



## Transcript for S11 E7 How to build a movement with Deborah Hale

Cathryn Barnard (00:43)

Hello and welcome to a brand new episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm your co-host Cat Barnard, joined as ever by Jen Sproul and Dominic Walters. And today we are joined by basically somebody that I accosted in a queue late last year. I think that's probably an apt way to describe the intro. So last year when I was attending the Anthropy conference down in Cornwall in the middle of what was an absolute tempest as well at the time. I was Billy No-Mates on the first day and I was just looking around for nice friendly faces and I saw a nice friendly face behind me and started up a conversation and little did I know that we would fast track to becoming firm friends very quickly. So without further ado, I am delighted to welcome to the podcast, Deborah Hale today. And Deborah and I immediately got chatting about engagement and building audiences and movements and so on. I think very much in the vibe of Anthropy at the time. And I was really, really keen to invite her onto the podcast because of some of the experiences that she's had and some of the ideas that she shared with me, I know are going to be absolutely relevant to our community of internal communicator listeners from across the globe.

So just to give you a tiny bit of background and to shush myself up, I would like to share with you Deb's has a proven track record of developing high profile UK and global campaigns that achieve brand growth, awareness and audience engagement. She has told me from the start that for every project that she gets involved with her starting point is always, what is the change that you want to see? Which I think is very nice and appealing. She has worked extensively in the creative industry. She worked as head of international marketing for London in charge of positioning the capital as a centre of excellence for inward investment, tourism, education and culture. Which led to a role that most of you in the UK will identify with, her role as producer of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic torch relays. I'm sure we can all remember that in what would become one of the UK's largest engagement campaigns. And so every time I have a conversation with her about audience engagement of any type, I am enthralled and for that reason I can't wait to get chatting with her today. So Deborah welcome and thank you for joining us.

Deborah Hale (03:52)

Thank you for having me. I'm very pleased to be here.

Cathryn Barnard (03:56)

I'm really glad that you accepted my approach back in whenever it was October, November and didn't call security because I think this conversation is going to be a good one. So I think it's probably an understatement to say that engagement is a topic close to most organisations top of agenda at the moment, I think it's not unfair to say that most CXOs are very worried about performance and productivity and dare I say growth. I think that the ongoing saga around hybrid work versus return to office is a overt manifestation of that. So I wondered if we might kickstart this conversation by finding out a little bit more about your career and what you have learned about building engagement across audiences.



Deborah Hale (05:00)

For sure. So I think you gave a really lovely summary of my career. Now I consult organisations, businesses and individuals on how to make change happen. But I think, the one thing I have learnt across all of the projects and jobs I've had is it's about listening. So you talk about engagement but my first question is always engagement for what? What is as we've said what is that change that you want to see? What is the goal that you need to achieve? And then I think the other thing that is so important and very overlooked these days is patience because change does not happen fast. We live in a world where we want to consume things immediately and we're seeing it right now with our new government. Where's the change? Where's the change? Where's the change? Real change takes time. It takes real engagement, requires listening. It requires understanding a multitude of people's point of view. And it takes very, very clear and acute planning to get to where you want to be. So I think listening, patience, planning are what are required for proper, true, deep engagement, not the superficial engagement that we see a lot of these days.

Cathryn Barnard (06:30)

So I think your point about patience is really key here because of course we now live in a 24-7 365 media-fuelled world where we are all slammed perpetually by headlines telling us about the state of the world and also telling us about how we can become better, faster, more effective humans and of course I think then that bleeds over into boardrooms and encourages the idea that we can achieve results instantaneously, which of course human behaviour doesn't work in that real time false reality, does it? So I'm really drawn to this point about having patience because to me immediately, I also think about persistence.

Deborah Hale (07:18)

I was once interviewed for a book on fast leadership. And it was exactly to your point, Cat, that people want answers immediately. And actually, I think that it is possible to achieve that and make quick decisions. But I think you are only able to make quick, confident decisions in the right way if you've done the prep beforehand. You need to have a framework.

You need to know what your brand is. You need to know what your goal is. I think the other piece of this is that continual drip feed of communication. So you're taking your audience on the journey with you. People will accept the tough stuff if they know that there's good stuff at the end of it. So again, transparency and honesty and integrity, all of these values are very very important if you're trying to create change.

Jen Sproul (08:12)

There's so much there Deborah, you said that I think just chimes with me and I can imagine our listeners going, yes, if only my leaders had more patience and would drip these things through and that immediacy, I think it was something I said to somebody as well with the evolution of AI as well, mustn't bow to pressure to take everything that's new in front of us if it's not considered and



thought through. But I'm gonna move on to a different thing, because obviously in the intro, Cat talked about your campaign for the Olympic torch relay, which sounds fascinating and must have been quite the feat to organise but also, as you say, convey that sense of campaign and brand, let alone the acute planning that must have gone into that as well. It'd be great if you could just tell us a little bit more about it and really what, apart from the office, what was, I guess, remarkable about it and what did you really take away as the kind of things that really created that audience connection?

Deborah Hale (09:03)

So, it's interesting because we now look back at that period of our history with real rose tinted glasses. It was a very, very happy time and we were all together and this is an enormous sense of pride. But when we started on that programme, it was not like that at all. We were in a recession. We had won the Olympics, but we'd had the London bombings. There was a crisis in London at that time. The general UK public thought that the event was about London, not the rest of the UK. And people said, you'll never beat China. So it was not that rose-tinted to begin with. The brief for the relay was make the country proud. And I've spent so much time thinking about this since. And that really was, that was the plan. Make the country proud.

Deborah Hale (09:50)

Interestingly, pride was a word we never used, ever. We said it would be a consequence of us getting our job right. To my earlier point, it took a four-year programme of engagement and listening and understanding. So we wanted to travel the length and breadth of the UK. We could have planned the route without asking. We didn't.

We went to every single local authority. I spoke to every single MP. We went to every single county council. And the first thing we did was we said, if you invite us, we will come. So the language was exceptionally subtle, but what it meant was they immediately took ownership of an event that would become theirs rather than us bringing a London-based event. And then that message over time trickled down to the public. I think, 16 and a half million people in the end came out onto the streets, let alone the millions that watched it online. And it was the largest UK public engagement campaign post-war. It was a massive piece, but we took it steady and we listened. Authenticity was super important having extraordinary ordinary people who were ran from within the vicinity from which they came. So that knowledge and respect for community was a great big piece of it. And yeah, it worked. It worked in the end. An awful lot of planning, you're right. A great deal of organisation. But I would say that a very strong vision and a great deal of listening and a great deal of continual engagement got us to the place that we were at the end.

Jen Sproul (11:43)

Amazing. Just one thing as well that distracts me when talking and maybe you've already answered this, but obviously internal communicators were also a lot in the business of creating campaigns because it's always an answer if you know a leadership or we're trying to change a behaviour or create a sentiment or emotion, let's create a campaign. Is that done a way to create the right kind of outcome? I guess. My question is, my follow up question, when you're thinking about creating just



that mix or that process from a communicator's point of view to deliver a campaign that has the right outcome, that as you said is with people, not to people, respectful of people and honest with people, what do you think are the things that just make a great campaign?

Deborah Hale (12:25)

It's got to capture the imagination for sure. It usually has to have some creative thinking applied to it. Great campaigns are consistent. Consistent communication is very rare these days, I find. There's a lot of popcorn, particularly brand communication. It's like, we've got this new thing to tell you and then that new thing to tell you. And actually consistency is a very, very important part of building loyalty and engagement with a brand. So, capture the imagination, consistent and truthful. I think great campaigns need to connect emotionally as well as intellectually. They need to be hopeful. So, movements by their very nature mean that you are moving towards something, you are creating an action towards advocacy, if you will. And I think we don't talk enough these days about impactful legacy. So quite often, we decide that we want to build a campaign for whatever we think the purpose of that is, but we don't necessarily plan for what the legacy of that output will be. What happens as a result of the actions that we've taken. So not just taking us to the event itself or the moment itself, but what then happens as a result of that afterwards. So I think those are the real pillars, if you will, of successful campaign.

Dom (13:52)

I'm fascinated you use the word movement then. So I guess my first question is, is there a difference between a movement and a campaign? Or does one lead to the other? Are they synonyms? How would you describe the difference between the two?

Deborah Hale (14:07)

I think that one leads to the other. I think campaigns create movements, if I'm honest. I think the campaign is almost the tool to which you gather people together to make action. And then that action by its nature is a movement. So if we took the relay as an example, we ran a campaign to encourage people to come out and celebrate their Britishness and celebrate their community. Their act of doing it became the movement, if that makes sense.

Dom (14:42)

It makes perfect sense. I guess there must have been a point when you realised that you were in the process of creating a movement and you mentioned it was when people came out on the streets. But I guess even before then there must have been some trigger points or some hints when you thought, actually this is really taking off. Is that the case? And if so, what were those moments?

Deborah Hale (15:01)



On that one, I know exactly the moment when I knew that we got it right. So it took four years to plan, three and a half years to plan. The first day, so we flew the flame in from Athens the night before and Ben Ainslie was to be the first torchbearer at Land's End the following morning and it was a really early start and in our heads that was just photo call. It was just like get the shots, start moving and we had all our knowledge of previous Olympic torch relays told us that it took about a week to build and it was usually when you hit your first city at a weekend.

And Bristol, in fact, was our first city on a Saturday. But this was a week before. And I was on the helicopter. I took a helicopter to bring the flame into Land's End. I got up at three o'clock in the morning. And when I looked out of the window of the helicopter, there were 10,000 people at Land's End. And they must have got up at six in the morning to be there.

And that was the moment when I thought, okay, we got there. Okay, we're all right here. And it just built. It just built after that. That was definitely the moment we'd never done that before in our country. We'd had three Olympics, but a relay of that nature had not been done.

And so we have nothing really, we got other relays in different countries, but we've got nothing really to benchmark it against. So we knew we hoped we planned it right, but you never really know until the moment where, in that case, the public bothered to come out and boy they did.

Dom (16:45)

Now, clearly this was a, I remember it, was a fantastic movement, it was a fantastic success. Like you say, probably a one-off. So when you've done similar things and managed campaigns with other organisations, I guess on a smaller scale internally, what have been some of the moments when you've thought, yes, this has worked, this has inspired people, it's developed a movement within an organisation? I mean, I guess sadly we can't have 10,000 people at Land's End for everything. So what's the equivalent you've seen in organisations that have shown that you've been successful?

Deborah Hale (17:18)

It completely depends on the project and it completely depends on the goal. I'm currently working with the Design Council on an event that is, it's a campaign that will result in an event that will happen next year in November. It's something called the World Design Congress and it's a global gathering of designers. And the thematic for that event is Design for Planets. So design takes a lot from the planet by its very nature and this is the whole purpose of this particular campaign is to encourage the industry to rethink circularity, rethink use of resources and how they apply, how they place planets at the centre of all their decision making in terms of design. And we are still a year away from that, but there have been some really important milestones. And one of them was announced quite recently and that is a legacy piece which is the desire to upskill one million designers in green skills. Now we had considered that legacy piece when we were writing the bid document for that event. But to see that come to life with government backing, with good solid national coverage.



That was a moment. I think, Dom what you remind me of is that when, the moment on the relay was the beginning of the end, really, what is very important when you're planning a campaign is to earmark these, what I would call punctuation marks along the way. The moments that will create the memories that will build the movement towards your ultimate goal.

So you can't just sort of drive the train and wait for it to get to the station. You've got to celebrate all the little stations along the way. And that, again, that's very much part of the engagement piece. So on the relay was the 10,000 people at Land's End was a major moment. There were many, many smaller moments along the way that made sure that the public had all the right information that they required to be where they needed to be on the day, to understand the storytelling of that moment, to know who their local heroes were, to have baked their flame cakes because we gave them the recipe. It's the little moments are sometimes more important than the great big moments as well. And planning in baking those literally into a campaign is a really important part of it.

Dom (19:50)

So I guess just to conclude on that part then, it's a mix. It's a mix of saying that we've got to plan for some of these big milestones and be able to report them back. But also sometimes milestones happen we don't quite expect. And the importance then is to make sure people know about them. It's to keep that drum beat, I think you said earlier, of communication. Can I ask you very unfair question, Deborah? And you don't have to tell us this, but did at any point the flame go out? Because I know it's supposed to stay going.

Deborah Hale (20:16)

Yeah it did.

Dom (20:18)

It did. I have this great mental image of someone nipping a Zippo out. It didn't.

Deborah Hale (20:22)

No, that never happened. But thank you for asking. No. So it's a lovely, a lovely, it's a delicious bit of inside knowledge. So when the flame is lit in Greece, you take for what we called instances of the flame from the mother flame, and we kept them in miners lanterns, specially converted miners lanterns. It went out three times on our relay. To put it into context, I think it was the Torino relay. It went out about 27 times a day.



So our torch was and remains the most successful torch in terms of performance. But it did go out, I think, in a one almighty downpour in Blackpool, as I recall. But yeah, it did. But you light it from the mother source, if that makes sense. There's a little bit of inside knowledge.

Dom (21:07)

Thank you for sharing it. And the fact that in our climate, you've kept it going so often, I think that's a great accolade. Congratulations.

Deborah Hale (21:15)

We're actually very proud of that. And that was, again, gosh, the things you learn, it was an extraordinary engineering. It was an incredible piece of engineering that created the burner system for it. And I do recall one of my slightly madder moments was being in, I think it was the BMW testing facility somewhere in Europe where they could simulate every type of weather condition and we tested the flame there. Yeah, very scientific things you don't know that you learn about on a relay.

Dom (21:45)

Yes, but also it does reinforce not just the importance of planning but also the importance of planning scenarios so that if something like that does happen you've got to back up. I get that.

Deborah Hale (21:55)

For sure. We did, in fact, I recall we did 27 different scenario plans for the relay, which went from a torchbearer trips over and breaks their leg, what do you do, right up to a kind of 9-11 type scenario, what happens. And we used a military command control communication model for that. It was planned within an inch of its life, yes.

Cathryn Barnard (22:19)

There you go Dom, you've got your knowledge for your next pub quiz. Should that question arise?

Dom (22:22)

If it doesn't, I'll make sure it does.

Cathryn Barnard (22:26)

Exactly. Debs, I wanted to come back when you started to describe the project, the programme of work, you talked about kind of the goal for the project on day one being make the country proud.





And I think that's really interesting because I do find myself wondering how many boards and executive teams think about that, if at all when they are thinking about the topic of engagement and improving organisational performance, and I think about that against a backdrop where the construct of work seems increasingly transactional and profit focused rather than human focus. So if I may drop a bit of a question bomb into this conversation. What are your thoughts there around, when thinking about the topic of engagement in boardrooms and this piece around pride and how pride galvanises engagement, what do you think your advice would be or your observations, your reflections on that would be?

### **Deborah Hale (23:40)**

God, it's such a good question and you know I have conversations all the time at the moment about the nostalgia of that moment in time and the fact that we don't have that now and that as a nation I wonder, I question whether we are proud to be British right now and I think it's a fascinating one as you say when you then apply it to the boardroom. I think I come back to the asking of the questions and the listening to what what would make people feel proud to work for your organisation? What are those hard and soft factors that move the dial for individuals? How many people genuinely are proud when they sit around a dinner table or when they meet new people to say, I work for X or Y? That's an interesting debate these days, isn't it? And in my impression, this is your area, work has become very transactional. And I think the balance of the hard and the soft skills, the listening, the feeling values and knowing that your values fit in the knowledge that you are making a contribution and that contribution counts. Sometimes it's the smaller stuff that is the really, really big stuff, if that makes sense.

### **Cathryn Barnard (25:03)**

Massively because I always find myself going back to the IC index, maybe I've memorised it by now, but there was a finding in the 2024 IC index that synced engagement to understanding, clearly understanding the business strategy, but there was also a point around, how many people actually understood the strategy. The Index revealed that, but also more importantly, how many people understood their specific role in the delivery of that strategy. And when you break it down into those constituent parts, that is just such an obvious point. How on earth can you give your best at work each day when you don't really understand what you're there to do or how that feeds into a bigger picture?

### **Deborah Hale (22:57)**

I think that's really interesting and I mean that would lead me to, one of the things I'm really passionate about is celebrating the team, but recognising the individual acts. I think that's, recognising a person's individuality and the contribution that they can make whilst also celebrating the wider contribution of the team that they fit into. And I, again, would question how often we take the time to do that.





Jen Sproul (26:33)

I would agree as well. Another thing in the Index to pick up on that point that it pulled out as well is that I think very lowly employees felt that the organisation operated in their best interests. And when it came to things around about leadership or change communication, we talked about change at the very outset of this podcast, is that when that change campaign is being driven or being asked of them, it's not the volume of change that's the problem, it's that the fact that change isn't reflecting their reality. As in, well, that's lovely and lofty. I get that. But do you understand I have this small process problem or that there's a barrier in my work in the way that I do things every day or how I work that will inhibit that change to be delivered? It's become so disconnected from actually what it feels like to do that and you haven't spent the time understanding the realities of what it's like to do the things you do before you've thought about the change. Does that make any sense?

Deborah Hale (27:31)

It does make sense and we all want to feel like we're making a contribution and having that recognition I'm happy to share it because because I nicked it from someone and so I can't take the credit for it but over the course of the 70 days that we were on the road and it was pretty pretty gruelling you know we were in a different place every single night I wrote every single member of the team a handwritten note, everyone was really considered, I had either heard a story or I'd seen something and it was just a little postcard on their pillow, I didn't put them on the pillow by the way, but somebody put them on the pillows every night and my goodness me, the impact of that was enormous and we'd been on the road for 30 days, they were on their knees, they were really tired, they were just wanted to go home and see their families. And that was a very, very easy thing to do. And again, sometimes it's that deeply personal, isn't it? That we don't necessarily have these days.

Jen Sproul (28:32)

I do think that's really interesting. I think work has become impersonal. And I think that's a big challenge when you want to feel emotionally connected or you want to feel valued or you want to feel seen or heard or understood when work is so impersonal, it inhibits you to express that in both directions. And I think that one of the things I was interested to ask as well as a perhaps unfair follow up question as well is and I'll pass back to Dom, when you obviously were putting this campaign together, when you had to bring in so many people, whether it was the local MPs, the local councils, or you've been given this brief to make the country proud, and you brought this sort of campaign, and you brought these considerations to it, did you face any, I guess, leadership or buy-in to that dialogue, or the language, or the tonality of the campaign, or why was it important to have patience and take time rather than speed it up? Did you have that counter argument to you as you were presenting what you were going to do? And if so, was there a way you counteracted that?



Deborah Hale (29:32)

Do you know, we didn't have that. And I think the reason, one of the best pieces of advice I was given was that there is only one way to eat an elephant and that is bit by bit. The other thing that I was asked a lot was, at the end was did you ever dream it would be like this and my response was always this is exactly how I dreamt it would be and the very unusual thing of course about an olympics but it's quite an interesting discipline is you can't move the date you can't just say you know what should we put it back a week because there's a very very specific date and time you've got to get ready for it. The second thing is if you plan accordingly, you then chunk it down and we knew when we were going to do what, we knew what would then lead to what was the consequence of one announcement after another. So that was very, very well thought through. And then the final glory thing for me about it was the cross-functionality of the teams working on it and the only way that you're going to deliver an Olympics and a relay is if all the relevant parties come together and work as one. And that cross-functional working was so efficient and so enriching, So I think there's a lot to be learnt from that, but I don't recall the pressure to do it faster. No, I don't on that one. Other ones definitely.

Jen Sproul (31:07)

Well, clearly you put it out for the beginning. This is the way to do it if we're gonna have it and this is what you mean and if you want that deep impact. I think that's a wonderful story. And I think that your point as well I'll past to Dom in a second, is it takes an army to do all these things, an army of people that need to be working towards the same goal and the same agenda. And I think it's also a testament to actually if you bring together different constituent parts of an organisation or strategy that moves against one one goal, then there's a lot of power in that, I think.

Deborah Hale (31:36)

I think that is so important. And I think, so often we work in silos and we guard our territories, and that happens a lot within large organisations. And it doesn't move things forward and it doesn't change things. It just protects the status quo. So I've never really worked to that extent in an orgaiaation that was so dependent on so many other different disciplines. It was big learning for me and I use that all the time now.

Dom (32:10)

Deborah, it's always great to talk about something which is not just about internal communication, but from which we can learn a number of things around internal comms. I guess to bring us into land, I've picked up on six things, all beginning with P fortunately, actually by fluke. You talk about patience.

So the fact that, great point, that change doesn't happen overnight. I think often as communicators, get pressurised to do things quickly. You talk about the importance of planning. So making sure that you've got, I think you love that lovely phrase about chunking it down so you can break it down into key points, which I'll just steal that if that's all right. I love the bit about punctuation, about readily



feeding back about how we're doing. And I think we forget that. I think we ought to give people progress reports on, even if it's small progress reports, to give people reassurance and reasons to believe. Allied with patience who talked about persistence, because you're not going to get it right every time, all the time. You're going to get setbacks and you have to keep going. I love the point you made about pride, which I think I'm going to paraphrase, I hope correctly, which is we can't make people proud. We can give them the circumstances in which they become proud. You can't tell someone to be proud. You help them become proud.

Deborah (33:18)

You can't!

Dom (33:19)

And the final one is about being personal. I think I love the idea about handwritten postcards because it just gives people that feeling of someone's caring, they're noticing me, they're listening to me. So there was a huge amount from your experience of running the movement and the campaign that we can take as internal communicators. But I'd like to ask you an unfair question. We've had a number of these already, which is for people listening to what we've just been discussing as internal communicators, from your experience, what's the one thing that you would like them to take from our conversation?

Deborah Hale (33:50)

I come back to where we started, which is listening. I think listening is a superpower and I think there's a real difference between listening and hearing. But I think really, most of my career has been spent managing really complex stakeholder engagement groups and very very powerful groups that have their own goals, their own targets, their own ways of being measured, their own KPIs and you're only going to move the tanker if you appreciate their perspective, what they need to get out of something and then the next group and then the next group. Usually, sometimes it's the thing we all disagree on, which is the thing that binds us together. But it's finding that commonality or that shared goal or that sense of companionship around one thing, and then you've got something to start moving forward from. So it comes back to listening.

Cathryn Barnard (34:50)

I love that.

I love the fact that listening underpins all of this conversation, but also how to build a movement, how to build a campaign that becomes a movement. I think we're starting to close out 2024 now, and I'm starting to reflect on all the conversations that we've had throughout the year. And listening has been like a golden thread that has woven through so many of the conversations and it's a highly nuanced skill that we all have but that we perhaps aren't as practised in as we could be and as we face into increasingly AI framed futures we have to look for the parts of internal communication that



are future-proof, that are the antidote to technology being presented as a cheaper alternative to internal communication. And listening, our capacity to pay attention to another human being in a way that that person walks away feeling deeply seen and understood is a skill set that no technology is going to replicate. So what an amazing way to end this conversation, right? Thank you so much, Debs, for coming on and sharing, your insights and all the wisdom that you've built up over the course of your career, because fundamentally, what I've taken away is there are no shortcuts and it is bit by bit, human by human, person by person, conversation by conversation. That's how we do it.

Deborah Hale (36:44)

It's my great pleasure. Thank you. Really nice to see you all. Take care.

Cathryn Barnard (36:49)

Thank you so much.

Jen (36:50)

Thank you so much Deborah.