Transcript for S9E2 The Future of Internal Communication Podcast with Chris Carey and Christina Dolding

Dom (0.043)

Hello and welcome to the next instalment of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Dominic Walters and as usual joined by my co-hosts Cat Barnard and Jen Sproul. And today we welcome two guests from Axiom Communication, Chris Carey, the MD, the boss of Axiom Communication. Chris and I go back a long time. I won't say exactly what year it was that we first met, but it definitely started with a 19, not a 20.

And over those years, Chris has worked with a lot of different clients on a whole range of communication, internal communication, employee engagement, and other types of assignments. And no doubt we'll talk a bit about that. His colleague, Christina, is a leading expert on both the employee experience and also the colleague experience, internal experience for people. And has really come to this, I think, as a bit of a critical friend for those of us who see ourselves as professionals around internal communication. I think having over the years, having mixed experience of the role of internal communication in the colleague experience. And no doubt we can pick up on that. Chris and Christina, welcome. My first question, I guess, is how much justice have I done in that introduction and what have I missed?

Chris (01:48)

Wouldn't have changed the word, Dom. Brilliantly done.

Dom (01:52)

In which case, let me ask you a question around this whole area of colleague experience and something I know has come very much to the forefront, particularly for internal communicators in the last, I guess, 18 months to two years. So it'd be great to clarify terms. So can I ask you first of all, and perhaps Christina, I'll come to you first and then to you, Chris, what do we mean by colleague experience and why is it so important for us to be concerned about?

Christina Dolding (02.16)

Thanks Dom. Well I find it really fascinating because in reality organisations are delivering colleague experience whether they realise it or not it's happening, it's happening day in day out and the chances are it's consistent and random and with that comes high risk and high costs, you know high levels of nutrition, you need to get hold of it and just why it's important, I'll go on to it in a bit more detail in a minute but if you don't mind me sharing a few stats just to make the point about the important. So disengaged employees cost businesses 18% of their salaries in the US. One in three employees in the UK are unhappy in their job. And I was thinking about that myself with my own friends and I was thinking, yep, that feels about right. And 69% of

employees will reject a job if they know workers are unhappy. My favourite, and I've definitely been there, 36% of employees in the US will give up $5,000 a year on their salary to be happy at work and in the UK that's 10% of their salary and I've definitely been in that space. But to go back to your question, what is it? There are two lenses to colleague experience. One is the organisational lens, so that's engagement, employee engagement, culture, and I think they're two separate things.

and the management and the measurement of employee experience which is too often gets missed. And the whole employee experience world is as I think you said you know 12 to 18 months you know it's been going on since the year dot really hasn't it and we're really struggling to get to grips with it and unlike customer experience, employee experience is really at an embryonic stage.

And if you think about the colleague experience, that's from the beginning of when they're looking to join an organisation. So it's like recruitment is pre-joining to leaving and it's not just that, oh, I've just left. It's getting paid, getting everything back. So it's that whole end-to-end journey and all the moments of truth that sit in that, of which there are seven, and they don't change. And I see a lot of organisations focusing on that honeymoon period, on that onboarding journey. A lot of effort is going in there.

Christina Dolding (03:53.058)

but there's not much effort going into the post honeymoon period, which I think is really sad. So doing the job, your pay of benefits. I'm a big fan of like managing life events from employee perspective, from employer perspective, these things need to be done. And it's easy to do the tools and techniques exist in the world of customer experience. And they're just a simple mirror to the world of colleague experience. So, and if you don't do it, somebody else will. And that younger generation that's coming through,has high expectations and rightly so. And if employers are not authentic, they're gonna leave.

Dom (05:00)

I'll come on to you Chris in a moment, but Chris, let's go back to what you said about engagement and experience. Because I know from talking with other internal communicators that there's sometimes a confusion perhaps or a blending of those two things. When does engagement stop and experience start and what's the relationship with the two? I know it's quite a complex topic, but what's your take on that?

Christina Dolding (05:20)

I mean engagement for want of a better way of saying this tactical stuff and experience is strategic I would say. So experience is looking at your end to end journey as a very intentional,

consistent, measured and understood journey. Like every aspect of that colleage journey is clearly understood, managed and measured. Engagement is like I said is more tactical things and you know with that you know joining and being delighted to join Axiom but the types of things Axiom do a lot of that is in the world of employee experience but it's very focused on engagement and it's a wonderful thing to have engagement but it doesn't solve all the problems and you need that and you need to be managing the end-of-end journey. Does that make sense?

Dom (06:02)

Yes, and it's a really helpful distinction between one being more tactical and one being more strategic in terms of overall outcome. Thank you. Well, Chris, we come to you. What's your take on this whole area of colleague engagement and sorry to colleague experience and why it's important.

Chris (06:17)

Thanks, Dom. I just want to loop back around on one of the things that Christina said about focusing on that golden period when people join an organisation for that three-month probation period. We concentrate really, really hard from an HR standpoint on making that a great experience. What we should be aware of is they then go and have a drink in the canteen or a virtual meeting via Teams with a whole bunch of disaffected people that have been in the organisation for years and tell them how it actually is. So even when we focus on that first three months, we should be aware that there are people out there that aren't necessarily, calling the same tune that we would want them to call. I guess from my standpoint, having really focused on employee engagement for so long, but realising more recently that we have been working in the world of experience without wishing to call it that, it must be said. For me, it's all about the difference that it can make to attraction and retention. So massive challenges we all know right now.

What better advocates are there for staying with or joining an organisation than the existing colleagues who should be raving fans of the organisation that employs them? And I think experience has got a lot to play there. If we get that right, of course, the paying public, the customers will notice, or the internal customers will feel the benefit too. We've strived to make sure that colleagues in every organisation that we work with are truly inspired, really enjoy what they're doing. They might even have some fun. The bottom line is it needs to show. So we've been doing it for 30 years. Candidly, Dom, we just didn't know to call it employee experience.

Dom (07:44)

I see. So it's something we know what to do. We know how to do it. We've got to basically look at it more strategically perhaps and say, well, actually, this is something that can help the organisation achieve its goals, which gives us a very strong argument.

Chris (07:56)

I think we have got a number of the keys to the car, but we haven't got all of them. And I don't think that we're necessarily focusing on it. We're still too concentrating on key messages and attendance rates and compliance levels and all that good stuff. I think we need to move more into what difference does that actually make to human beings that work in these organisations.

Christina Dolding (08:14)

I was just going to say, and this is my critical friend piece here, you know, you get a lot of mission statements, purpose statements, behaviours, that type of thing, you know, that all comes in and engages, and then that tends to change with, you know, whatever ex-co C-suite is in place, you know, one or bringing a new one, and then employees are going through that journey and on like a little, on a boat, and that's what I think causes a lot of the problems, because underlying underneath all that, the employee experience journey is not understood and employees have been cast adrift on the sea of this ever-changing narrative that's coming from the organisation, which I've been there many a time, and it is a very confusing place. You become quite cynical the more you've been with one organisation and you're just like, well, that's what organisations do. And to my point is that younger generation is not going to be cynical, they're going to walk away. You know, it's really important that those kind of waves don't, you know, sometimes it's tsunami, you know, a new ex-member might come in a new CEO and suddenly everything changes and everything is thrown out and they don't always, and this isn't just my own experience, other experiences, nobody stands back and looks at what was working. Some of this was actually working. And, you know, wouldn't it be amazing if you could keep the best of it and just improve it? Um, so yeah, that's my kind of take on that side of things.

Cat Barnard (09:33)

It is really, really interesting, isn't it? Because to some extent, I sometimes look at this, all this, this whole panorama and think, my God, are we overthinking this? Like, you know, if you try and describe to somebody how you ride a bike, you can't do it. And in fact, the action of riding a bike becomes very, very difficult, because when you think it, you can't do it. But I agree entirely with your point, Christina, about a rise in demand and expectation of authenticity. And I think there's a really funny thing going on at the moment, particularly since COVID and as geopolitical tensions arising, supply chains are weakening, we've got all manner of complex issues in our commercial landscapes that have resulted in, I think, a new era of continuous change and uncertainty, instability, et cetera, where leaders seem to maintain the viewpoint that they need to assert authority because that is the role of leadership. And yet that isn't to all intents and purposes what we followers want from our leaders. And so there's a really interesting question

that I have in my mind around the role that colleague experience plays in transformation, because we are, whether there are proactive, deliberate transformation programmes going on in the workplace or not, we are all subjected to continuous change that is stemming from complexity. And my view is we need to as individuals feel connected to a greater whole in order to pull together and respond effectively or adapt to these changes. So from your point of view, what are you seeing and experiencing in terms of how the notion of colleague experience plays into a successful business transformation? I know we've talked about that prior to coming on air and started a really interesting conversation. So I want to try and tap into what we started there.

Chris (11:56.897)

Can I pick up on that then, Cat? I think the whole colleague experience has got a massive role to play in effective business transformation. And I agree with you in the context of we want our leaders to set a direction. We'd like to be involved in that decision-making process. If we can be pleased, that would be fantastic. We've got lots of brilliant ideas we'd like to bring to the party. Would you mind listening? Appreciate that you need to set the direction, but we'd really appreciate being in on that conversation because we've got a lot of value to add.

Chris (12:25.081)

And we hear employees saying all of the time. And we certainly want to be there as a way of contributing to how we get to the intended direction. So for me, it's about being super clear about where you want your business to be going as far as we're able to tell in today's VUCA world. But both in terms of hard metrics, which of course we get measured by, but also what's it going to be like to, what's it going to feel like to work in this organisation, whether you've been there for five minutes, five years, or 25 years. And then being super clear about what is the role of our colleagues in helping to deliver that. We set the North Star, but how are we going to get there? And I don't think that any leader worth his salt now or her salt now would be able to map that out for us. I think it's a co-creation activity. So it's about dialogue. What is the role that colleagues can play in delivering success? And I think we should co-create that.

What will success look like for this business, for our customers, for our colleagues, for our team? What's what success look like? Let's get our heads around that. What will it sound like? What will we be hearing our customers saying? What will we be hearing in the corridors of power around the organisation in the chats on Teams meetings before we finally get started? What's it going to feel like for everyone involved? How does how does my contribution fit in?

I'd love to be able to describe how what I do helps achieve organisational success and success for me personally. And then in concrete terms, what do you want me to do? What can I offer to do? When can you get it done by? Who do I need to work with to make it happen? I think it's really, really important that we also discuss what's in it for them. We talk constantly about the customer experience and what it's going to be like for the shareholder. But what's it going to be like for the people that are helping to deliver that success?

I think we need to get our people involved and think more about the experience and not just internal comms, as it were. After all you try delivering change without your people.

Cat Barnard (14:17)

Right, isn't it that there's that, I mean, it's probably long in the tooth now, but there is a McKinsey data point that says that more than 70% of transformation programmess fail, and then it dives into the data and most of it is down to a lack of alignment and buy-in at the internal stakeholder end. And we've probably all been there in some way, shape or form, like trying to get your children actually to do things that they don't want to do as one case in point. But there's nothing more frustrating than trying to move something forward and being met not just with apathy, but actual resistance and you know it's resistance. And so that's a massive, massive thing right there, isn't it? Christina, what's your thought?

Christina Dolding (15:06)

Well, I'm very practical, so I think the tools and techniques used in the world of customer experience translate brilliantly. So on a business transformation, step back from the word go, step right back and look at it from the impact of the colleague. Map the journey. Like, how is it going to impact recruitment? How is it going to impact pay and benefits? Let's be honest, quite a few impact pay and benefits.

How is it going to affect doing the job? Is it transformation? Has it got an environmental thing? Is there office change? Are the team changes? Are there going to be redundancies? Is it going to impact people's opportunity for promotion? Is there some kind of HR change on the landscape as well? Are we changing the kind of some cultural changes? And then within that, with an internal contact, you need to know what the terrifying messages are as well as the positive messages.

I'm with Chris, it's totally about co-creation. I think organisations get scared of business transformations because there will be negative impacts, because there will, you know. It's unusual for a business to transform just for no reason. There's normally a business imperative to do that. It might be cost saving, I think we probably all know and have seen lots of impacts of that.

And even if it is that, you can still take the people on your journey because you need to know if you're going to do X, has that got an impact on the front team on the front line? You should be a brave organisation and bring these people into the conversations Many, many years ago, I was lucky enough to be involved in that and it made a huge difference. So you might have to do it under a non-disclosure agreement.

But do you know what? That's a great thing to do. It's much better to find out upfront where your little niggles are going to be or catastrophes waiting to happen might happen. And then you can plan them in and from an internal comms perspective you have to start thinking about a hearts and minds message. You know, you need a proper campaign.

Christina Dolding (16:54)

I love hearts and minds, not my phraseology, but if you think about hearts and minds campaign, no matter how difficult that transformation is or how wonderful it is, you are probably gonna focus on the right messages. But too often organisations are scared. They know there's some bad news in there, they shy away from it. And then colleagues are met with a face of complete and then they're just left to kind of get on with it. And some will probably moan.

I was talking to Chris earlier, there's a concept on I think Cat you were talking to this, there's people that are unhappy. There's a word called cave people, if you haven't heard of it, continually against virtually everything. And you will play to those people, you will play to them, they'll go, well see I told you, told you they were up to no good, I told you, and look what's happened. And cave people gather followers into their caves. And involving cave people in these journeys is actually sometimes quite important because you're gonna get that anyway. So sometimes it's quite good to get a cave person involved. And we all know cave people. I've been a cave person. I'm a positive person, but I've been a cave person in certain, so I put my hands up to that. So I think it is about putting the people at the heart of it and understanding the people impacts at the very beginning and being honest about it. I think honesty is so important and quite often missing. Sometimes when we're looking at communication.

Cat Barnard (18:16)

I will pass over, but I'd not heard that acronym before. And I think I love it. But I also think my experience in my career has been, if you politely invite a cave person to share with you why they are dissenting, nine times out of 10, they crumble quite quickly.

Chris (18:37)

And I'd build on that, Cat, imagine the power of having somebody formerly famous for being a cave person to suddenly becoming a raving fan for what you're trying to achieve. I think their voice would carry significantly further with the people that we need to influence than any senior manager speech at an event ever could. So I think those cave people need to be our new best friends. We need to fire them with enthusiasm, or if they continue to be cave, fire them with enthusiasm and with the support of our HR colleagues to make sure we do it properly, of course. But I'm up for, you know, let's get these to be infectious advocates for everything we're trying to do. Imagine the power, imagine.

Cat Barnard (19:14)

Right. And at the very least, you know, presumably dialogue with those types of persona invites access to what is actually wrong with the organisation, right? It just gives you such, it has the potential, if they're legitimate complaints, it gives you huge potential to improve, right?

Christina Dolding (19:39)

Absolutely, and that's my thing at the start, taking it back, looking at the moments of truth within the employee journey, within the colleague journey. Get that cave, but no, they will probably articulate it very badly. There's going to be a lot of noise, a lot of emotion, but there's probably truth within, you know, once you strip away all the emotion, the truth is probably there, and they've probably got a point. They're just, you know, they've turned it into kind of something like gargantuan but I do think that whole journey mapping at the start and then just keep checking in and making sure you know that you have listened you're not always going to agree with a cave person.

And the company that I learned the cave person analogy from, Chris said fire them with enthusiasm or whatever. They call it releasing talent to the competition, which I really like. So they get their chance, they get the opportunity to come on board, be part of the change. And if they don't, well then you need to go and work somewhere else. Do you know what I mean? You need to kind of have these honest conversations. This probably isn't for you. And I think that's being honest.

Jen (20:39)

going to jump in now if that's okay. I've just been listening and nodding intently to both of you, Chris and Christina with everything that you've been talking about. And so much of what you're saying resonates with the research that we've been doing, the key issues around what employees want. I want to know more about pay benefits. I want to know about career development, bad manager behaviours. I don't feel it. If you listen to me, great. But if you then don't feedback, that then makes me feel really poor. So we know all of this. And like we say, this is building body of evidence, but it still feels like there's a lot of fear to move from perhaps positive messaging to honest messaging. But that's going to do some kind of detrimental work where actually, perhaps it could add that more honesty. And I'm sure there's lots of internal communicators also nodding along whilst they're listening as well. And also feeling that sense of frustration, particularly when we talk about change communication, that they are never called in early enough.

They are not utilised as a resource for that stepping back, as you quite say, and making those considerations. And I think there is lots of things that we can pick up from the external world as well, like we say, you know, how can we work with more influencers? How can we get voices better? How can we drive advocacy? And obviously we've talked about engagement, we've talked about experience, we've talked about culture, all these different, different facets. And, and I would say, I don't know what your experiences are, but they feel very disparately placed within the organisational design of a corporate. Therefore they're not bound together. You know, engagement is in one department experience. We maybe haven't quite established that culture. Is that the leadership department or is that here? And then the tactical communication or change communication teams are somewhere else, so they're not linking it back to it. It feels so,

dispersely managed and distributely managed, which makes it not feel joined up, which is the key to it.

And I've always thought that internal communicators have a great opportunity here to be the people that bind that together. So I guess when I was just trying to see, well, get your honest views and what do you just, what role does internal communication play in colleague experience? How can we as a professional community help design it and overcome it with all the things that you've just talked about?

Chris (22:53)

First of all, it was really disheartening, if I'm honest. When Christina and I first met in 2023, early in 2023, and she described 30 years in corporate life and having a patchy experience with internal communications professionals, my heart sank. So it's encouraging to hear that there is a lens through the new partnership that we've built in Axiom, which has given her a little bit of heart and me a little bit of heart too. We are the glue.

Chris (23:17)

Us internal communications, employee engagement people, we're the glue, we're the fitted carpet that touches all parts of the business if we play that hand correctly. And I think there's a whole bunch of things that we can do that really do make a massive difference to the end product, the experience that we want our colleagues to enjoy and benefit from, and of course the business benefit along the way. Let me take live events as an example, a topic that's really, really close to my heart.

We spend a lot of time trying to find a wonderful venue. We spend no time at all dialing into the needs of the participants that might come along. So we think one of the roles for internal communicators is to do some pre-search, head these problems off at the pass, do some pre-search, reach out proactively, candidly, with or without permission sometimes to the people that are going to come along to the event and find out what they want to find out about, which is often different to what leaders want to talk about.

Well, you've already got a mismatch before you've opened your mouth and turn the microphone on. So let's reach out to those people and their direct reports. They're going to be the people that deliver the strategy, the cold face. So let's talk to those guys, find out what they want when they get there. We hear and have heard for decades, senior managers standing on stage and saying that, you know, our, our people are our greatest asset and then completely ignoring them once we switched the lights off.

So we can't go on with that. It's platitudinous. It's ridiculous. And we've said it so many times. Our people are our greatest asset. And then we just don't treat them with the respect that they deserve. We create content that's serving for the leadership, but not content that's serving for the people that are going to come along with their direct reports. What if we're developing

content? Fantastic solutions. If only our people had a problem for them, they might listen and take action.

We spend time and effort on creating beautifully lit stages, wonderful graphics, super clear sound. We can do all that, by the way. We want the best guest speakers and so on and so forth. But what if no one does a thing differently as a consequence of the event that you've put forward? You've wasted all that time, energy and budget, but you can tick a box. Deliver the conference. We want everyone to have a great experience. Speakers, organisers, technical, partners, especially the participants, everyone. But it's clear for me that we need to think clearly about what is the outcome that we want to create. And that outcome, to the point you made earlier, Jen, should run across every faction involved in delivering success. Let's get clarity around that. And I know, Christina, you've got clear views about frameworks and processes to make this happen.

Christina Dolding (25:48)

And Jen, I share what you were saying about where does internal comms sit. My background is customer experience and for many years that was nobody knew where to put it. It was a thing, you know, where does it sit? Does it sit in marketing? Does it sit in sales? Goodness me, whatever. And I think employee experience like, you know, Dom said at the start, it's new, it's in its infancy, where does it sit? And I don't think it sits anywhere. I think it's its own thing. And I think organisations that grasp that and have it reporting direct to the ex-co are going to be successful in this space. It needs to be independent. I've had some great experiences with HR over the years, but I don't think it sits in HR. I don't think it sits in marketing. So when we get to the point where we can have, you know, you've probably heard of chief customer experience officers, you need, and there are roles, chief people officers, sometimes they report into HR.

Christina Dolding (26:37)

I think it needs to be an independent role. I think internal comms sits there. I think internal comms sits across the end to end journey. To Chris's point, sometimes you're in with events or there's a change and you're communicating it. I think in my experience, there's conflicting priorities for internal communication specialists. They've got their objectives, their agenda. You need to have a tone hall. You need to put this on the internet. You need to do that. But imagine a world where internal comms specialists are involved in every aspect of the journey and can put the colleague lens on every aspect of it and go, well, hang on a minute. You know, why are we doing that? Why are we saying that? Or, and actually, do you know, if you do that, that has an impact over here. So I think internal comms specialists can be brave, like empowered, they can rip the plaster off and really show what's going on in an organisation in a really safe way without too much drama, just focusing on facts. I genuinely do think there's a huge opportunity there, but I think truthfully, until internal comms sits somewhere independently within a business

where it's not getting dragged into it's master if you like. I think the opportunities there are endless, frankly, that's exciting.

Chris (27:49)

Would it be okay to share a fail, a live fail?

Jen (27:51)

Yeah. Oh, we love a fail. Fail is how we learn.

Chris (27:53)

Let's share a fail then. We weren't involved in the planning of this meeting, but we were involved in its facilitation. And we saw what seemed to me in the playbook for the meeting, it was in the energy generation sector, by the way. It said, participants given the opportunity to write on Post-it notes and place on the wall any questions they want answered live at the event. It seemed to me when I looked at that, that was fine.

But what I hadn't realised is that no one had asked them in the preceding five years. So when we came to facilitating that bit with 120 people in the room, we had to send out for more post-it notes. And candidly, we could have done with building more wall. There was just so much stuff. We had five years of pent up demand about, I really could have done well understanding this. I really could have understanding that. In the lunch break, we thought, I know what we'll do, we'll cluster them. But again, even in the clustering, there were so many topics that should have been dealt with years before prior to this 120 or so people coming together. Think about the direct reports of the people that have come to this posh event. We need to think about their experience. They've got a massive role to play. We've got a massive role to play as internal communicators. An example from the finance sector, we were asked, how should we measure the success of this event? And we said, how are you doing currently? And they said, well, we give them happy sheets to fill in at the end.

I said, what sort of feedback do you get? Well, we get feedback like the sandwiches were too warm and the room was too cold. Fantastic. Well, we can do a lot with that. So we put forward, why don't you ask 100 people three months after you turn the lights off at the conference venue, five questions about the key content. By the way, make those 100 people, people that didn't even come to the event and tell folk in the meeting that that's what you're gonna do. I've never seen so many people metaphorically sit up straight and lick the end of their pencils in my life. Because they knew that they were going to get checked on the extent to which their content was delivered. If you don't do it, you get into a terrible mess. In another sector, again, around an event that had already taken place, we were asked to research the extent to which colleagues in the field understood the key messages around a strategy and their role in delivering it. And we

went and did that field work, and we were able to go back to the board and report. The vast majority of your people understand the strategy and their role in delivering it. And the board sat up and we're very, very proud until I said, unfortunately, it was three strategies ago. They had a workforce that was brilliantly implementing something that went out of date years before. But let me give you hope, internal communications people, we know how to do this. To bring the strategy to life in another organisation, we suggested that through the participants that were at the event, we reached out to the people that weren't and asked them to make short videos about how they were bringing the strategy to life in their part of the world. We got one hundreds of videos back. We eventually got a winner and the winner was a group of five people, females that were operating in a factory in Thailand. Their prize was to visit headquarters in Gothenburg and meet the board. They'd never so much as left the country, much less, much less than anything else. They went on to become the advocates for strategy. And of course, in the by product was we got hundreds of great case studies about how we were bringing the strategy to life. We know how to do this. We just need to be a bit more intentional in terms of making it happen.

Jen (31:11)

So many good examples and so many things that we can learn from that. And like you say, I've always been a big, you know, we all make mistakes and failures, but we've got to learn from them and not bury our head in the sands about them, because then how can we go forward in the right direction? We can't pretend just because it's a long time ago, it doesn't have a ripple effect that stays for some time. And also as well, it was just interesting as well, listening back when I think about the very beginning, you talked about a customer experience has been so established, but employee experience isn't.

So I used to work in a previous life, in the market research industry. And I was there when customer experience took off, but that's where it was really sat because it was all about insight, measurement, behaviour, outcomes, knowing what it feels like from thinking about how people look at shelves and where their eyes focus and the technology was done around that or the way we monitor about that, which really was there to establish it. And I guess what I'm trying to, to get to is perhaps a quick question. Cause I know I'm hogging the mic for a minute.

And also as well in customer experience, we used to talk about it was winning the hearts, minds and wallets. We just don't need the wallets this time. There was so many synergies in what you just said, but going back to that comment that you made, particularly it was you Christina at the beginning. What are the elements of customer experience that are not being mirrored in employee experience? You said we focus on the honeymoon period, but we don't get the rest of it. If there was sort of, I guess a couple of really top tips going, I know it's the end to end journey, but you know, what are the things in the CX that you, well, that we're just not seeing in the EX world?

Cat Barnard (32:35)

Sorry, and I do want to know the answer to that question, absolutely, but I just want to chime in because you've made me think of something, Jen, about the lived experience of people at work, germanely.   And it seems to me to be the case that we've gone from really lacklustre interactions with HR where even today too many people talk about only going to HR if there's a real issue that needs to be, you know, something that's legislative, something that's policy, something that is a breach of conduct or what have you. And we seem to have gone from that, whichwas kind of the norm in many, many organisations, to now this really messed up state where we're continuously sending out surveys and going, well, what do you think about this? And what do you think about that? And rate us out of five. And it's like, hold on a minute, there isn't there a whole load of heart missing right at the epicentre of this whole conversation.

Jen (33:36)

We are emotive beings. We know that. I think I heard someone say once that it's a stack, we make, I think it's something like 80% of our decisions from the emotional part of our brain, not from the rational part of our brain. That's how we live and we feel. And yes, we know we need data and research, but from my understanding many years ago, customer experience is also designed where we aren't asking you questions. We were trying to study your behaviour and design into your likes and your preferences to understand you first, to connect with you first, rather than just try and assume. And I sometimes worry that we're trying to get there too fast when you're not going back to that data point. And yes, surveys are important, but I don't know, Christina, you probably need to check there, but those are the things that I think are missing perhaps.

Cat Barnard (34:17)

Just to, again, be devil's advocate here, we want to understand your behaviour. Why? Not because we care about you as human beings, but because we want you to work harder for us. Well, how inauthentic is that? And back to the point about Gen Zs and agitators and employee activists coming into the workplace, they can see through all of this.

Christina Dolding (34:39)

It's about intentional. It's about, in the same way with customer experience, you have to create consistent intentional journeys. So if you're an organisation, anybody could go to you and you'll get a consistent intentional journey. You know, there's a brand journey. The same needs to happen with employee experience. And all those tools and techniques, like I said, you know, user workshops, I mean, you have got your employees with you, haven't you? That's not like you need to go and spend a lot of money trying to get somebody to source consumers, do some research. So for me it's about mapping these journeys, having workshops on the, like we've discussed onboarding, but paying benefits. A lot of companies are really shy about sharing bands for salaries. That's a real thing I have a bit of an issue with. I think you should know what

your salary band is, I think you should be aware of it. I think certain organisations like the Civil Service, you know what the bands are.

And therefore, you know where you are and it's not a thing. And I was doing some work with some teachers and I thought that was a similar thing, but within the teaching grades, that schools can actually uplift your salary within tiers. So it isn't quite as black and white as I thought it actually was. But for me, the big thing to answer your original question, Jen, and Cat, we have to do these workshops. You have to, you know, I love doing this. You know, you go in and you talk to people, you give them the framework to have a conversation. They then share their lived experiences and you can then go back to the organisation and say this is what they said and here's the verbatim to back it up. Life events Jen for me is the big one to start. The management of life events. Life event is where your personal life bumps into work, either in a positive or a negative way. But let's think about maternity, you're buying a house, you get married, you've got the holidays, something goes wrong. Pets, I don't know if you've heard there's something called pawternity. So some companies are kind of getting with the vibe on that. But this is about things that are at the core that matter to you. And when you need your work to be there to respond to you positively, they have to respond positively. And you won't forget if they don't. And you will remember forever if they do.

Christina Dolding (36.49)

I've been very, very lucky to have some incredibly positive moments in my own life where I was having very difficult situations and my manager, I pick up the phone and he's like, do what you need, just do what you need. And that's what you want to hear. You don't want to go, let me have a look at the rule book or I'm going to have to speak to HR. And I think you can, and the maternity journey is a great place, generally, you know, if you're sort of saying, where can an organisation start? Well, maternity is a thing, it's gonna happen, isn't it? It's gonna happen, maternity, paternity. And I think mapping your maternity journey is a great place to understand an experience. It gives you the methodology to do it, gives you the feedback from people, you can make some immediate quick wins and change. And there are three parts to a maternity journey. There's the pre, before you go off, there's when you're off and then when you come back. Now I'm sure organisations don't think like that, they don't, but you need to know what does that pre-journey look and feel like, and leaders need to be trained, properly trained in these experiences. And this is where internal comms come in, not some, oh, there was an email last December, did you not read it? Internal comms should be involved, I think, in these workshops just to hear the stories, to hear the lived experiences and then articulate the solutions.

Chris (38:05)

It's fascinating as I'm listening to you speak, I'm mapping that onto your typical employee opinion survey question. And then I look at stats around people leaving an organisation, often not long after starting, or they've been around forever and they're just hanging on for retirement now. We ask people in exit interviews why they're leaving, and quite often they talk about life experiences and how they were managed.

We're asking them all the wrong questions in an employee opinion survey. And in any event, we just get a stat back. We don't understand why they said what they said, unless we get in a room and ask them. We're asking them potentially the wrong questions. And to the customer experience perspective, I was around in an organisation a few years ago that kept getting 10 out of 10 on the monthly customer satisfaction score and sacked the provider and they said, well, how can you sack us? We've been getting 10 out of 10 every month on the customer satisfaction score to which the customer said, you're asking me all the wrong questions. I can't help thinking that we're doing the same sort of thing around the employee opinion survey. We've got to get in and find out what are the issues that are really on our colleagues' minds, not the usual pat stuff that we ask that in any event, the results that we get back so broad, it's very, very difficult to act on them. We need to get underneath those numbers. I think that for me is, is really clear I think we've got to be significantly more intentional about the experience we want people to enjoy and benefit from. And obviously the customer, the ultimate end customer will, will gain from that. I think that colleague experience has got to be the first thing that we think of, not an afterthought as I think it is in so many cases right now, or candidly, not even thought about at all.

Dom (39:42)

I was going to ask, laid on from that really, to look at how we can help people listening in to frame that and to shape the colleague experience. Because listening to what we've all been saying, actually let me put my cynical hat on for a moment. You could say, well, we're really saying what we've been saying for 20 or 30 years. You've talked about the importance of authenticity, of dialogue, of bringing people together, of co-creation, of conversation, explaining what where people sit in the great scheme of things, what the line of sight is, all of which is fantastic. We also know that that's not likely to happen in every organisation in the future. We'd love it to happen, but it won't. So I'd love to get your take both on how you envision the colleague experience changing over the next few years, and what factors will improve it, and what factors we have to watch out for that are going to cause drag on it and stop it from doing what we know it needs to do.

Chris (40:32)

I think the number one thing and Christina and I will probably say this together is listen and to your point, Dom, yeah, as, as we were thinking about today, I was reflecting on the fact that some of these conversations you and I could have had a amount of years ago and, you know, it feels a bit like deja vu all over again, so to say. But I think what's changed is the world has changed. Whereas we were banging on a door that we're kicking on it quite hard, frankly, headbutting the damn thing. We wouldn't ever get to get let in.

Chris (40:58)

I think the world has changed now. I think that people are demanding this of us now, not we're banging on a door that won't open. I think the door is wide open. I think we just need to step into it. Our particularly younger colleagues joining an organisation for the first time, kind of expects us to behave in this way. We're the ones that are out of step. So we need to just get back into step and to take this opportunity.

The first time I ever got involved in employee engagement was well over 30 years ago, and it was to do the employee opinion survey. I thought this is easy. All I need to do is look at all the wonderful things we've done since the last employee opinion survey and go back with a campaign that said, you said we have. I was grounded within minutes because I couldn't find a thing that we'd done since the last employee opinion survey. We're having that conversation yet still. So listening, surveying, I think is really, really important. But we need to listen to understand. Properly listen, be seen to be properly listening, not window dressing listening, not listening to respond, but listening to truly understand. I think the worst thing we can do is pretend that we're listening as organisations to our colleagues and then do the square root of nothing about what we're hearing. So listen properly going forward, then take action head on and get underneath the sentiments behind employee opinions, survey statistics, try and find out via deep dives, in one to ones and in focus groups, why they said what they said. Are we even asking you the right questions? Of course, we need to celebrate what we're doing well, but we need to keep our feet on the floor. There's a whole bunch of stuff that we're not doing well. So we need to address that. I know that, Christina, you're a mad fan of sort of processes to get to that and to operationalise it as well, knowing that to be the heart of many a senior exec.

Christina Dolding (42:39)

I think it's going to be like customer experience. It's going to gather its own pace. It's going to have to, you know, you're going to have to get with it and understand it and isn't it wonderful. There is a well trodden path for customer experience and the same thing happens. But when you think about what makes employee colleague journey, often it's the technology that the businesses and that's often the first thing is bought be that the operating system, HR thing. I mean, how many multiple sign-ons do some people have to deal with? But there's the tech.

Then you've got your HR processes or your local processes for whatever it is the work that you're doing and you've got the leadership Who's interpreting some of that work around it? And then you as the colleague are on the receiving end of that in the same way that a customer would be on the receiving end of that so it's a very bumpy journey very crowded journey and What needs to change and I think will change is actually designing with not letting those journeys just happen is actually going, I'm just going to go back to the maternity journey because it's quite an easy one. We want to have a really good maternity journey, so let's stand back from it, map it, see what the experience is, co-create the new one, share it and make it happen and train leaders. Like what happens at the moment is leaders aren't trained, things just happen. So leaders don't know how to execute the vision, the process, whatever it is, the experience, let's call them experiences. So I think training leaders, and I think I was back in the day too many years ago when I was made a manager for the first time, I was taken away for a whole week, role played things, it was amazing. And that definitely made me a better, I think you can have the

tools and techniques, but leadership, it's not HR that delivers employee experience, it's teams and leaders, colleagues, they deliver the employee experience. And that needs to be understood, managed and measured and I think it's actually quite easy to do. And for an internal comms specialist, I think I would be very excited if I was on my internal comms journey to think do you know what I can get in here?

I can get my hands dirty and I can make a difference. And you know, evolution, revolution has to start from somewhere and wouldn't it be cool if that was internal comms.

Dom (44:48)

It's interesting that what you're saying, coming at it from a slightly different angle, reflects what others have said around different topics, which is a lot of this is down to how people are treated by their immediate manager, their immediate leader. And we know that means we're putting more pressure, if you like, onto people who are already very busy, but I think you can alleviate that by giving them support. And I think this has got to be a crucial role for internal communicators to give line managers, the skills, the confidence, the experience to have these conversations. And it goes back to the whole thing about, you know, line managers often fear being told they've got a communication responsibility because they think it's something dramatic, and it can be, but mostly it's having good conversations. And going back to what you were saying, Chris, to listening, which is increasingly becoming at the forefront of what we are asking of leaders when it comes to communication.

Chris (45:35)

Definitely the case. And I think for me, those very, very busy line managers, and we accept that they're very, very busy, they're very, very busy putting fires out that needn't have started in the first place. So if we can equip and inspire them to have these conversations that are likely to lead to a better employee experience, they'd be less busy. They might be able to spend a bit more time on their own development, on the development of the people around them and on improving customer experience, which is of course why so many of us get out of bed in the morning in the first instance. So I think we need to invest a little bit of time to get a bit more time back. And I know that it's a prize worth fighting for. Christina and I know how to do this. Many, many people that are listening to this and watching this will know how to do this. But, there are some brilliant stats that show the size of the prize. It may be worth just exploring some of those.

Christina Dolding (46:17)

I was just going to just give one tiny example of a leadership situation. So there's an organisation who was doing some great work around menopause, a very topical subject. That's a life event for some people, not for everybody, but it's a life event. And one of the things they were going to do was give people the opportunity to have time off work, if it was menopause to make it easy, it wasn't gonna count towards, you know, if you're five days off, you're gonna be in trouble. So like,

we're just gonna give, you can phone up, and you can have a day off if you've got menopause, et cetera, et cetera. But what hadn't been considered was the managers, one, were not trained, two, quite often were male in their 20s. So let's stand back and look at that conversation, is that conversation actually gonna happen? And I've done some research on this in the last year, and women don't even really want to have the conversation with their husbands, nevermind a 26 year old land manager at work. So this is where internal comms can make a huge difference because they stand back and go, well, hang on a minute, what's that gonna look and feel like and how is that gonna be executed in practice and how do we make that happen? So that was a really well-intended thing that just didn't work, but getting it right is amazing. So here's some stats I can share with you. Highly engaged business units realise an 81% difference in absenteeism. Where employees feel motivated, there's a direct link to growth and financial success. 23%. Is that not a great reason to do something? Engaged employees show an increase of productivity of 14% and to your point Cat, yes, of course we want people to do more work, but there's a way to do it, isn't there? And it isn't in a slightly devious, underhand way.

And companies with happy employees outperform the competition by 20%. That's Snack Nation. And if anybody, you know, any of your listeners are on the Snack Nation, it's an American report. It's brilliant. It's got some really interesting, quite fascinating stats.

Jen (48:10)

That's brilliant. Thank you so much, Christina. I'm just going to end with one final question, which hopefully can do that because there's many people that listen to it, but actually just to finish off a reflection I just had from what you were talking about with those live moment piece. It feels like a place you could start is open up the staff handbook, which has every policy in it and go, what is the human journey for each of those policies? Not the policy communications, not what's all the statutory stuff. We know that's part of it, but for each part of our policy, sick, pay, paternity, pawternity, all those sorts of things, caring responsibilities, what is the journey for you? And I would almost think, because the staff handbook is where all those policies are. That was a reflection I just had as I'm going to look at my staff handbook.

Chris (48:53)

And please, please do not write them in the language of 1.1a, 1.1b, 1.1c.

Jen (49:02)

Exactly. Humanise the handbook. So with that, I guess that was just my reflection, something I'm going to go away and do. But I think just one quick, if you can really succinctly, kind of for our listeners go, what one action can an internal communication professional take from today's conversation? Chris, can I come to you first? Then Christina, can I have one from you?

Chris (49:15)

Yeah, 100% listen, but listen with intent to understand and then you can be understood.

Christina Dolding (49:23)

I would suggest, I actually agree with you Jen, go to your handbook. I think alternatively. Find a team that you've got a good relationship with and sit and map those journeys within that team. It's a great exercise, you'll have a lot of fun.

Jen (49:37)

Brilliant. Thank you so much, Chris and Christina, for your time. There's so much that you've enriched in there from listening, from thinking about life moments to thinking about conversation and human journeys, to thinking about intent and in being intentional, consistent, all those things, but also thinking about, and I think one of the things you said as well is remember the experience is made up by the team and the leaders and the people around us and what they behave and look like. But the final thing I think we should leave on, which is something I think you said, Chris, is **the world has changed and the door is open**. So internal communicators listening, big opportunity here. Go and grab it. Thank you so much.