



Transcript for S11 E2 Helping people change with Ellen Van Oosten

Cathryn Barnard (00:43)

Hello and welcome to a fresh episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Cat Barnard and I'm joined as ever by Jen Sproul and Dominic Walters. Today we are going to be exploring a topic that I think is probably on every single internal communicator's agenda in 2024. So we are halfway through the year and I think it's fair and perhaps an understatement to say that we are all immersed in continuous change in the outside world, in our daily lives, but also in our workplaces. And that's really what I want us to talk about today - continuous change.

I want to reference some of the research that came up in the IC index when it launched earlier this year on the topic of change and continuous change at work because when I was looking through some of the data points earlier this week, I noted that 40% of the 4,000 survey respondents who took part in the research told us that their organisation had undertaken some form of restructuring in the last 12 months, 22% of respondents told us that their organisation had made redundancies as a result of organisational change programmes. And actually what I thought was really quite jaw-dropping was that almost 20%, 19% of respondents said that they had witnessed a change of chief exec in the last 12 months.

So I think when you put those data points together, it really does corroborate my hypothesis that continuous change is somewhat of an understatement of what we're all experiencing in the world of work at the moment. And so because of that, I feel like it's the most ingenious stroke of luck that I am delighted to welcome Professor Ellen Van Oosten to the podcast today, because she has a lot that she's going to share with us about change and organisational behaviour.

So let me start with a bit of a mini bio - Ellen is Professor of organisational behaviour at Weatherhead School of Management, which is part of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio in the United States. She's also the director of the Coaching Research Lab, which is a scholar practitioner collaboration to advanced coaching research. And she co-founded that with her colleagues, Richard Boyatzis and Melvin Smith in 2014. Her research focus is the study of how individuals and organisations learn, change and develop in lasting ways. Interestingly for us, I'm sure, and for you, the listener - other areas of her research interest include coaching, leadership development, emotional intelligence, and women's leadership in STEM fields. But the thing that grabbed my attention the most was one of my friends telling me in late 2019, 2020, about the most amazing coaching book that she had read. And she urged me to get myself a copy, which I promptly did. Helping people change is the topic of Ellen's book, which she co-authored with Richard Boyatzis and Melvin Smith. It was published in 2019. It went on to win the award of coaching book of the year with



Henley Business School in 2020. And as somebody who has completed an executive diploma in executive coaching, I was absolutely blown away by the premise and the findings of the research. And it really did sit apart from much of the other literature that has been published about executive coaching and organisational change. I literally could not do it justice myself. So without further ado, I'm going to welcome Ellen and ask her to tell us a little bit about the book and what it's about. But Ellen, thank you for joining us today.

Ellen Van Oosten (05:12)

What a lovely introduction. Thank you so much, Cat. I'm delighted to be here with you and Dom and Jen and all of your listeners.

Cathryn Barnard (05:19)

It's an absolute privilege. I mean, it is a real serendipity of how we came to be in contact with one another, which is perhaps a podcast in its own right at some point under the topic of serendipity. But in order to do your research justice, Ellen, can you tell us briefly about the book, *Helping People Change*? Tell us what it's about and tell us what your kind of major findings were.

Ellen Van Oosten (05:46)

Absolutely, I'll try to summarise this succinctly and then we can go in whatever direction would be interesting for you. So my colleagues and I at the Weatherhead School study the phenomena of human centered change at several levels, like the individual level, which usually focuses on leaders and leadership in organisations, teams, organisations as like whole systems and even kind of broader context like communities and societies.

My particular area of research and teaching is on the individual and extension to teams. And what we're really curious about is what drives sustained change. So we call it enduring or sticky change for individuals. And when we look at that as in terms of what's happening in organisations and the role of leaders, the leaders need to inspire others to follow. And so the context is always about change is how we see it. It could be goal achievement, right? But that's still, we're here at point A and we need to get to point B. So that could be, and we often think of that as a context of development growth or change. So we do use this kind of the term change as a bit of an umbrella to include a learning growth development because it's all embedded within that. Yet, as you pointed out in terms of some of the recent survey, the change that is prevalent in organisational life, shall we say, takes on kind of its own unique set of characteristics.



And so we look at what does that mean, what do people experience in these various conditions that we live in in our organisational life. And certainly the past several years have been an acute context for us to really examine that more closely. But helping people change really has been a compilation of 40 years of work really examining these various facets of how individuals and teams, groups and organisations evolve, grow and change in ways that are enduring. So that's what we kind of get into and explain some of the research behind it and what we really know about it.

Cathryn Barnard (08:20)

I think for me, and I'm really putting myself on the line here because if I've misremembered what I remember about the book, I know you're going to correct me. But one of the things that really stood out for me when I was reading the book with my kind of executive coaching hat on was a difference that you pointed out quite early on, which is if change is imposed upon an individual, that is a completely different ballpark than if the individual feels a sense of agency over the change. So to your point about growth and development, if you are able to, if you are a change practitioner, if you are in any way, shape or form responsible for the success of a business transformation programme, if you are able to couch the required transformation in a way that allows the individual to see perhaps a better version of their future self, that is infinitely more likely to yield results than we need to change because we've got to cost cut or because we've got to consolidate or because we need to deliver shareholder value next year - something that is abstract and tangential to the motivations and desires of the individual is not going to yield the same kind of results. Did I remember that correctly?

Ellen Van Oosten (09:51)

You remembered it perfectly. And what stood out for you is this reality that really the way that we are inspired, and I'm going to use that word a number of times, right? And I can explain that in a moment a little bit further, but to be motivated, right? To want to change has to come from within but the way that we often go about it in our systems of management in organisational life is the opposite we go, kind of we approach this or our models and frameworks and systems for decades has been around telling people what to do and laying out that kind of the need or the goal. There's nothing wrong with laying out the need or the goal. Like we now need to cut costs. There's not an inherent problem with that. The issue is you don't inspire people to want to change by just stating the facts.

So where people get tripped up here is they think, well, it's important to kind of deal with reality. Of course it is. We're not suggesting it's not. The thing though is in order to get an individual, to get a team, to get a whole organisation engaged around having to pivot, right?



And to tackle whatever that big need is, you have to be able to acknowledge and then follow this path of realising people are emotional beings. As human beings, we're not machines, we're not robots - we want to and need to be engaged in seeing the purpose. We need a shared purpose. We need to be able to connect in with something greater than ourselves and to have hope. And so we draw upon some theories, some key theories, I'll just name two, that I'm sure a number of your listeners might be familiar with, but one of them is intentional change theory. We talk about that in the book. What that really is about is what we know around how adults learn and change. We don't learn and change linearly. Like, okay, everybody, let's get the team together. Now we're going to cut costs by 20%. It's point A, point B. That's the facts. That's the challenge. But the way people go about changing themselves and inspiring others actually involves five different phases.

The first one is helping somebody to discover and integrate aspects of what we call their ideal self. And the ideal self includes a number of elements, but basically is answering the question, who do I wish to be and what do I wish to do at some future point? And in a team context or an organisational context, it's the same. Who do we wish to be? What do we wish to do in the next five years, in the next 10 years or whatever? And it taps into purpose, taps into values, taps into hopes and dreams. Often we skip over that and we get to the second phase, which is we call it the real self. And the real self is the here and now. It is the point A. It is the reality. And that's important to know and address and anchor yourself in, but it doesn't by itself inspire a motivation to bring out the best in yourself, the most creative options, to kind of think about things to collaborate. It doesn't do that by itself. You really need that first phase of discovery.

And then the intentional change theory then gets into more practical steps later. The third component is putting this together into some sort of actionable learning plan which is not about only goal attainment, but the process of it. What kind of learning and development needs to happen along the way. The fourth step or phase is experimenting. So often we just skip right over this notion of wanting and needing to experiment with what could work. And instead we launch into this is the only way. And if the CEO or the manager says this is the only way, it's that person's way. It's not engaging the group.

And then the final phase is actually one that supports all these previous ones, and it is called trusting supportive relationships. We don't change as human beings by ourselves. It's not a solo act. This is nothing to do with personality theory, extroverts, introversion, and how people are kind of wired in their personality. It is to appreciate that as human beings, we don't evolve, learn, change, grow by ourselves. And so being supported by others and ourselves, being the one to support our direct reports, our associates, our team, our organisation is all part of it. That's intentional change theory. But the second theory I'll just mention is self-determination theory. And what that really speaks to is, again, I'm sure you and others may have heard of it, but it speaks to the fact that we have basic human needs that need to be addressed for us to fully engage in supporting and achieving change.



One is autonomy, which is really free will. It's not so much being independent, but it is about having some agency, like you mentioned. A second is competence. So this idea that we desire to be better, to do good work, to develop ourselves and skills. And the third is relatedness. It goes back to this notion of connection and being related to others. And so when we draw upon these kind of theories, which have been tested - both of them have been tested in many ways through different research studies. We've done a lot ourselves, which is captured in the book around intentional change theory and that's what we continue to do. We know the value of these because of the studies that reinforce how they really are at play. So let me pause there, I can go on a roll about this - let me know what you think.

Cathryn Barnard (16:06)

Well, I just want to, and I know I'm going to hand over to Dom in a second, but again, because I guess I'm knee deep in looking at the IC index research at this particular juncture in time, it reminds me of the data that came out of that research showing both belief in the organisational strategy, but the extent to which people felt that the organisation had been clear on the business strategy is one thing, but then the other thing which absolutely kind of puts rocket fuel onto belief in the strategy is a shared understanding of how I personally can contribute to the delivery of that strategy. And so for me, what you're describing, there's a huge communication piece in here, isn't there, about how we articulate the goals and objectives that we want to meet as a collective group of individuals.

Ellen Van Oosten (17:04)

Your comment makes me think of this kind of fundamental truth. So there's the theories and the research and then how do we just boil it down to something we carry with us in our work and for those involved, especially in internal communications and leaders and organisations. And it's this: as human beings, we need to feel appreciated and that we belong. So, I would add to that people need to be understood. You need to know that your leaders and others in the organisation understand what you're going through, what your position is, whatever the challenges are, what your development opportunities are that for you have excitement and meaning. Individuals need to feel like they're appreciated for those contributions and what they're capable of. And they need to feel like they belong.

And we don't have to look far for evidence of that, right? Just look at the last four years and all that we've kind of learned coming through a global pandemic, especially on the belonging piece, but all these other things, these three tenants really play out. So as we work virtually more often now than we ever did before 2020, it's still the same kind of needs are present - being understood, appreciated, and feeling like people belong. And so



communication, systems, frameworks, activities, the more that they kind of support that and lift that up at all levels in an organisation will feed a deeper human need.

Dom (18:43)

Ellen listening to you speaking then and fascinated by what you were saying, it struck me that it's still very much an accepted and received wisdom in the communication world that change isn't successful, often isn't successful. I'm thinking about the often-quoted statistic, I think from McKinsey, that 70% of change fails. I think it's like the vinyl records of management consultancy statistics. It was in fashion, it went out of fashion, and now it seems to be coming back into fashion – I see people quoting it again on LinkedIn articles and so on. But my first question from your experience, is that right? Is that sort of proportion of change programmes actually failing?

Ellen Van Oosten (19:23)

Sadly, it is on target, Dom, and we really haven't moved the needle since we began measuring it, honestly. You don't have to look far for confirming data if you looked at any of the engagement figures that Gallup and other organisations report, right? So whether we're looking at organisational change as a macro phenomena, engagement at any levels in organisation, the statistics are always kind of hovering around 30% at most of individual's report being engaged. Recently, I read that that's dropping. So if you have 10 people on your team, what that really is saying is only three of the 10 are reporting that they are actively engaged in their work, and seven are in various stages of disengagement from complete disengagement or just moderate or kind of going through the motions. That's unbelievable when you stop and think about it, right?

And so what really is going on there? Why is this such a perpetual issue and challenge? And I think it's related to our conversation so far. The way that often we go about engaging with one another, now to speak from the position of leadership specifically - is that we skip over the human element. We don't try to get to know the individual as a human being. We go right into here's your job, here's your responsibilities, here's what we need you to do. Because most people want to do good work, that's not by itself a problem. The issue is you can't sustain someone's engagement, their desire to bring all of their capability to bear on an ongoing basis in that setting. It just isn't possible, it just doesn't tap into the human needs.

If you layer on that, and going back to what Cat started off with in the statistics of what people are experiencing, restructuring, know, redundancies and layoffs. Change at senior leader levels, which impact then everybody else. Those are often experienced as kind of



negative emotion. And so by themselves, it's not a problem. It's just that most people don't go into that going, this is fantastic. I'm so glad that now we're restructuring the organisation and my best friends are losing their jobs, right? Of course not. What happens from a human perspective is that we grieve that loss. So it's a grieving process and it could be something that doesn't even affect us directly, but we're grieving the fact that people we worked with over in purchasing or marketing or operations are no longer there. There's something else though. We start worrying that it could happen to us.

So the fundamental, any trust that's been established all of a sudden comes into question. Well, if it happened here, could it happen to me? Sure. So it's like the contract that leaders create, but then by extension, the organisation creates with employees at all levels is under the microscope. And so when you layer these things, when organisation, a culture and an approach is all about, we're only going to focus on the goals here. We're all about achieving and we're going to keep ratcheting up the goals. And then, by the way, we're deciding that, you know, we're going to lock off 20 % of this team because we're not performing and meeting the goals that we set out, you can't continue to look at it as this kind of emotionless experiment or phenomena. It's just not possible.

Instead, what you need to do is acknowledge what people may be thinking and feeling and create an opportunity for them to share that. And so thinking about kind of communication professionals, all of your listeners play such a vital role in encouraging conversations in the organisation. Sometimes there's no conversation happening. It's just delivery of messages, right? So conversations between leaders and their associates and teams where we can just allow time and space for people to absorb the news - whatever that news is, but also to allow them a chance to share their thoughts and feelings. And where the skeptics come in here and hear that, they think we don't have time for that. We've got a lot of work to do, right? Or that's not what we do here. We're not here to focus on people's feelings.

And that is just misguided. And when individuals take that too literally, it tells you they really don't understand this phenomena of how human beings are essentially wired. And it doesn't take a lot of time, but it does - anything that time a person feels that they are appreciated, that they're seen, that they're supported, that goes a long way to helping them garner the energy and to be able to keep going in the resilience to get through the tough times.

Dom (24:49)

It's a subject we've talked about a number of times on the podcast about the importance of conversation. I think you're absolutely right that many leaders look at you askance when you talk about the importance of conversation because it does seem to be a waste of time. They feel as though they're treading water. Although, interestingly enough, when you talk to many leaders about their domestic decision making, very few of them would just go out



and buy a car on spec. They want to process it, talk about it, involve other people, think about their needs. They find it harder to apply it to work. Also as you're talking, I remember talking to someone recently, if you want to get your take on this, saying the fact that that 70% figure is still right is actually a positive in some ways because if you consider the fact that from 30 years ago we live in a much more difficult world, organisations are changing, there's different tech, there's political insecurity, the fact that we can keep it around 70% failure is actually in some ways a bonus because the world around us is changing but it's still obviously not good enough.

Just to go back to the conversation piece if I could. In your experience, what stops organisations doing it? Because as you describe it, it makes great sense. And of course, we're often dealing with, nearly always dealing with intelligent, successful people when we talk with leaders. So how is it they don't do it? I can understand the initial reaction, which is, it's a waste of my time. But what else is there about it that stops them from having these conversations?

Ellen Van Oosten (26:10)

So there's a perpetual undervaluing of what we call engaging in empathetic relationship building. And so let me share a little bit of research that has been really profound for me to learn with my colleagues over the last 30 years. And we do talk about this in the book, so I'll just give that cliff notes. But we know from neuroscience in examining how the brain functions in different contexts that we have two dominant neural networks that are at play. Now, to be fair, we have thousands of neural networks in our brains wiring, but we are most interested in two dominant ones, which serve us similar to like a super highway. So you have many roads and highways of all different sizes and speeds. In this case, think of just two dominant super highways. One of them is your analytic network and a second is your empathic network.

We activate the analytic network anytime we are involved in an activity requiring focus, requiring objective thinking, critical thinking, for instance, calculating things, measuring things, monitoring things, and so on. Think about organisational life, and that's a lot of what it means to be a manager. You're involved in reporting, you're measuring, right? You're trying to solve problems, and so on. Another dominant neural network is called the empathic network. The empathic network is activated anytime you are engaged in relationship building or interaction. Anytime that you are expressing gratitude to others when you bring the team together to have that retirement party for somebody who's leaving. When you celebrate your success, but also when you're trying to innovate, when you're trying to create, you do have some sort of sticky problem and you want your best brightest minds to come up with the next possible solution or product.



So organisations often seek innovation, right? But they're going about it measuring problems and gaps and so on. The so what of understanding these two super highways is that we cannot activate them at the same time. Just like you cannot physically drive on two super highways at the same time, it works the same way. So if you think about this for yourself, if you've ever been involved in a project or an activity where it's taken all of your mental resources. You've been incredibly focused, maybe to the point that you've kind of been oblivious to what's happening around you. I work with a lot of senior leaders and they'll talk about, we were going through this acquisition and I completely forgot my anniversary. Things like that. You're so engrossed in whatever the work is and it's analytical in nature that it's basically shut down this other network. It takes intentional effort to then switch over, just like it would getting off one highway, driving across a bridge and getting on another highway. And so understanding that these two things work like a seesaw in our brains is really important. And organisationally, it explains sometimes why it's kind of counterintuitive. It takes more energy and intention to say to the team you've all just done an incredible job. We've been working 80 hours a week for the last month or whatever, to stop and say, let's go celebrate. You need to stop and think about that yourself, but also kind of signal to them, right? This is a shift.

A lot of times people don't do that. They just, they're, like, well, we're going to move on to the next goal. And I see that over and over and over again. Okay. That's great. Check. So our approach to the work of organisations as tasks, as transactions flies in the face of this kind of like whole other dimension which embodies more creative thinking, embodies building and nurturing relationships with others, celebrating and so on. So it's where the stories live, where the numbers and the measurements and the calculations and the formulas live elsewhere. We do our best work. Organisations are most successful when they see both of those and allow time and space. But for the majority of people in organisations, they just dismiss that empathic superhighway I talked about, and they focus only on the goals and the transactions and that's where the rest of the organisation then goes.

Cathryn Barnard (30:56)

That to me really chimes - it feels to me radical and we're coming out of a cumulative period where we have worshipped at the altar of kind of analytical pathways and de-prioritised empathic pathways and I guess I would conjecture and that is evidenced by the lack of teaching of empathy in MBA programmes, which surely are all about helping next generation leaders develop the skills and the toolkits to manage efficiency and scalability. But there's no teaching of empathy, or at least there has not been traditionally, right?



Ellen Van Oosten (31:43)

Absolutely. And you're preaching to the choir here because I am in an MBA programme. That's what I do in my day job. I teach our MBAs and have for the past 12 years, but I stand on the shoulders of giants who have put in place over 30 years ago, Richard Boiaxis as being the leader of this emotional intelligence, learning and development. And so our leadership course is anchored in understanding yourself and understanding others, understanding your own emotions and being able to work with the emotions of others in the service of building relationships. And we start off on day one with that and we do a heavy hit. We also provide coaching, this idea of we don't learn by ourselves. So we do a lot of leadership coaching embedded within that process, which is an area we've been working in for a long time. So I couldn't agree more. And I will say one thing, and then Dom, I want to take your question too. The communication of what you just said and what we're talking about in terms of empathy being an example, emotional intelligence being kind of an overall frame as soft skills is something that actually isn't helping. Isn't helping organisations, isn't helping anybody to really understand the significance of everything that we're discussing. And so I reframe it with our students and with all the work that we do as relational intelligence in pursuit of relational excellence. So while an organisation pursues financial excellence, operational excellence right up there. You need to acknowledge and pursue relational excellence. This is what we're to get to put out there for your listeners. Dom, over to you.

Dom (33:38)

I'll be very brief because I want to pass over to Jen, but it was more of a statement because when you gave us the metaphor of the highways, I suddenly had a clarity, a moment of clarity about how we can help leaders and how consultants we can help communicators help leaders because going back to your highway which is about process and facts and figures and this echoes what Cat said, it's brightly lit, it's well used, it's clearly signposted, it's easier to use it. Whereas the road that's about emotion and empathy is dark a bit windy, a bit uncertain. I think our job is to help make that road even more usable. So for me that was really helpful. So I just wanted to share that - and I'll pass over now to Jen.

Jen Sproul (34:18)

Thanks Dom, thank you so much. I've just been listening intently now and learning so much and nodding my head vigorously at many things that you've been saying. And I think that coming onto this as well is that what struck me and what I'm thinking about as you're talking as well is, as for our listeners perhaps and internal communicators, the other pieces of this piece about when we're delivering the communication of a change, right? One of the things



we know is the internal communicators is not considered as part of the design of change - communication isn't embedded from the beginning of the design of change.

So therefore it becomes out process and systematic and transactional. I always say change isn't a Gantt chart. It can't be delivered, it is far more complex than just simply a Gantt charted approach. But that's how it eventually comes. And then you also have an issue of listening a lot to what you were saying about empowerment and authority and how that is really important and how we create I guess those environments for that autonomy to thrive, for that empathy to thrive. And in the index research as well, we found that 10% of line managers are not confident to have a conversation about change.

So we're trying to get to an endpoint when we've missed so, so many steps. So say we're in the real right now where we know change is going down, but we as internal communicators, we get called into or sent an email from a senior leader that says, we're going to deliver this kind of change in about 48 hours time, can you prep some comms? That's generally where we're sort of at at it. And what we'll try and do is, and this is why I think it's quite interesting as well, talking a lot what you're saying about when we approach change communication, we think of life as the change curve, which was designed out of the theory of grief. But we're not playing into or really thinking outside of actually how has the environment within that change happened?

We're thinking we've got to take them through the series of emotions of change, which are related to grief, rather than playing into having the continuous conditions where change can thrive from within. That's just my thinking, but I think one of my things I'm thinking about as I'm talking is how do we make the business case for emotional intelligence to fact relational intelligence. And if we're trying, I guess, with communication at the heart, when organisations are approaching change or navigating it - where should they prioritise rather than the Gantt chart, if you like? That was a waffle and a ramble for me, but I hope there was something of that that made some sense to you.

Ellen Van Oosten (36:45)

Everything made sense, made perfect sense. There's no one simple answer to the insights and the experiences that you just summarised. But I'd like to go back to kind of, again, some fundamental truth here that maybe could provide some perspective, especially for your listeners involved in having to prepare the comms, right? If we link together some of our prior conversation today, and we know that people need to be understood and appreciated and feel like they belong, I would challenge from the get-go a process that relies solely on written communication and instead urge everyone to consider first, can you have small group sessions where individuals, especially leaders can talk with their teams around the change, create the - or convey the reason for the change and what's coming. Most people, again, remember most people want to do good work. Most people have a lot of talents that



they want to apply. But when change comes down from on high, so to speak, and they don't understand it, where is it coming from? That's when you get some resistance.

So starting off in the beginning, you need to lay out, here's what's happening. This is where communicating the facts is important. What happens next though, is that doesn't mean people are going to be embracing it right out of the gate. Like, yes, that's great. Bring it on. No, that's a next step. So understanding that there's going to be different reactions to the change from scepticism that it's the right change to denial, to people feeling hurt. And there's a whole host of reactions, some more cognitive and some more emotional. But in a small group setting, you've got the ability then to kind of have a conversation around it where somebody can feel heard.

So when working with organisations and senior leaders where I'm coaching them, we always talk first around like what's your plan to meet in small groups and provide a room for listening to what's on their minds first. Most people, once they feel heard, then they may disagree with the decision, but they are able to kind of support where the organisation's going. It's this notion of we agree to disagree. If that conversation doesn't happen and all they get is the email or the memo, so to speak, whether it's electronic, which it probably is now - or worse, they don't get anything and they hear it from their colleague in another department, then you've lost control of being able to engage the minds as well as the hearts of the organisation because you haven't explained it and given them a chance to talk with you directly around it.

And so I can't underscore or underline enough the importance of interactions where individuals can have an opportunity to be listened to and to share some of what they're feeling. So one of the things that we do a lot of work with organisations around in our leadership development programmes and what I do with my MBAs is develop the skill of listening. So much like both you and Dom and Cat also brought this up earlier, this kind of inherent scepticism or dismissal could be both or either or both of the importance of having a conversation is pervasive. So organisations often come to my colleagues and I and then say we want to have our managers become better coaches. And we say, great. How often are they interacting with their employees now around their development or anything else? And they say once a year, they have to. I'm like, okay, well, we, got to start with some basics here. You know, just like even just getting together and checking in, like, how you doing Jen? Like, how was your weekend? Right. I don't need to get into your personal life. I just want to just demonstrate that I care about you and building that is what building a relationship over time includes, such that you now have kind of deposits in this employee leader manager bank account, where when you have to have a tough conversation, you know the person, you know how they operate. It's much, much different than a more clinical generic kind of approach.

And so that is challenging as people are spread out everywhere virtually and with the organisational workload, people will say we just don't have time. I've got a team of 15



people and then my managers have managers. You have to make the time. These people are working for you because what you're trying to do is inspire them to again, bring their creativity, their talents, what they know to the business scenario, to the challenges, to the problems, right? So we somehow lose sight that these things are inherently connected. So we say, if you do nothing else this week, the most important 30 minute segments and meetings that you have may just be that you check in with people, find out how they're doing, offer your support, listen to what they're excited about as well as what they're challenged by. So it really is kind of an ongoing mindset and approach.

Jen Sproul (42:27)

I absolutely agree. And I think one of the ticks in looking at the things that you talked about and the things that we're seeing as well, and we're hearing from our members this point about they're not being valued and heard because they want to push that agenda, but no one wants to listen to that agenda because it's just too much time. And as organisations and as leads, be really mindful of that pervasiveness of where we just don't have time or we'll just get to it or we must rush through that checklist. And it's something I've tried, I can be guilty of and you try really hard to just sort of self-check yourself really. But I think that one of the things that - and Dom I know we're coming back to you in a second, you might have a thought on this as well - is that how do we help create I guess that culture and that mindset within organisations so it's in every facet of every interaction and every point in every discussion when a change, whether that's a new CEO or a restructure or a new system, or it comes to the table.

That continuous environment exists, so therefore it becomes that place where we can work with different - or our managers feel comfortable to have conversations. It strikes me as that's the challenge that we face, and as you said as well, and there's enough statistics out there to show that this is worthy of investment businesses, but why can't we get past this? And I'm not looking for an answer, I think that's just a sort of a reflection really.

Dom (43:50)

Well I think it's interesting question. I think from our experience it seems to be that either people don't understand the value of it, which Ellen has said, and often they feel a bit uncomfortable because it's actually quite an unusual thing. People feel it's an unusual thing to ask questions they don't know the answers to because some leaders that can make them feel very exposed, I think. And Cat you may have a view on this as well.



Cathryn Barnard (44:10)

I wonder if, and it's exactly as Ellen said before, I wonder if we under emphasise the soft skills, like the actual labelling soft skills implies that they are less important. I loved hearing what you classify them as – we started an experiment at Working the Future at the start of the year just to try and change the language. And we call them vital skills because we believe that they are life essential. But there's something about it, isn't there? And I say this back a very long time ago, I did my degree in European modern languages. So I've been communicating in French and Italian for most of my life. I think communication is just a really interesting construct in the world of business because it is assumed that we all have communication skills. I also in a previous life worked in staffing and recruitment and almost to a T, I can attest that somewhere in the long-haul blurb of a job description, almost any job description will be listed, must have good communication skills, brackets - written and spoken - close brackets. But it's like an afterthought. It's just a general assumption. Well, if I have a mouth and two ears and they work, I have good communication skills, but it is fundamentally not the case because of this difference between communicating to broadcast and communicating to receive and contextualise and empathise and build relationships. So for me, I have a bit of a bug bear about the way in which communication is generically regarded, not in terms of exec communication or marketing communication, things that serve a kind of tangible dollar sign, pound sign purpose, but this magic of synchrony that goes on between us, I think that's just massively overlooked.

Ellen Van Oosten (46:20)

I couldn't agree more with what all three of you just said. One of the things I spend a lot of time doing is while I love the research and understanding it, I like to translate it for everyday managers and leaders because it's often only valuable when they can access it, right? And so a question for me always is, well, how do we make this accessible? How can we help individuals and by extension, an organisation, be able to be more, say, compassionate without necessarily always using those words we're talking about? I'm not saying we shouldn't by the way, but how do we kind of capture that? I have a couple of thoughts that I can share and would love your reactions, but one is we start with the basics around communication.

So Cat, you were saying, we have to break this down. And so in the context of leadership and management, which are the essential kind of mechanisms for the change, right? We start off with just demystifying and prioritising, asking good questions and listening beyond what you hear - we work on these two things. And if I don't have a whole lot of time with a group or a person, I go right to listening. And what I found in doing this for the past, I don't know how many years is that it's so innately human that we know what it feels like when someone listens to us. And we know absolutely what it feels like when somebody doesn't.



And so if you can put people in that experience, it doesn't take much for them to both think and feel or realise and feel that they, in terms of how they want to be known, how they want to lead, they don't want to be making others feel dismissed or discounted or like they don't care. That's not what they really are seeking to do. So we work on listening and what kind of gets in the way of the listening, but also how to do that better, right?

A really simple way I can leave your listeners with a way to try this on is just to create really short - one of my coaching clients, a senior executive called it "coffee with Ron" his name was Ron. And he's like, I'm not connecting with any of my people. And I said, well, let's just like take out your calendar and find 20 minutes. Can you find 20 minutes for each person on your team? He said, well, sure. And he said, well, yeah, and I'd like to have coffee with them. So let's do that. Or perhaps it's tea at four in the afternoon. Find something that you could do easily with everybody. And the only agenda is to check in with them, hear how they're doing, find out what they're working on, find out what they're excited about. Those are questions right there. Tell me how you're doing. Tell me what's, you know, the best thing that's happening today. What is it that I need to know? How can I support you?

Those might be your only questions. Those are questions, right? Your job is to listen. And then that's it. There's no other agenda, right? It takes a while for people to kind of go, there is no other agenda. Because they may not believe you at first. They didn't believe him. Nobody signed up for the 20 minute coffee with Ron because they thought it was a ploy to figure out who might want to go to other parts of the organisation with an upcoming layoff. So they didn't believe that it wasn't a redundancy that was coming at first. So he had to really build trust like, no, I really just want to hear how you're doing, Dom. Or John, like, yeah, tell me some good news, right? So that's what we mean by demystifying this.

You don't have to be spending hours with people, but you do need to care. So much so that you're willing to carve out even a little bit of time just to put everything else aside and say, how are you? Tell me what's going on. How can I support you? Is there anything else you want me to know? And to do that with enough regularity, maybe it's once a month. I mean, we're talking 20, 30 minutes once a month in this example. If you can't find that kind of time, then a person really needs to look at how they're spending their time. Right? Because that's very doable. But the impact of something that simple can be immense in terms of the connection that gets created, the message of, hey, I care about my people and I'm going to do my best to support them in whatever way I'm able. That's just one example of how to demystify it. But remember the role of leadership is inspiring others to want to follow and you can't do that instrumentally. You have to demonstrate that you first of all care about them as a human being.



Dom (51:10)

Ellen, this is fascinating and I think we've probably got the wherewithal for a second podcast, but we have to come into land. I'm going to pass over to Jen in a moment to actually bring us into land. But I just wanted to pull together what you talked about there in terms of the role of communication. And incidentally, just to echo what you said, in our findings, when we train senior leaders and we start talking about the importance of listening and questions - nine times out of 10, they will roll their eyes and saying, this is basic stuff. Why are you wasting my time? Or at least that's the implication.

And then nine times out of ten when they go into an exercise to practise they fail because they can't listen because they're moving on to other things or they find it hard and they can't ask the right question. So although it sounds sometimes obvious to them if you make them try they realise it's harder than they thought. Just to pull together what you said about communication, I think I've taken three things. Firstly you've spoken about clarity so it's good to give them facts, it's good to give them people purpose, it's good to talk about why an organisation is implementing a change we shouldn't hide from that.

You talked about connection I think - so help people understand how what's happening reflects their requirements or what their role is within it what you need from them and why it's important for them and the last, I think the biggest is conversation. Get people to talk it through give them their take on it give them chance to consider it to ask questions, to think about what their response is. So those are three things I've taken just before I pass over to Jen what else do you think is important is the important role that communication can play when people are facing change at work?

Ellen Van Oosten (52:36)

Thank you for that excellent summary, Dom, and also, yeah, this question for me, I appreciate the chance to share something else that we really haven't talked about yet. And that is, we've touched on it - but it is the impact of positive emotion over negative emotion. So what I mean in short, because I know we don't have a whole lot of time, is that as human beings, we can do good work when we are in that analytic mode I talked about. We can focus in our mental resources and really come up with some way of kind of solving something or a problem. However, we cannot sustain that over time always in that mode.

And what we have learned from a lot of research is that we need to drop on or provoke more positive emotion over negative in order for the system to thrive and flourish. And the system could be the person, one person, it could be a team. It could be the organisation or it could be society. And so to do that, it's actually quite straightforward and simple, much like the conversations we've been having. It is about integrating gratitude, integrating mindfulness, hope, compassion, and playfulness. So levers for how to do this authentically.



So in other words, the way that you do it could be different in the way that Cat does it and the way that Jen does it and every listener out there. So this is really good news, right? We don't have to be copycats of each other. This is where our own personalities and strengths come out. But if we can kind of spark gratitude, if we can focus on helping others to be mindful and reflect what they're learning, how it's going, for instance. If we can provide hope that yes, this is difficult this week, right? These layoffs are difficult for all of us, but we're going to get through this. And the people that are affected will always be part of our extended family. Whatever it is, helping people to find hope in the reality of the situation is huge for the human spirit. Compassion, showing that you care. Being able to really demonstrate some of your own vulnerability, or at least just recognising if someone's going through something in a difficult way that you notice it.

And then playfulness. Remembering to smile, remembering to have some fun, everything isn't always so serious and all about the results and the goals, right? And so any of those things are levers to foster more positivity. So we're not talking about artificial happy talk here. We're talking about truly inspiring kind of a more positive kind of a set of emotions, which is very different from anger, frustration, worry, disgust, and so on, which fall into that negative emotional space. And so remembering that is easy to put into practice. And often people find it to be energising themselves, like you don't have to always be only about, you know, getting this work done and working, however many hours a week, guess what? We could and should have some fun here. We could and should be able to prioritise gratitude. If we only have 20 minutes, let's talk about be ready to share something you are authentically grateful for and appreciate in the other person or in the team. So that's what I mean in terms of getting to the crux of it in a way that's easy for everybody to do.

Jen Sproul (56:17)

Ellen I love that. And there's so much in that that you've just said. I'm like yeah, I wish I had that more every day. And if that was around us, it does. You need that. And I think in these times that surround us, you need that time to have the playfulness and to have fun. And I think being who you are and bringing your personality to the fore is the core of that to remember it. And I think that bringing more positivity in a world where sometimes that doesn't feel that could do so much good for everybody, perhaps more than we realise. Where we are is in general societies and in life right now, isn't it? I love that. And I think that there's probably many of our listeners and internal communicators who are sort of going, this has been a fascinating podcast. I thoroughly enjoyed it, Ellen. You said so many wonderful things. And I think I tried to stop nodding my head because I was going to go so much vigorously into everything that you're saying because there's so much good stuff that you've talked about. And I've really, really enjoyed it.



I think that as our listeners and the people who doing internal communication every day, who are sitting there going, where does my future sit? What does my role look like? How do I take what you said? How do I help create an environment where there is positivity? How do I help my leaders understand the importance of listening or compassion and understanding? How do I help instil bra mindset change that management is more than the delivery of a set of tasks? and how do I help people understand how they move between the analytical and the emotional and what that looks like and the reality so that continuous change in the world we live in can flourish or can at least can be done to the best it can be when sometimes change is just really, really difficult. And as many of our listeners are doing, they're going, yeah, I want to be part of that and my role is changing from broadcast and this is what the future is. I guess my closing question to you, which is maybe a hard thing after all the wonderful things that you've talked about is what one thing can internal communicators take from today's conversation do you think?

Ellen Van Oosten (58:08)

That is a challenge. I am very appreciative of the complexity of the role of internal communicators, especially in the context that we've talked about. I would offer this to try to summarise so much of our conversation into something that folks can maybe take with them. I'll leave you with these three principles for how to inspire change.

So let's think about it in that way, the written word or in many ways, right, that your listeners would do that. One is to remember positive emotion is needed to thrive and flourish. It's not an either or, it's not only positivity. We're talking about like a ratio of generally more positive emotion over negative. Like sparking gratitude mindfulness hope so messages of hope messages of gratitude, right? are key. A second principle is remember that it's about dreams not just goals. So if all the communication is only about the goal the instrumental goal that will not inspire people or help them to be resilient in the face of change. We need to tap into inner desires, we call them dreams, right? What's a dream? A dream is really our ability to imagine a future. So that's what that is. And so you need to be able to tap into that so people understand a shared purpose and a picture of the future. And the third thing would be to remember to build what we call resonant relationships, which is about that connectivity. It's about being in sync and in tune with others and so think Dom, your three C's would come here, right, clarity, but also connection and compassion would fall there and that's where listening and being able to have those listening sessions would fall as well. So those would be my three things to leave with folks.



Jen Sproul (01:00:06)

Ellen that's a wonderful three things and many from that that our listeners and the professional community can take away into their work. So thank you so much for spending so much of your time with us today, Ellen. It's been a wonderful episode and so much, I'm sure, that we'll share. So, Cat, as the introducer, do you want to close us out?

Cathryn Barnard (01:00:20)

I do, because I just feel like I know we had a couple of false starts. It's taken a tiny bit longer than Ellen and I would have preferred to bring her here today to talk to us. But oh my goodness me, worth its weight in gold. And as I've listened to everything that she shared, I just think this is the future of the profession, the connective work, the relational work, the resonant work, that's it in a nutshell. Yes, there will always be a requirement to produce broadcast written content, but there's this whole other side of internal communication now, not least as we walk into ever more AI enabled futures. How do we remain connected, tethered, aligned, around goodwill, around motivation and so on.

So Ellen, I absolutely without stealing too much more of your time, I mirror what Dom said when he said, we need to have you back at some point for another conversation. We would love that if that were to happen. But this has been amazing and thank you so, so much.

Ellen Van Oosten (01:01:32)

Thank you and thanks to all of you for putting this podcast together and to all of your listeners. That was the fastest hour and a half or almost hour and a half I've had – I can't even believe it. I'd love to continue it at any point and hopefully we'll see each other again soon and often. We'll leave it there.

Cathryn Barnard (01:01:47)

Thank you so much, Ellen.