Transcript for S12, E5 - The rise and rise of workplace activism and the power of speak up cultures with Megan Reitz and John Higgins

Dom (00:42)

Hello, I'm Dominic Walters. Welcome to another edition of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. As always, I'm joined by my two colleagues, Jen Sproul and Cat Barnard. And today we have two guests, Megan Reitz and John Higgins. A brief bit of introduction before I go into the first question. Megan is an associate fellow at Saïd Business School, Oxford University, and a professor of leadership and dialogue at the Hult International Business School. Her focus is really on transformative dialogue at work and lots of research has been done into leadership change, dialogue, mindfulness. She's on the Thinkers 50 ranking of global business thinkers and ranked in HR magazine's most influential thinkers listing as well. Meghan's written a number of books, most recently Speak Out, Listen Up, which is a second edition of her bestselling book Speak Up, which was published in 2020. And as a contributor to the Harvard Business Review, the MIT Sloan Management Review, and presented research on BBC and CNBC. And amazingly, her TED talk on the topic of employee activism has been viewed by more than one and a half million views. So we'll be talking about that more in a second. We're also joined by Megan's colleague, John Higgins, a widely published researcher and author who for many years has been looking with Megan into what it takes for truth to be spoken to power at work. Something I know we internal communicators have been talking about for a long time and how this in particular shapes workplace activism, which will form the basis of our conversation today. Their work has appeared in the Harvard Business Review, the Sloan Management Review, and the European Business Review and on various public platforms, including Radio 4's At the Bottom Line and Brené Brown's Dare to Lead podcast. For the last year and a half, John and Megan have been looking at the whole concept of spaciousness and what it takes for organisations to bring together spacious mode to help enrich and over-focus on tasks and busy doing. Alongside this, John has written two books, working with Mark Cole, which critique the taken for granted assumptions about what counts as good organisational management and leadership. So there's a lot for us to be talking about. Welcome, John, welcome, Megan. Thank you for coming to join us today.

Dom (03:00)

One of the things I know is very central to your work is this whole issue of workplace activism, which is certainly something that we've been talking about in internal communication, probably for the last, well, a number of years, but particularly for the last 18 months and so on. So it'd be great to start with that. Perhaps, John, I can come to you. Firstly, could you define the term, I suppose? What is it? And why is it on the rise?

John Higgins (03:24)

Well, activism is really about voices of difference that upset or challenge the status quo. This is it's about something which disturbs the power structure in some way, shape or form. And it's on the rise at the moment. Well, I just wrote back from that.

I was musing about this because listening to a lot of history podcasts and things, and it is always this risk of presenteeism. We think that the current moment is extremely unique. And I was just thinking, actually, activism in our societies and our workplaces and the relationship with society and workplaces is endlessly changing. I was thinking, if you go back a few hundred years, riots was a good way of negotiating with your employer about where things are. You know, there were lockouts back in the late 19th century, strikes and demos, this is the idea that, we thought that activism is strange, whereas actually it's very, very normal. And I think this gets a bit hard for sort of particularly people in sort of, let's say, the HR world, where they're expected to make everything smooth. Whereas in fact, the world of work and its relationship with society has always been quite spiky. And that idea that it's always been in flux. And because we've gone through a period where it's quite stable, the particular world view around its shareholder value in the profit sector, and that almost stopped the conversation in its tracks for about 20 or 30 years. And it's almost like the conversation has now restarted because it is a social construction. It is not a given what counts as the normal boundary between the work personality and the society personality.

I've just written down here is that normal is never normal when it comes to work. And we often kind of overemphasize that. And it's the idea that we talk, let's say, about the language of rights. And we can see how those have begun to emerge a lot around certain issues in the workplace recently. And it writes basically emerge out of disputes about what is normal. There's the sort of the philosophical thing. Now, let's assume that it is on the rise. What is going on?

John Higgins (05:28)

First, it's about new issues that people are feeling strongly about. All the identity stuff, ethnicity, climate, these are things that people feel really, really strongly about. And when people feel very strongly, they often go into quite a heated mode and that therefore often invites a heated reaction back. So activism often has this confrontational, this fiery quality to it. Also, what's probably driving the rise is that work has become more intrusive in people's lives. The boundary between where work identity and home identity begin and end, in a sense, is the home identity is being squeezed out. And so it was often quite easy, you know, clock off work, and then you could do your activist work. You could go on your demos. And also you didn't have to curate your personality so much. Work wouldn't know that you were demonstrating, say, against where business practices were being done. Now, of course, what you do in your private life becomes transparently visible to your workplace in a way that didn't exist beforehand. And so this whole idea that, where and when does my identity begin and end? Where do my responsibilities for work begin and end? And of course, there's the last thing on that one, which is there's the ease of mobilisation of opinion. Our dear old social media, you can now actually find that you are not a lone voice. And whereas beforehand, maybe 20 years ago, it took quite a lot of effort to find, am I mad or do other people see the world like I do? Now you can find that actually a lot of people are exercised about this and I can become resourced.

And that again is part of activism and what rises is when people move from being solitary voices to being group voices. And what's a lot of sort of pause for breath in a bit rather than to continue it's what makes it more of a management challenge at the moment is that we've actually been very addicted to the language of unity. This whole alignment conversation, which has often disappeared difference. And actually we've lost the fine art of how do I actually stay with people who see the

world differently to me? Because actually I thought that as a manager, I failed somehow if I haven't converted people to seeing the world as I do. And there's a lovely French post-structuralist philosopher. You do not want to engage with his work, but he wrote a beautiful book called Community Without Unity. And it is this notion that a lot of workplaces assume that a good community has to have unity. And in a sense, the activism stuff is saying, no, actually it's about how do you hold with that divergence of experience and life perspective.

One last macro point is of course, we're now compared to the 90s. We're now living in a multipolar political world. This whole thing about there are no universal norms. In sense the Pax Americana has come to an end. We now have these very different coherent worldviews and the different philosophies that underpin it operating within the same organisation. So if you're doing business in India, China, Europe, Africa and the States you are engaging with people who understand what it means to be a human, what it means to be a good human, what it means to be a citizen, utterly differently. And again, when it was just, US multinationals rolling out their norms, life was much easier. And I'll just finish actually saying I've raised before, I'm just looking at, wondering what Megan's going to connect with what I've said and not said. And that is really a loss of skill at conflict.

In a sense, we don't know how to stay with it. We think it can all be smoothed out and made nice. And from an internal comms point of view, it's the idea of, you should smooth things out. It's like, actually, it's about how do you legitimise and stay with strongly felt conflict and conflict as a source of good energy, not necessarily always bad. Megan, your thoughts on that.

Megan (09:27)

Well that was pretty comprehensive, John. I mean, you've covered a lot there. I would merely add, by the way, it's lovely to be with you and talking about this. John and I can get very exercised on this topic. It's probably worth just reiterating. Activism is such a controversial phrase. And so people tuning into this podcast will have ideas about what it is we're talking about. We noticed in our research, you mentioned the word activism and most people do have a picture of somebody holding a placard.

And just to emphasise what John said, we actually look at a very broad definition of activism. So people that are seeking to challenge the status quo, which inevitably means that they are challenging people in positions of power as they do that. And you might be very clearly an activist and you might have the label of an activist proudly planted over your forehead or you might be much more kind of undercover small micro at seeking to change organisational culture. We're interested in that whole range and we're very interested in why and how people choose where in that range to be and to act. I really think John covered most of the reasons why activism is on the rise but perhaps one other really critical one is we've been asking people to speak up for the last 10 years. There's been a move to bring your whole self to work and we want to hear from you and let's create forums. We've been inviting people to speak out and speak up until it should be said, we need to recognise that the current situation is in quite significant flux, especially over in the US. It's debatable how activism is on the rise or morphing perhaps into something slightly different given the pressures that people are under. But yes, if we've stood there and said we're listening, we care about what you think, please speak up, then you can imagine people will go, all right then, thank you very much, this is what we need to do about race and gender and climate change and everything else because you've just asked me to. So that would be the other thing that we've been doing and

John and I have worked with a lot of leaders and managers really grappling with the oh I wasn't quite expecting that many people to speak up and I don't actually know what to do with what they've said and I'm sure we'll come onto that as well.

Dom (12:05)

Well, one thing that definitely strikes me from what you've both just said, and it's a potential problem, I think, which is, if I understand it correctly, we've got more people willing to talk about more stuff and having more ways in which they can do it. And I think, John, you were talking about people who always protested, always kicked against their organisations. But it strikes me, when they had lockouts, lock-ins, or strikes and riots, it was mostly about their own situation. Not always, I know, but mostly. What you've both described is when people start to challenge, it's more about societal stuff or more broad stuff, which is interesting shift. But I think also you've described a situation where we've got more people willing to say stuff, but fewer of us are able to manage conflict. So it becomes a flashpoint, I guess, potentially. And I saw this a little bit. We recorded this in January over Christmas, family Christmas. I've got three daughters in their 20s. I don't agree with them on everything. And we both found it quite hard to have a debate. And we decided it was easier for harmony just to not discuss stuff. And that's not a healthy thing. So I guess that's a bit of a problem, how we as communicators encourage people to have views, but manage that in a way which is constructive. And I'd be interested to get any take you may have on that, or any experience you have on that.

John Higgins (13:18)

And that really resonated and I use the word debate I think you said debate and again it is that framing of debate rather than inquiry and it is we are so trained still in our education system in order to hold an argument to hold your ground to rather than actually an inquiry led engagement which is how do I understand where you're coming from how do I understand why you see the world the way you do. And it's so different, that discipline, because it's this idea that until I've really understood where you're coming from, I don't know how to engage with you. And again, that's a very, it doesn't give you that ego rush and people who are good at debating. We've shadowed a lot of people who work in the legal profession and they love a debate. And it is this thing of, is your interpretation to win, to colonise the other with your view, or is it actually to understand the other? That's a completely different communication skill.

Cathryn Barnard (14:19)

That is really, really interesting to me, just in terms of how we might conceive of debating clubs and and I have to say, hands up, never attended one, but I have read most notoriously about the Bullingdon Club actually in the debating societies and how it was very much a kind of win-lose mentality that underpinned traditional university debating and something a couple of things that I want to just chime in on because I was really interested in your starting point John about the historical examples of kind of industrial friction are industrial history is rich with those frictions and tensions we have been at the institute in the last year looking very closely at the rise and rise of

artificial intelligence. And one of our advisors was inviting us to think about the Luddite movement and the good points about the Luddite movement that are often overlooked in the telling of history. We had a lady called Antonia Bance from the TUC on this podcast a couple of years ago. She's actually left the TUC to become a politician now. But we had this conversation about how conversations take place at work. And I'm thinking about several things in tandem. One being that until more recently you know, the seventies, we would probably associate the 1970s in the United Kingdom as being very strongly influenced by the trade unions. And then the trade unions almost seem to be kind of I don't know whether they were dismantled or disempowered over a course of maybe 20 years, and we've seen an uptick in interest in membership since the pandemic. I'm also interested, I know I'm going to shush up in a minute. I'm really interested in the impact that smart devices have had on our ability to disagree agreeably, I feel very strongly that smart devices provide a means by which you don't have to receive the feedback loop of seeing that you have upset somebody or seeing somebody's confusion on their face when you've said something that we might have construed as a bit of a blooper or a blunder. And I'm also really interested, and this hopefully is in your Bailey work as well.

The business world has been full of parlance, hasn't it? Cultural fit, cultural alignment, let's foster mass homogeny and almost discourage outliers, people who might have differences of opinions or different perspectives on things. And yet difference is where innovation and change and progress emerges isn't it? So I know there's lots I've just splurted because you've just got me totally riffing so I'll just be quiet for a sec.

Megan (17:15)

Yes, difference is absolutely required. Difference is required for us to understand what we know and what we believe. And it's also required to challenge us to think in new areas. But of course, it challenges power. So, difference of opinions create upset very easily within an organisation. I agree with you on the technology on the social media to be precise, the social media aspect of communication, training us to be very swift in our responses, very short in our responses. So we are practising a form of communication which is stripped of nuance. There isn't any place for nuance. There's little place for inquiry.

And there's definitely no place for being clumsy in our communications. And of course, one thing John and I write about is when we're scrabbling around to try and understand somebody else's perspective and we really don't get it, we are almost certainly going to be clumsy and put our foot in it and say the wrong thing. But we've created a forum which doesn't allow that to happen.

Megan (18:34)

And so when people don't feel safe in doing that, they'll retreat. And then you lose the dialogue, you lose the inquiry. And that's one of the most worrying things that I see in terms of communication inside organisations, but beyond that.

John Higgins (18:50)

The bit I was wanting to, from Cat, what Cat was saying that I really made a note of here was the battle for civilisation. That this is, we can make it sound very small, but one of the people we

interviewed was also an ex very senior TUC person. And he did frame that our current era is a battle for civilisation about what counts as good practice, what it means to be a good human being. And again, those are philosophical questions. Those are ethical questions. The moral questions. And again, those don't fit neatly into, cam you give this on a one to five scale? How moral are you feeling today? How do you feel about civilisation? Smiley face, not smiley face. This is, again, how do you stay with a more sophisticated conversation? Because actually people are quite capable of having a really chunky conversation about what do you mean by a phrase like fair or just. But that is avoided because people will say, what do you mean by fair? Well, that is in itself the conversation to have. And it again feels too abstract or it's not practical enough. And again, this ties into our latest piece of research on despaciousness, which is we love that doing mode. We love stuff that will track down into something we can immediately take some actions with. And what we're saying is a spacious mode actually allows us to engage with these intangible things, with these more multivariate indefinite concepts. And the goal is how do you integrate the doing and the spaciousness so that you can actually discuss activism so that it's not just a statement of value statements, which somebody has come up with within an organisation and everyone can say, we are this type of organisation. Whereas actually what you need is the space for people to say, if the organisation is claiming to stand for this, this is how I interpret it when I'm actually dealing with a customer or when I'm dealing with a colleague. And so people can then explore that the sort of the huge personal challenge it is to live ethically, for instance.

Cathryn Barnard (21:03)

On so many different levels, what I'm thinking about as I'm listening to you guys speak is that the pace of our work cultures far outstrips our effectiveness. We're constantly being exposed to opinion pieces and research and data that promises vast efficiency.

I'm not entirely convinced our human brains are best suited to that pace of efficiency, but also, as you just did, when we mentioned things like philosophy or ethics or values or, the things that actually do feed into good society and good citizenship.

They're quite lofty topics that aren't succinctly parameterised and bluntly, who's got time for that in the working day? And so that's a really interesting piece, isn't it? Because actually, I feel like on many many, levels, we are at an inflection point. We were recording a podcast yesterday and talking about the plausible reality that we're on the cusp of a paradigm shift with regards to how we go about our work. And of course, such enormous change does require deeper, I believe more meandering conversation, but it is very counter-cultural because most of our business literature kind of veers towards doing things at speed. Agile, I mean agile is a great example of that, isn't it? So I wonder, and this is a bit of a flip, but when I read your book, which I thought was absolutely brilliant and prompted so many questions in my mind, one of the things that I had written down about the topics that you discussed was about conversational effectiveness. So how to have a productive conversation that all stakeholders, I guess, feel they have gotten what they needed out of it. I will absolutely stand open to your redefinition of what I have understood conversational effectiveness to be. But given all your research, how would you grade the state of conversational effectiveness? Because I can't help but feel sometimes that there's a lot of chatter at work but people are talking at one another and not to or with one another if that makes any sense.

John Higgins (23:44)

That's great Cat. My great relief now is actually you've come back to one of the questions I sort of prepared for as well. I always liked that one. So if I was ranking conversational effectiveness, which by and large I try and avoid, if I thought that it's the volume of advocacy, I'd give it a 10 out of 10. We like to broadcast and boom and say this is what we do. And it's almost this whole idea of if I talk at you hard and fast enough, I will convert your understanding. And I always remember interviewing some family mediators a long time ago. They said, you've always got to remember you can only own 50 % of the meaning in a conversation. And the trouble is with our advocacy led thing is I believe if I talk at you hard enough, you will see the world like me. And in terms of other things to do with our conversational thing, if it generates busyness of activity, it feels like there's a lot going on in terms of surveys, consultations, appraisals. That's a ten as well. We've got lots of processes which make us feel that we're doing lots of conversation. The effectiveness, I give it a five because what is missing is the stuff we've touched on already, which is any spaciousness, reflection, self-awareness, group awareness. I despair when I look at things like how people carry out something like a board effectiveness review, in which it is a completely analytic process. It does not invite people to deepen their understanding of how they are in groups, which is the lost language, which is never covered, I think, in business school contexts. And we do constantly mistake activity for effectiveness.

And actually it's very comforting to be busy the whole time. One of the guys in our latest research referencing the Greek myth of Sisyphus, the guy pushing his rock up the mountain was, he said, maybe Sisyphus was a happy man because he didn't have to think about what he was doing. Every morning I've got this rock, I've got my task, I've got my to-do list sorted, I'm on my way. And the other thing that I've mentioned about surveys in terms of our conversational communication effectiveness is we think that using surveys is a fast way of connecting in with people. I would suggest that when you use a survey on its own, I'm saying there are occasions that it can be useful, but a survey often simply reminds people of how disinterested you are in them. If you actually gave a damn about me, you'd come and talk to me and listen to me on my own terms, because again the survey just tells me what it is that the company already wants to know about. I mean, all of us, I'm assuming, had the backside irritated off us by customer surveys by the big supermarkets. And you're thinking, I don't care about that. What I care about is this. And you can see the concerns of the internal organisation forcing the customer into it. That particular extreme, I don't know if you've read The Circle by David Eggers.

John Higgins (26:47)

And that whole thing where it's so much easier to manipulate customer satisfaction scores than it is to actually improve the customer experience. And again, it ties in with the pace thing. And I'm just going to hook and I think I hope this is a tee up for Megan, because at the heart of this, the conversational experience, I think, ties in with what Megan was doing for her doctorate, which is about this shift to an excess of an I-it orientation rather than an I-Thou orientation.

Cathryn Barnard (27:20)

Yeah, I'd love to hear a bit more about that, actually. I think our listeners would as well. Please, please share.

Megan (27:26)

Yeah, we were talking about nuance, weren't we, in the previous discussion just earlier. And of course, the most frustrating response to your initial question on effectiveness it depends. What do we mean by effective for whom? Effective for when? Effective for what purpose? And, one thing we do know, again, linking back to our previous conversation is that in business, in the organisational world generally, we have a framing that is instrumental in nature. And so we tend to look at effectiveness in terms of measuring success on actions that are taken or short-term targets that are delivered. And it may well be that we're quite effective at, finding a target and delivering it come hell or high water in particular situations. So we might grade ourselves as quite effective on that perspective. Of course, when we look at whether we're effective at causing dwelling, meandering, reflecting deeply on possibilities and complex issues, giving them the space to breathe and giving ourselves really a chance to look at different possibilities then our effectiveness score is pretty poor I think in many organisations. So yeah it does depend on what exactly we're measuring and I would say yeah I know where you're coming from John on the ten out of ten for advocacy and the only thing I would mention though is actually though we know from our research on meetings and our capacity for debate and even our conversation on short-term issues and targets is, much of it's absurd.

Megan (29:27)

The way that we create forums for certain conversations that raise some voices, silence other voices, refuse to talk about some of the complex issues that underplay some of the targets that we're talking about. So we're doing some work on that actually at the moment, just looking at how absurd some of our conversational spaces actually are. Coming back to what John wassaying that I work with Martin Buber's thinking and philosophy I have done for about 15 years now and he does talk about two ways of encountering the world and encountering others, both of which are necessary. We're linking also into somebody else that deeply influences and inspires us, is who is Ian McGilchrist. And, he comes at a similar vein. He talks about the hemispheres, but we have a way of seeing the world, which might be called I-it or we might say that it's from the left hemisphere, that looks at the world in terms of a narrow view, a view on utility, on manipulating stuff in order to make things predictable and to control them. And that view and that way of encountering things and others is vital for survival. We get stuff done.

But if that is our only mode of engaging with the world and engaging with others in conversation, then it won't be very long to strip our conversations from any kind of trust, relational meaning, and again, kind of the possibilities of it because it becomes so instrumental. So, Buber talks about our ability to turn towards the other with our full attention, to be able to see our full interdependencies and our relationships. Not all the time. No, if we are talking about, have you finished the report tomorrow, I might not need to turn my entire body and attention towards you, but on certain issues that we are facing, that is exactly and precisely the way that we need to engage with one another. And I think it's one of the biggest and most exciting challenges for internal communications professionals is that, okay, and actually interestingly, 20, oh God, nearly 20, yeah, about 25 years ago I was employed and I specialised in stakeholder management and internal communications. And at that time, of course there was a lot of talk about engaging and having conversations, but of course really it was all about how do we tell people what the message is and persuade them. And I think

internal comms, has spent a lot of time with the content of what needs to be said and what is the content of the conversation. But of course, the manner in which we encounter one another underpins all of that. And that is where I think it starts to get really, really interesting and exciting.

Jen Sproul (32:48)

I've just been sitting here listening and there's so many notes and so many fascinating and a lot of head nodding going on over here as well and I think Megan what you've just said is it's wonderful I think for our listeners and I think that's where we've been sitting on this podcast for a long time and the work that we've done at the Institute is that we're in this exciting I think transformation thing where we look at communication as embodied in every facet in every way not as a broadcast and that is the new work I guess or the new opportunity for internal communications to add that transformational piece. I found all this really fascinating, and with that, where internal communicators are now is trying to encourage, place value to their leaders about why it's important for them to listen. When perhaps that's a fearful place to be, because if I listen, do I have to do something with it? What if I say something wrong and I'm in cancel culture mode?

What is the risk of having a conversation? And we know as internal communicators, and the work we've done at IoIC as well, when we've looked at trust and we've understood employee data, is that fundamentally, if you listen to me and feedback on what I'm saying so I feel understood, not agreed with or on one side or another, it transforms the way I feel about you as an organisation and the work that I do there.

So we're trying to encourage our leaders to become listeners and to go out on the road and to talk because it's going to give them that. There seems to be, I think, sometimes barriers for that, but barriers to then the post-listening action as well, because listening for no action creates sometimes more disingenuous feelings, perhaps, amongst the workforce. What do you think in this time it's so hard for leaders to listen? And is there a way we could better support them or encourage them to bring this kind of conversational effectiveness to their skill set as a leader.

Megan (34:40)

I'll kick off on that on one point, is one of the key things that we found in our research is we can talk with leaders and managers about the importance, of course, of listening and normally, most of them will be nodding their head and going, no, absolutely. No, listening is critical to leadership, absolutely. The problem is that they'll also be thinking, and they might not even notice that they're thinking this, they'll also be thinking, luckily, I'm really good at that already.

Okay, and we call this superiority illusion. We think we are better listeners than we are perceived to be by others. And that tends to be because our intention is often really good. I intend to listen. I really do. But what happens is I don't actually behave and act in a way, and I'm not listening in the way that I like to think that I am. So there's a gap between the intention and the behaviour. And that's a really critical point because until it really lands with every single one of us that actually we've got work to do here, we are silencing people.

Unless that lands, then we're really not gonna put any effort into changing habits. Because let's face it, changing any kind of habit like listening takes a lot of work, generally speaking, and support and commitment over a period of time. So we've got to really, really feel the pull and the need to do that. The other aspect that I'll speak about and then I'll hand over to John is another thing that we found was called advantage blindness.

Megan (36:31)

And advantage blindness means that when we have the titles and the labels that convey status and authority in systems. Our experience tends to be that, yeah, we can speak up and you know what, people listen when we do. And our mistake is that we then generalise to everybody else. We kind of think to ourselves, well, yes, I can speak up, I get listened to, therefore in this organisation we're really good at this. So we don't really need to change anything. So we have to, one thing in terms of why it's so hard for leaders to listen is that the intention might be there, but underlying that tend to be a lot of beliefs that temper the urgency and the need to actually do anything different.

Dom (37:25)

Megan, can I interrupt for a second? Sorry, but I've experienced what you just said so many times with groups of leaders. I would love to know how do you break that superiority illusion? What can you do to show people that they're not as good as they think they are at listening?

Megan (37:40)

It's a really good question. And I think I've been trying to practise this for about 10 years now. And what I would say is that a lot of it is in how you're meeting people. In other words, I really try and make it a collective issue. It's not just a kind of me putting people into positions of defensiveness. It's like, look at what we do. This is what happens, okay? And I use a fair bit of humour with a twinkle in my eye, so I get people to also kind of recognise it laugh about it. And then I use hard data. So we've surveyed over 20,000 employees globally now. I nearly always survey a group of managers and leaders before I work with them. And this is where surveys can be incredibly useful, is that it is inevitably resoundingly clear when I show them the data that we collect that they're in this trap. It's in fact laughable. They look at the data and they just dissolve into laughter and they kind of go, my God. And then, they're interested and then they want to work on it because they haven't gone into that place of having to defend themselves at all. It is a really important question because it's a question about listening. How do you enable people to listen and meet them where they're at?

John Higgins (39:12)

Part of it is why it's so hard to listen, is people are so goddamn busy. And again, it's this idea that, listening is something I fit in around the side of my work, rather than seeing it as being at the heart of my work. And again, so this shifts to, it wraps up with people's ego and their identity. And again, however much we've talked about, you know, leaders and managers need to step away from experts and they move into coaching roles and they become the facilitators. An awful lot of managers are still very invested in themselves as experts. And once you see yourself as an expert

and somebody tells you something, you immediately want to answer it because that's what good leaders do. And, you just have to listen to the news and everything. When you hear something like, need more strong leadership. It often just means more people telling other people what to do. And again, it's very easy to lump all the responsibility for this on the people in positions of power and authority. But actually, this is a relational construct. This is about as much to do with what we project onto our leaders, as much as how they then behave, because we expect them to behave like that. It's very hard for them not to behave like that. And it's therefore part of the question is, yes, you give people the data, as Megan has said, but then to say, and what's your role in your organisation that traps your leaders in this pattern? And then for across the hierarchy to have that conversation. But I'm just also aware that when a lot of people want to address something like speaking truth to power or employee activism, they think the problem is with somebody else, rather than seeing it, this is a situation which we can only engage with collectively. It has to be in the context of the relationship between the relatively powerful and the people who are relatively powerless.

Jen Sproul (41:07)

I think that's so fascinating as you say that. I think that, you're right, it is about how we encourage that group and we have to have that inflection. And is it about reframing what it means to be a leader, but also just a person at work and how we actually engage in that process and what we bring to that. And I sometimes worry, I know it's slightly off topic, but we've seen particularly referenced media and the demonstration of what leadership, and I say that with inverted comments, looks like from an external point of view, whether that be political leadership, et cetera, et cetera. But on the media have talked a lot about rhetoric, right? It's all about my rhetoric. It's all about that. So it's about pushing an opinion and that's what leadership is. But that might not be how every leader approaches it, but then there's a sort of then kind of viewpoint of that person receiving that rhetoric that's kind of going, I don't understand the meaning and what are you going to do about it? And that doesn't sit with me. And it feels like we're trying to engender a combative nature rather than a dialogue nature and do we need to reframe that? And is that something that internal communicators from a workplace point of view can help the organisation reframe what that means and how we become a well-oiled, communicative, dialogue-based organisation?

Megan (42:21)

I think you raise a really important point and we still use the word leaders all the time to convey people in positions of power in the hierarchy and we should be far more interested in leadership as a process and what we what is the practice or the sensation or the emotion that comes out of leadership.

It's an important question, and of course, it's an eternal question about what leadership is about. We have shifted from leadership on rhetoric, least in theory, and some in practice. And we now talk about leadership in a very different way, John and I, in terms of one of our most recent articles that's about to come out, we actually look at leadership in terms of the courage needed to open the space for the conversations that really matter. That's an entirely different way of looking at leaders and

leadership than, you know, I win an argument and I'm persuasive. And there's still a role for winning arguments and being persuasive sometimes.

John Higgins (43:41)

The casual use of the word dialogue, I think is, it's actually even the casual use of the word conversation. And it is this thing of, actually, if you step into a dialogic encounter with somebody, we are talking about a really different way of encountering. It wraps up to me with Megan's description, it's to do with how you turn to the other. And it is not just a set of skills, it is actually an entirely different life philosophy.

If I am in dialogue with someone, I'm arriving open to be touched by the experience of another, which ties back to the activism stuff. As if I'm turning to the other with the sense of, they are exercised about this subject because it really matters to them. I need to understand that. I need to turn to them with the sense that they feel they have been deeply respected as a starting point. And then we can step into, and how do we grapple with that with a world where that is not the only view. The dialogic encounter is a world away from a debate or a conversation.

Cathryn Barnard (44:46)

Honestly, that just packs such an emotional punch because it feels like when you're describing that, it's the opportunity to see somebody at a kind of heartfelt level, at a real kind of connective level. And as I was preparing for this conversation and obviously, I read your book but I also found a sentence on your right on the front of your website, John, and it just blew my head off and I have to recount it here. You have written on your website, to strip someone of their voice is to eviscerate their identity. And I think my response to that is every time that we fail to prioritise active listening to really see and hear the other, what somebody else has to say. We're kind of just shooting blanks, aren't we? We're not actually achieving anything because we're not hearing them, but we're not connecting with them. It's just this transactionality of communication. I'm not sure how far that gets us. Yes, we might pass bits and bytes of information to one another, but where do we actually stand in our relationship with one another. And I'm really interested in this piece around how we listen and then what that means for, because it's something that gets talked about an awful lot and I'm sure you guys will have lots to say on it, employee or colleague voice, the work of Engage for Success showcased the four enablers of engagement, one of which was voice. And I'd just like to hear your thoughts on that. Why is colleague voice so integral to I guess business success and long-term sustainability.

John Higgins (47:03)

It is the experience of feeling seen and feeling heard. And when you feel seen and heard, then you feel you belong and you can be part of something. And once you strip people of that experience of being seen and heard, you're disappearing them again, you're turning them into a thing. You're actually even less they're turning into a ghost. It is when the transactional approach to life becomes an overplayed strength.

And I would go into that if we talk about collective intelligence and I'm again, we tend to focus on individual intelligence and equipping individuals, but the collective intelligence is a much more interesting thing. All my research with Megan is a completely collaborative experience. I mean, often when we finished a book or something, you cannot tell who wrote which sentence. And certainly I experienced that when I look at the paper that we've written together, I am acutely aware that that is better than anything I could write on my own. And that is such an ego shift from where I was, let's say, in my 20s and 30s. The other thing is that when people have a voice and they speak with emotion and feeling, there is energy. And it might be viewed as negative or but when there's energy in a conversational system, when there's energy in a workplace, there's something to work with.

It's when you have an organisation or any grouping where there is no energy, the collective energy is gone. Then what have you got to engage with? At one level, it looks great. We can manipulate, but it's inert. And I got going through my head and I'm going to risk it, but this is a definition that Megan gave me recently from the work of Ian McGilchrist. He says that the opposite of life is not death. It is the machine. And it's when we have just got the machine mentality that everything's smooth, then there's no energy. And it's the conversations that bring life into organisations.

Cathryn Barnard (49:07)

What a powerful thing to say when, 10 days ago, one of our Silicon Valley revered technocrats announced the imminence of artificial general intelligence in the summer of this year. I think you have just hit on such a powerful theme of humanity. I'm not going to, but I feel like we should, we could have an entire series of podcasts just on these topics because they're so needed.

Dom (49:40)

So building on what you've just said, I am going to ask the question about how being in a tech centric workplace can hamper or inhibit speaking up. I think you've answered a lot of this. You said it takes away that energy. You've both been talking about it takes away the relationship. It inhibits nuance. It gives people the illusion they've had their say, perhaps when really they haven't and hasn't landed and they're bound to be disappointed that no one's taken notice of it. I mean, picking up a number of things, but as we sort of come into land with the conversation, what do you see as some of the big dangers that our very tech-centric workplace has in stopping people from speaking up?

Megan (50:20)

I will talk about the dangers, but I'll also talk about the opportunities because I don't see technology as an inhibitor. It can be, but I've experienced situations where it's helped hugely people voice something that they never could have voiced previously. So in fact, in the book Speak Out, Listen Up, we have a whole chapter on tech. And in that, we really explore that it's not just, is it tech or is it face-to-face, for example?

It has to be around what's your intention of using particular forms of technology. Where are you coming from? Why are you doing what you're doing? We had an article in HBR specifically on AI last year. To give an example, let's make it practical. So say you're using an AI assistant and it's telling you something like the percentage of voice that's gone on in that meeting. Now if I'm a manager I can use that data in a number of different ways. I can use it to kind of be quite pleased that I'm speaking a lot and first. I could use it to look at the people that aren't speaking up enough and that that means that they need to be more assertive, best get them off to a training course as soon as possible. So I can use it in these sort of very, naive sorts of ways. Or I can look at it and go, hang on a second. What can I learn from this data that might help me create meetings that are more effective, to use that word previously? How might I be silencing others? So AI brings with it the potential as well to give feedback that many people are very wary of giving, people in positions of power, like, for example, by the way you're speaking too much, do you realise you've interrupted the same people numerous times? Have you spotted how much of your time in this meeting has been advocacy versus inquiry? I mean, some of this data is just gold dust in terms of feedback that people perhaps, yeah, don't get that often. But of course, it depends on how we use that and how we approach it. It's similarly, you know, if there's one question that I get asked again and again, it's sort of which is better, virtual or face-to-face? Although most often people go, tell us about the troubles of virtual communication. And again, it's really not that simple. In our research, we've witnessed virtual meetings that are the epitome of I, thou encounter.

Real relational moments of meeting that were only made possible because there was a virtual forum to have them. Similarly, we've all been in numerous face-to-face meetings, I'm sure, are utterly dysfunctional, and vice versa. It's the technology is there in a way that may really enable. The problem is, the irony is that it will only enable if we pause long enough to have a conversation about how we're using the damn thing in the first place. And of course, we're so fearful of being behind the pack in terms of integrating AI that we're rushing to do it without considering the impact that it will have on the way that we communicate and making some real choices and learning and experimenting as we go. That's the thing that we need to really have our eye on.

John Higgins (54:23)

I'd just like to leap in there for a second, which is Megan being really practical, I'm not going to be thoroughly impractical. There was a gorgeous phrase that was developed in the 1960s that said, there is no such thing as technology. There is only sociotech. And the point of saying that is actually that technology has no meaning outside of the social context in which it's used.

And it fits with this idea of, so often technology will simply amplify existing power relations, existing patterns of communication. And it is this question of you can't hand it over to the technology. You have to look at how are we talking about the technology? Who's talking about it? How are we thinking about using it? What's the social process within which the technology is being deployed? Because if we leave the social process the same, by and large, the technology will deliver just more of that.

Jen Sproul (55:16)

You know, that's very gratifying, I think, to hear because at IoIC as well, we've been working on sort of an AI ethics charter, if you like, or trying to give some principles for that. And one of the things that we've been really talking about in our task forces, we need to give space for conversation of how good adoption looks like, as opposed to that side of things. I think that's a really important point. And I love everything you've just said. And I think that one of the things I was just going to really resonated with me as well as this energy. If I think about my life or my days or how I feel and how my moods and how things shift and how I'm feeling about an idea or where I'm going is that conversation is so energising. It's so in the right way when you feel it's done in that kind of condition. And it's where the good stuff happens and it does take pause and reflection and time and all those merandering qualities.

And as we've talked about as well, we reference the employee voice and all those things and leadership and all is really, really important. But for our listeners, I guess, sitting here as sort of internal communication managers, heads of internal communications, we're going, I agree with everything. I can't work out how to approach to ignite this sense of harnessing colleague voice and harnessing that shift from, to I thou and how we create that. I guess my question to sort of close off is really what role do you think internal communication can play in sort of harnessing that colleague voice and how can we advise those people listening kind of go, look, this is amazing opportunity. This is how we can be part of harnessing that power and that energy.

John Higgins (56:55)

To me, this fits in with in the activism work. We came up with the, well, we didn't come up with, we used a well-known phrase, which is the notion of the tempered radical. And it is the most difficult position to be in because you are the bridge between the world as it is now and all those people who benefit from the status quo and the people who are outside the tent wishing to be heard by the status quo. And you can wind up being hated by both, but you are utterly essential. So you as the internal comms people are the way that you are the act of translation. You are the mediator. You're the one that creates the space where suddenly the way the world is and the way the world could be can meet. And it's a political act. And it's you've really got to play the politics well. We're one of the things in our general research about speaking truth to power is organisations are political entities. As soon as you say, we're going to disappear the politics, you say, without politics, there is no room for conversations to happen because that's where you allow different agendas to emerge or different priorities, different personal strengths to happen. So the tempered radical is the one that plays the good political game.

Megan (58:14)

Yeah, I would reiterate that. I think it's, isn't it fascinating to think of internal communications as an activist role. And some people listening to this will go, what the hell? And they'll have shutters down their spine and go, no, thank you. I'm not doing that. And then others will be rubbing their hands together in glee going, this sounds much more exciting. But of course, to suggest, if internal communications, if part of internal communications is about creating the space for conversations that matter inside a system, as John says, that is a political act. That will mean that stuff gets said

that will disrupt and so that would then, down the more pragmatic route, that means, okay, how do people in those roles look after themselves? Because another part of our research in activism was how important it is for an activist not to do this work alone, or it's almost impossible, it is impossible to do it alone. So that leads you on to some advice, which would be you do have to really focus on yourself a bit in order to do this work well. I mean, that's true of everybody in every role pretty much, but particularly in this sort of case, that means it's really good if you have a group of you. You have people that are supportive and people that can challenge you in a really productive way. You have people that can create the space almost by force for you to reflect on how you're doing and what you're doing and why you're doing what you're doing. So that's an absolutely fundamental aspect for internal communicators because I would say that it's a field that is co-opted into the instrumental framing of our workplace.

Megan (01:00:22)

So quickly and easily without us even noticing we can be on a path that just creates more of the same. So unless you as internal communicators can have the capacity to just step out of that, look around with people that can create new ideas and possibilities, then you're restricting your role and you're restricting the possibilities of voice inside your organisation.

Jen Sproul (01:00:58)

Megan, John, I don't know, Dom, if you want to come in, there's so much you've said. I know we've been in a super long podcast, but I think that there was just so much to cover. But I think that that's a wonderful place to end it as well, because I think as an internal communicator listening in, might be that sort of, the tempered radical might give that kind of, you know, an immediate, oof, that's challenging. But through all of this conversation that we've had today, just for me, it puts opportunity for the people that we represent, for the internal communication profession to help go through this journey. So I think that's been fascinating and there is so much to take away. Cat, I don't know if you wanted to close off.

Cathryn Barnard (01:1:38)

I could spend hours, but I think, our listeners would probably not want or appreciate hour-long podcasts, even though I know that they are a thing somewhere out there in the internet world.

What I will say is I would be incredibly grateful if you guys would come back at some point later in the year to talk about your new research and this topic of spaciousness. We would absolutely love to hear about that. So if you would say yes, you'd make me very happy. Yay! Well, thank you so much. It's been amazing. Really, really, really enriching conversation.

John Higgins (01:02:07)

Yes.

Megan (01:02:08)

Thank you for the invitation.

Cathryn Barnard (01:2:12)

Yay! Well, thank you so much. It's been amazing. Really, really, really enriching conversation.