confidence they would have to contribute, I don't think many of us would really want to go back to that. So I think making the case, and as you put that, it's harder sometimes because there are some people in the external world, outside organisations, who, put it bluntly, want to increase the barriers, they want to raise the barriers, they want to divide people, they want to make people feel more uncomfortable alongside each other so it makes it harder for us as internal communicators to make sure that least within the area that we can influence we have that safety you talked about. So I pulled out a number of things that you said that as a communicator I would like to work on. One is making the case, secondly it's about comfort with discomfort, that's a fantastic phrase, but there's really so much that lies behind that because I think as human beings we want to make things comfortable and safe and they're not always like that. We can make people safe to discuss it but not necessarily safe with what's happening we can do is get people to talk about stuff and I think that's fantastic. The distinction between acceptance and toleration I think is crucial here. We've spoken for a long time about let's tolerate different attitudes and opinions and that's not good enough and think acceptance not toleration really helps to bring that out.

The point that Cat was talking about, about unification of where do we actually agree? Let's start with where we agree. Let's start with what is connecting us all and then build up from that. I think that's a fantastic way to start the whole debate and discussion. So there's lots I've taken, but it'd be great to get your view. Having done the white paper and the research involved and obviously the work that you've done elsewhere, what are the, say, the top three things that we as internal communicators can really do to help people have these conversations, to help break down some of these barriers. What are your thoughts Neil?

Neil (42:13)

What a lovely, lovely question. I'm gonna go slightly sideways for this one. So I came across an amazing article that says linked from the white paper about the internal power couple of HR and internal communications. And certainly my a lot of my communications work I've tried to get close to HR teams because I always feel it's two sides of the same coin. But there can be this divide in between, whether it's a hard divide or a soft divide, internal



communicators go off and do one thing, HR go and do the other. But both have such influence on the perception of the company, internally and externally, and whether that's through the sort of storytelling and the artifacts, and go back to Edgar Schein's kind of model and the internal communications artifacts that are there and how they kind of influence the unspoken beliefs and the sort of company DNA, or just physical access to things like training courses. There's some great training courses out there. I've been on some in the past.

HR often hold the keys to those and it's not it's not an internal comms thing to say let's let's put on a new training course about X, Y, and Z. But actually internal comms eyes and ears of an organisation, eyes, ears, heart, mind, all the good things and work with HR in a partnership, an equal partnership, and say, look, we think that this is a really important thing to do. How can we help to get at a simple level these resources kind of brought into the the company? So that's definitely one thing I'd do is look for is look for that strategic alliance.

I think there's at some practical levels, and again brought this out, I think Cynthia brought it into the paper, just thinking about how we do the business of getting through every day. So things like simple simple things like looking at meeting agendas and just kind of thinking, well, we should be circulating these preferably a couple of days beforehand, giving a bit of time for reflection at the start, because you've got people with such different communication styles. Not everyone feels comfortable to stick their hand up at a meeting.

Whether it's a psychologically safe organisation or not. Some people would like, I can't do that on the fly. That's that's not my thing. But think about what people need. Give them that bit of time and sometimes change the way you do things. I worked with colleagues when I was working alongside the police and we did exactly that. and we kind of revitalised the entire partnership because we changed it. Let's do our meeting agendas in a different way, let's circulate them in a different way, let's give other people different voices, let's bring all of those in.

And for the final one, what a question. My mind is going to all sorts of places because it's been such a wonderful conversation. I think there's the bravery. There's a lot around for me, bravery and modelling of these behaviours. And internal communications people we do love getting out and finding those stories and telling those stories, sometimes being the ones in front of the in front of the lens, so to speak. We're great at foregrounding other people.

We've got really good things to as well. And actually, as internal communicators, we're almost a captive audience. If we want to showcase these things, if we want to model what some of these good behaviours look like, we're kind of the perfect, perfect set of people to



start with. So giving ourselves the space, the grace, the latitude, the time to dig in and explore and think a bit about well, what if? And then let's try it. Let's find that space and try it out for ourselves and then move it across the organisation. Because if it works, fantastic roll out. If it doesn't, it's another great internal communications experiment that you chalk up to experience and move on with.

Dom (45:19)

Hey look, those are three really useful and not the things I thought you'd focus on actually. So that was really good insight into how we can as communicators what we can do working alongside HR. That's going to be a big ask for many of us in communication, but nonetheless I see the value of it. But yes, being operationally mindful of different learning styles, different ways of approaching stuff and then finally modeling the behaviours. I think that makes a lot of sense. So Neil look, thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with us in this conversation. Thank you for all the work you put into the white paper. That is available from the IOIC on the website. It will be available there. And thank you also for your time today. And we hope to speak again. Thanks, Neil.

Neil (45:00)

It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you.