
**Transcript for S10 E5 Communicating with internal stakeholders in a crisis with David Wales**

Cat Barnard (00:42)

Welcome to a new episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Cat Barnard and as ever I'm joined by Jen Sproul and Dominic Walters. And today I want us to have a conversation in part about crisis communication but also human behaviour in crisis situations. So at the start of 2024, I went to an event in London and I was sat for most of the day next to a gentleman called David Wales. And we didn't actually - I don't think we spoke until literally the last hour. And then almost immediately found that we had a really interesting, rich theme of conversation to pursue. We've had various conversations since then. Regular listeners will probably remember us having last year, a lady called Ineke Botter onto the podcast to talk to us about crisis communication and what organisations should and ought to be doing to help staff deal with quite literally crisis communication. So Ineke's experience was she drew on working in Lebanon, which was a pretty hostile time of conflict where actually she was in charge as the country descended into almost a sort of civil war type scenario.

So, we've already spoken about crisis communication once. What I was so interested about when I was chatting with David was that he comes from the fire and rescue service originally and has built up a vast range of observational experience in how human beings respond to crisis situations. And what I really wanted this episode to do was to focus in on how organisations can better create a crisis communication plan, but also more importantly, which human aspects are most needed to be accentuated in those scopes of work. So without further ado, I would like to introduce David. He is the founder of SharedAim Ltd, which is a consultancy with a unique approach to helping organisations deal with the cost and disruption of unexpected behaviours that come from all quarters - workers, customers, partners, any other groups it interacts with.

David, thank you for joining us today.

David Wales (03:16)

Thank you, Cat. It's a real pleasure to join you all and thank you for the opportunity to share some thoughts and to learn from yourselves, of course.

Cat Barnard (03:24)

I feel like I wasn't doing justice to your background really. So I would like to kick this off by asking you to explain to our listeners your background in the fire service and what you have learned about how humans tend to respond to emergency situations.


David Wales (03:44)

Thank you for that. I spent 30 years trying to make sure no one knew what I was up to and now you're asking me to share it here.

Cat Barnard (03:50)

No cover now, you've just got to go for radical honesty.

David Wales (03:54)

I think probably the most significant part was I was 20 years into my service and having a very nice career, thank you very much. And at that point we'd learned the science and technical side and that's what my job was about - understanding fires and other emergencies, how they happened and how to deal with them and resolve them safely. And about 20 years in we had a meeting and we tried to understand why people were getting injured and what we could do to reduce the number of injuries in house fires. And it was here that I heard a phrase that I've lived with ever since, which I just got really fascinated with - is the sense that people weren't doing as we told them as the wise professionals we knew best and all they had to do, their only simple part in it was just do as they're told, but they didn't. And so one of my colleagues in exasperations at this meeting said, why don't they just do as they're told? And I thought it's a really fascinating question after 20 years of telling people we're there for them, that our role is purely about public service, that we're there for communities. When in fact, when I reflected on it, I joined for very different reasons. I joined because I liked the job, I liked the pay, the shifts. It was a selfish decision. It was great that it did community good, but it wasn't in truth the primary reason I joined. And I thought, I'm this far into my career and I've never meaningfully spoke to somebody about their experience, because it's not mine. I liked doing that. I wanted to turn up and do those things.

But clearly this person unexpectedly is having one of the worst days of their lives and will live with the consequences. And it's odd to say, but it never struck me - that difference in the balance and the impact it would have. And so I asked if I could take that question on and actually look at it. And to cut a long story short, we spent the next six years talking to people, just saying your story, your words, but ended up doing a three-year partnership with the university to scale up the study. But what we found by the time I went back, the expectation was probably that I would have learnt why people misbehaved and then we could form a new education campaign and tell them what to do in a more effective way. But the reality was every person I spoke to gave me an account of their situation and their priorities and their ability and what they'd achieved that made perfect sense. I never came away thinking, well, that was silly or why would you do that? They all made perfect sense. They were generally very sensible in the choices they made and happy with the risk that they took. That was a choice they made. And so by the time I went back, I said to the board, we need to look differently at the behaviour - we're not going to change this. But I have questions about our assumptions. And what really came out then, the single biggest insight I returned to the service with was we've lost connection. So if I look through all our documents, we say for the public, and you could look at the national level and local level and it's always justified in those terms. But realistically, we had no


meaningful conversation with them other than when we wanted to ask something of them on our terms. And so, I didn't have a budget and I didn't know how to resolve it. And I went to the customer experience sector because I thought big brands know how to do this. This is what they do. So I can borrow and learn from them, which is what I did. And I ended up becoming the first customer experience manager of our service to bring that customer mindset and model in. And then from there, various other opportunities arose and as you mentioned, we extended that work into the more crisis disaster space. But that was up to the point where I left the service and probably most significant part in this context about the roles that I had.

Cat Barnard (07:25)

And what I find so fascinating about that is that we societally seem to have an expectation of the service that our public sector services should be providing us with. So that's across healthcare, education, council funded public services. And yet it strikes me in tandem that across most of our public services right now, there is this communication breakdown where the service provider doesn't understand the expectation of the service recipient. So actually, what we're talking about on today's podcast is the intersection, isn't it, between what we expect from our public sector services versus the service that we're actually receiving. And most of those, if not all of those services, I'm gonna go bold - all of the services are chronically underfunded and therefore not even in a position to offer even a baseline level of satisfactory service more often than not. It's a great time to be talking about this isn't it?

David Wales (08:44)

It is, and picking up on one of your points, one of the things that we found is as we took the research out, trying to work out why some of it got taken up and some of it didn't. It was just rejected outright, despite the compelling evidence we had and the stories around it and the data. And over time, we came to realise that if you look at the system and environment in which a lot of these services all work and the fire services work, these used to be community functions. They would be how neighbours helped neighbours. And over time, as communities get bigger these become specialised services and you start to then create specific organisations. And the same happens in organisations. You go from that small organisation where everyone helps out to having particular departments.

That brings a lot of benefits, but it also means that if that department or service doesn't create strong links to those it serves, you end up with different drivers. So a lot of our public services are more driven by funding, political system, governance and inspectorates, whatever that looks like, than they are members of the public. Because all of those proxies have a means to have an influence, whether it's the political influence, financial influence or reporting. But they have resources and a means to ensure that their requirements are done. But then if you look at those, how many of those have really good robust links to do that proxy role, they come at it and it's not a criticism as such, but they have their own agenda as well. And so when you start to break it in the system, you realise it takes real bravery and leadership to act differently to the system, perhaps


encourages. And I think you can apply that to many of our services at the moment, that - you're absolutely right. The biggest fundamental weakness is that we haven't got a robust link so that as a member of the public, I have to rely on somebody else to make my case, but they will look at it through a lens that has meaning to them, not necessarily just to take forward my message. And unfortunately, I think we're getting to the point where that's having a negative effect, not just for us, but for the services themselves.

Cat Barnard (10:45)

And one of the things that we've spoken about off air is human-ness, as in the need for our communication to be embedded in the lived experience of the human. So far more, I guess, grounded in empathy and humility and relatedness and so on. Just before I pass over to Jen and Dom, when you were looking at these stories that people were telling you of their experience of responding to their own house fires, and you said, I couldn't fault any of the stories that the people shared with me, were there any kind of patterns and consistencies that you found over time? Because I'm imagining and I can't even begin to think how I would respond to a house fire. But I, to some degree, imagine that some kind of hyper adrenaline kicks in and you kind of, your propensity is to go into hero mode to save the things you value the most, even though the fire service might have said, stand aside, we will take over the situation for you. Are there any patterns and consistencies that you came up with consistently?

David Wales (12:01)

Yeah, I think often there was a gap and we looked at it in terms of risk tolerance. So everyone we spoke to almost without exception were people that had minor fires and someone that had minor injuries. All of them would do exactly the same again. Their acceptance of, I've got an event here that poses some risk, but to rescue my pet, to get my laptop that's got important information, to alert neighbours - whatever it was, was worth a trade off for a minor injury. I don't think any of them said they would do anything different because there is something within us that feels compelled to act. And agency is something that I think we really underestimate the power of. When we design communications, we want to be helpful and we often do that in a way that says, don't worry, we're the professional, just get out and stay out.

So for example, with the fire service, you alert us to something happening, average response time is eight minutes, just over. And we say, just wait - that will be the longest eight minutes you've ever waited if you followed advice, and you won't because at some point, if you're not already doing it, you will feel compelled to act. It's your livelihood to us, and I don't mean it in flippantly, but it's another job. We expect this sort of thing. That is literally your livelihood and the things that you know are in there that precious and irreplaceable. And so there's this huge gap around language, risk tolerance, that you can't expect others, your audience to suddenly make that up because this is unexpected to them. They're not thinking about this, most people, particularly with fire or health or crime, are thinking it's not going to be me, you know, and thank goodness for that. So it's us as professionals that really need to do more deep thinking around how do we get to that point that we


haven't suddenly got to deal with the difference in language or what we consider to be safe. And what we found is a lot of risk averseness in organisations, they would typically think about the worst case scenario.

So we did an exercise with our control team one time and they're intermediate. They obviously don't attend instance, but they'll take the first call and they'll hear from the caller. And we put them in different teams and said, so when somebody says I have a fire in the house, tell me what it is that you think is happening the other end. What's the likelihood someone's going to get injured and how's that going to happen? And it was fascinating that the people that have been there longest actually had a more extreme version that they thought many, most of the fires were likely to be life threatening or at least serious injuries. When you look at the data, fortunately, those are one in a thousand incidents. Most ones are very low key, don't pose a great risk and the person is very safe and considered in their actions. And so you've got this immediate imbalance of the people that's communicating saying, get out, get out, get out. And somebody's looking at a bit of smoke coming from the toaster thinking, why? And there's no follow-up message, that is it. So we end up shouting louder or saying it with more force. There is no, okay, if you're really gonna go in, tell me what it is you see and I'll try and help you stay safe. And actually that's where the shared aim bit for me came about with realising that we have a job to do as a fire service and it is to make people safer than that. But you can't do it if you discount what other people value. And as humans, unfortunately for us in the comms side, we're different.

What I value today may be different to what I value tomorrow depending where I am, what's going on. And so we have to build that uncertainty into how we think about the work beforehand. And just quickly on that, one of the things the communications team really hated, because I said, we can't just have this generic message. It's irrelevant to most people if we default to worst case. And I said, but it makes it really difficult with the comms, and particularly at a time of crisis. And I said, I understand that. So maybe then what we need to think about doing is just saying, if you have any concerns when you've got a fire, phone us. Now our job is not to dictate what that means, it's to be useful in the moment, to allow them to tell us what's happening and their circumstances and for us to have the resources and flexibility and organisation behind that to be useful in the moment. So we can keep a simple message, but it does mean we've got to change our operational practice behind that to be useful.

Jen Sproul (16:10)

There's so much you just said that, as you say it, it makes perfect sense. But I think that going back to what you were saying earlier what Cat was saying as well earlier about public services and resources, and I think there's this foundation, I think it's true, and you said it as well, that was particularly with corporates and just the sheer size and the sheer scale and the sheer things that they have done. I think the contract we have between customer and provider service and receiver. Those contracts are in the workplace and comms I think are shifting as in I have a different expectation from you than what you're bringing to me and just giving me process and formality and things like that doesn't work in that same way and I'm going to express more of my agency to do that and we've taken away particularly in larger organisations that in some aspects that community aspect of work and that community aspect of things that we do. But then as you go on and you were talking then the other


thing that strikes me is that particularly with crisis and when we walk into them whatever they look like - you're talking about a fire that's a personal human, that's like a threat of life you know whatever that might feel like you feel highly exposed and highly at risk. And we can all imagine at moments, whether you've just wobbled on a pavement, you think you're going to fall over, or you use that adrenaline that goes through your body in those moments when anything that's of sense and rationality just goes out.

But I think it's that thing is in crisis communication, however that turns out, is that we write scripts, we prepare processes, we think about all those things, but we are a human psychological complexity where when crisis happens, emotions come to the front and rationality goes to the back. So thinking about that, that sense of scripting and managing that, that becomes a place where it doesn't feel human, it doesn't feel like actually how I'm doing it and I can't hear rationality, I can only hear what I'm feeling perhaps. Just my reflections, I think you said that we've never really thought about it as well and I guess with that in mind, what have you learned from crisis communication? Obviously, you're talking about, like I said, those high risk moments, but generally as your work, as you've thought about customer experiencing and the things that you're talking about is how are we building ourselves to respond in the right way? and how do we learn from that to take and improve crisis communication so we know it's going to lean into the emotional mindset and psychology, not the rational one.

David Wales (18:50)

I think one of the things I really like about it is that it's not something you can switch on and off. You can't foresee a crisis coming up, assemble the team and go into crisis mode and craft the conversation because you won't get the language right. You won't really understand the community or those you're speaking to because often I find we'll focus on the “what”. We're very functional. This is going to happen there's maybe a fire next door to keep the windows closed. For most people that interrupt their day-to-day life. So they might be thinking, well, I'm due to go to the doctors or just about to hang the washing out. That we're interrupting them at a very different place. And they think about the practical implications. It may be quite minor like that, or it may be, I don't want any services coming in my flat or my house. They may have good reason or any reason that they would rather you don't enter. We found for example, there's a real decision-making process that we ignored because we just say, call us. And we assume that is what happens. But when you spoke to people, some people saying, but you arrived, I didn't want the neighbours knowing because we don't arrive subtly. You're going to have a lot of noise, a lot of fuss and a crowd. There are others saying, I thought you still charged or somebody else might need you more. And you completely ignore the decision making that they will go through.

And so if you want to connect with people, I think it's very much about be present in their everyday lives, go and have informal chats day to day. So one of the things we did  a project with an EU funded one around societal resilience. And that was one of our findings that we should really look at, they're different conversations, but you have to be present in people's day to day lives. You have to hear how they speak the things that matter to them and start to work with them to say, okay, if this happened, what do your priorities be? How could we find a way to make that safe? So it may be. You may remember years ago there was concern about car thefts and people saying, if you want to get


out of a building, there was a tension between security and being able to exit freely. So you keep your keys near the front door, but it makes them vulnerable to be stolen through a letterbox. And so you then think, okay, well, they are both realistic concerns. Maybe we put them into a secure box near the front door. So you still got access when you need them. So if you come at it from both angles or different perspectives, you will find a solution, but you can't do that in the moment when suddenly everything's starting to unfold because everyone's now really focused on their particular priorities and you get these competing tensions or you just get ignored. And you see that quite often that you think, well, we told them and they do their own thing. And so it takes an investment in time building relationships because those are the relationships that then you build the trust from. And when you've got trust, you're more likely going to have that ability to engage at a time of high stress.

And one of the other things I think just worth noting is where you see unexpected behaviours, and this is a point Cat touched on earlier, we typically then go into what's wrong with them, as I mentioned earlier at the start of our story. And what I've realised over time is often, your likelihood of changing those behaviours is very low and it's quite costly to try. But if you look into the organisation and find out what assumptions drive those, sometimes you won't even be able to find the source of them. It's just they've been around so long, we all believe them. Other times they're completely false. So again, if we use the fire service example of in the event of a fire, don't delay your escape by trying to get your pet. You can imagine how many people take notice of that. And we heard that in the stories. It's ignored because it's not relevant for people. And I think the point you touched on, Jen, about agency, with agency comes ethics. The minute you start saying to people, don't - ultimately, it's their house. They've chose to call us to help them. And we arrive and just push them to one side and say, no, don't be a nuisance. We're going to deal with this. That sense of it's their property, their lives has completely been removed while we do our thing. And there's many examples around that. And so I think if you're going to intervene in some way like that, it's your responsibility to know what the possible actions are.

So the example with our study, we found that a third of people having exited the building went back in. And when I told my colleagues this, they said, well, then we've got to stop that. That's dangerous. And I said, but you don't know what happens then. This is before we get there. So it's not like we can do anything at all of use. They are there. We're not. Let's assume they're not stupid and they're making decisions. Do we know for certain that their actions aren't saving lives before we can do anything about it? Because if they actually followed our advice and more people died, is that success? Just to prove that we were right? So it's about when you intervene in any way, that's a more extreme example, but I think we have to do more work to go beyond what we're saying. And think about the ethics of that. That's somebody's life, their property, they will live with the consequences once we've gone off to the next job. And some of us have said that the ability of knowing we did the right thing, even if on paper to an external person, it may seem silly. We live with that choice that we failed to act or we did act in the right way.

So I think these are really important discussions that you have to have if we want to be better at really connecting that communications piece. And what I did find in numerous documents was either explicitly or implicitly a sense that as I'm a professional, you can't be. And that you'll be aware with the work on trust where we look at how much we trust politicians, how we trust the media. I actually approached Edelman a couple of years ago and said, have you got the reverse? How much organisations trust citizens because in many cases that is a bigger blockage because we assume


everyone is incompetent and unable to follow actions and we have to do everything - and the truth it's far far from that. So when we looked at the fire stat we found that far from everyone calling us 70 to 80 percent of people dealt with the fire in the home without ever needing us and of the ones that we attended some of them were already out on arrival. So you now get a better picture and things you can do to help people that don't call you, and people that do.

And so I think, as I say, for a lot of this, it's really about understanding what informs your opinion and your belief and have you got the ethical piece right? Are you engaging with people? Are you talking to them to say you've got trust and you trust enough that you know what their priorities are and you respect them as individuals? Back to your point, Cat, these are humans and they have to be respected. To be seen and heard is one of the most powerful things you can do for people.

Cat Barnard (25:23)

And it cuts straight to because still very topical with the recent release of the IC index, you know, the hybrid work debate and the extent to which people are coming back into the office, but they don't believe that the decision for coming back into the office has been made in their best interest, presumably, and I'm making an assumption, presumably because they've not been consulted, they've not been part of the design thinking that's gone into that decision making. And there is this really interesting piece, isn't there, about agency and autonomy and what's it, you know, kind of treat us as adults, treat us as adults.

Jen Sproul (26:05)

That's exactly what I was going to say, Cat, and I think the thing that struck out to me in the Index as well is that when we asked employees - we focused on trust - but when we asked employees questions - we asked them to pick who they think the organisation is in the best interest of. And 43% of employees said, I think that my organisation operates in the best interest of the employees. So therefore, you're already starting from that low base. And also as well as we know that the most trusted is a direct manager - then also the expectation of the values and behaviours they expect from the one closest to them is different from the one that's 10 steps away from them. And I think that there is this need as well to think more about treating people as adults and I think people feel often that that's just sort of sidestepped. But the other thing I wanted to say as well, which I thought was really interesting and I'm going to pass over to Dom was this point you're saying about language, and how language is changing and how we use language.

And we were listening to a really interesting speaker that's looking at multigenerational changes as well and how actually, really we need to change the language to be more about the language is based on, I think it's from a noun to a verb, it's based on your agency. So rather than vote, be this, be a voter or take that and I think it's that language whereas before it feels like we're telling you to do something rather than we're encouraging you to use your empowerment and your adulthood and your ability and that trust to make the right decision for you and we're going to support that.


David Wales (27:35)

Absolutely. You just brought to mind an example of how you can make a subtle change. So typically most services, if you have an incident that makes the news, the comms message that will come out will normally be effectively organisational PR. It will say, look at us, our teams are working really hard. Look at all the equipment you bought for us and we're using it really well. Your money is well spent, reassured. And that has a place. I'm not decrying that. But not long after we started doing the customer work - and it was an interesting thing because most of my colleagues disagreed that we had customers. And so we had a real issue around the language of that - but it had energy so we could use it to create a debate. One of the signs, you know, this coming through, we had an incident that involved about 50 flats and two things come up - one, which is that they, for the first time I've ever heard, asked every flat owner if there was something they really valued that they could just make sure it's secure, which was a really, really nice personal touch.

Secondly, our comms went out and said, and I don't know if it was a design or accident, but it just said, we have 50 people displaced this evening and our focus is on trying to make sure they've got somewhere. Now that is a very different message because what happened then is the local vet said, if anyone's got pets, I'll be open. They can just bring them down. I'll look after the pets. The corner shop said, we're open all night. Come, you know, we'll help out. Other people said, we've got a hall open. We make teas, coffees, a shelter. The community has got a role. It wants to do that. And it does it often without the services being aware. But when you put out even the slightest change of message to say, look, we're in this together, we're not doing this to people, this is not about command and control, this is about collaboration and to an extent, the more the community can do the better, it opens up a very different conversation and narrative. So you're absolutely right, Jen, it is powerful. I mean, throughout my career, I never ceased to be amazed at how powerful subtle changes in the language became.

Dom (29:28)

David as I'm listening to what you're saying there are so many parallels with internal communication, leadership internal communication, I mean a number but the ones that strike me are - again my words - but there are still lots of leaders who believe that if their communication is not getting through they need to buy a bigger amplifier and just say stuff louder I think that's one of the things you've been indicating as well as maybe certain branches of fire services have been guilty of as we all have.

The second one is about frustration - where I think it's often the case, I understand managers have got lots on their plates, but if their communication doesn't get through, it's not their fault, it's the recipient's fault. Why are they not getting it? And I'm paraphrasing here. And then the third one, I think, is this whole point about, I know best. And I hadn't seen it in those terms, but I think you're absolutely right. And it's something which managers can often do. And if they do it subliminally, I know best, why are they not listening to me? And if you put those three things together, and a few other things, it's quite a powerful cocktail. And I think you gave us - I was going to say the antidote but I don't think cocktails have an antidote - but you gave us an alternative which is about conversation I think because you were saying to us that I think it's about situational stuff people


have to realise that you can't use the same communication approach in every situation and how you vary it depends on your understanding of where the people are at, at that particular moment and of course I appreciate you can't arrive at a fire and sit down with a cup of coffee and say well how are you feeling because they're going to give you short shrift - but you can start to anticipate that through having conversations. I think why I'm saying all this is I can see lots of read across with how leaders can build relationships and have conversations with their teams. So I'd like to pick up on some of the theme that you were just talking about with Jen there about building community, because it'd be good to explore a bit more about from your experience what we can learn from how the fire service operates to see how communication can start to enhance a community preparedness and responsiveness. What can it do to build up those things within the community?

David Wales (31:28)

I think, I mean, certainly for me, it's still a work in progress to understand that. But one of the things that I think we have to recognise as well is as professionals, we find a way of working, whether it's a departmental level or organisational, we organise ourselves in a way that we feel is conducive to getting the work done. And we find the practices and processes that we like generally. And then when we encounter communities, we get frustrated that they don't get it. And we saw this again with the EU-funded project around societal resilience. There was lots in the literature saying, we would like more volunteers, but they're really hard work. And at a time when we need to be getting on with this, we haven't got time to manage them. And on the surface, that makes sense. But actually, what it reveals is we're trying to organise, I guess, in some ways in a hierarchical or semi-military way and you're trying to take people and force them into that. And of course it's not a natural way for them to be. So when you looked at, we sort of stood back and you thought, we're assuming there's one way of working and the volunteers have got to be somehow coerced into that way on our terms. Rather than saying, but they probably organise work and talk slightly differently. And now what you've got is two different groups coming together. How'd you create an interface that works effectively for that purpose? We don't need them all to be like we are. In fact, it’s probably that's a real advantage that they're not.

But you saw that thinking right the way through. So it's almost as if we created our own problem and dismissed the potential to help work with them because of that situation and that friction we'd caused. And I thought, if you come at it slightly differently and just recognise they are different, it was quite explicit. I mean, even in one of the documents I saw, it said about the cost benefit analysis of volunteers. And I just looked and thought, if you start from that, you'll never get it to say, I'm not looking to be cost beneficial if I'm volunteering. And we looked at lots of different types of volunteers. So there are some that are already affiliated with organisations, some that are spontaneous, and some that are quite remote. The technology allows people to help from different sides of the planet.

So you've got different ways and people want to help, but you can't start with, this is the way it has to be. And that, I think, comes back to perhaps the point that's been made, Jen, about that flexibility if you teach to a script. The reality is that none of us have the ability to foresee or imagine every situation. So we're designing failure. We are much better investing in people and giving them empowerment. Our local members of staff and employees to say, look, we trust you. We'll do


everything we can to let you know what the right thing is, the things to consider. And if occasionally we get it wrong and it's done with the right intentions, we'll back you. Because that's how we learn. And one of the other things I found in the work was the minute somebody that wasn't one of us got it wrong, it was the red flag come out. It's brilliant. We told you that you couldn't be trusted. And my question to the room at the time was, but which one of us has never made a mistake? Which one of us has never got a project wrong or in the worst case, taken an action that could have led to somebody having a serious injury or in the worst case, they lose their life.

It's inevitable whether you're in the hospital environment, firefighting environment, or other services. Your mistakes, your bad day can have very severe implications. But for those that weren't one of us, we weren't prepared to give them that ability. So it's one strike and you're out. So it's about resetting the balance and look, we're all trying to do our best. Let's trust that we're all trying to learn. And it comes back to another point that I found a lot of the comms was too short term. It was aiming to cope with the next crisis, rather than saying, so where would we want to be in 10 years? What's the capability we need? If we're going to get there, we're going to make mistakes. What can we do that is acceptable or with intolerance or safe to make those mistakes and learn on the journey? Because we can't all do it in the training ground. Some of it will be in the field and we have to manage that and think differently. And I think the other bit that really come out was lack of ambition. I think a lot of people in the public sector at the moment are very good managers. They are not, in my mind, leaders because most of the systems and environments we've got were post-war. They are 80 years old - they are not fit for the world we live in. And I don't see enough people at the senior levels of public sector pushing to have the freedom or the environment in which they can best serve the public that they're there for. So I think that long-term part and the ambition and I guess more readily is be part of your community. Not in a preaching way. So I think if you look at most organisations, something you don't use very often, the best thing is people feel comfortable to approach you when they need to. So if you look at the fire service, they do education in schools, which has been great. It is about stop, drop, and roll on those messages. But I would also argue you just need to be sometimes present. Just hang around, talk to people so they're familiar with you, they get used to, they can talk to you. You build the relationship that will last there in a lifetime.

This part of that much more long-term view about what learning looks like, what relationships and trust look like, and what ambition looks like. Because one of the biggest things that I see at the moment is we are removing capability and social connection at a time we need it more than ever. And some of the technologies that we're introducing, if we had a bit more wit about us, could do the opposite. But actually what a lot of them are doing are replacing - if I go back to the crisis work - one of the most important things is that social cohesion and resilience. It's how communities function, the networks that people have, the connections they have, access to resources, because that starts way before the emergency service get involved and it continues many, many months and years afterwards. But the more governments digitize and self -service, you remove those connections, the opportunities just for a slight conversation that makes a link.

And so I think, as I say, I'm slightly concerned that we're being quite clumsy in the use of our tech and digital side, because we're not thinking about it beyond what it says on the box. We're not thinking of its societal impact or even organisational impact. And we're deskilling. And at the moment, we have a generation that, we understood the bit before the IT and tech. And we can see how tech comes in. So you've got that transition as we go through the next one or two generations,


you lose all of the knowledge of the background working and we will get to the computer says, and I had that recently when I went to get a prescription and I was told I had the text saying it would be there and the person behind the counter said, it's not here and just looked at the screen and assumed it's not here because the screen tells me there was no, I'll have a look or anything. And it was then pushed back to me to go and say, we need to go and speak to a doctor. You need to go and why should I? You've already told me it's here. And I think as I say, with communications it's the same. There's a lot of ways we can automate communication. I would be very wary of doing it too quickly unless we understand what impact that has beyond the immediate short term. What's that doing to our ability to communicate at times, particularly some quite detailed and nuanced messages.

Cat Barnard (38:33)

Literally I've got light bulbs going off in my brain now because as you're speaking, I'm thinking, my goodness me, in 20 years we've become societally addicted to drag and drop five step playbooks that tell us how to do stuff and they lack context and they lack nuance and they lack, you know, the reality of the lived experience. And I really liked what you said about, you know, if we don't pause now, we are the last generation of people who were doing things before digital became all encompassing. But the other thing that I will bring into this conversation, and I'm sure I've referenced it on another podcast, which is so overlooked, is that if an emergency strikes, and I take this from a real life situation, when I was working on the carbon almanac projects a couple of years ago, one of the people that was absolutely pivotal in the creation of the carbon almanac lived on Hawaii and as we know Hawaii was subject to terrible, terrible fires last year was it? or the year before- I think it was last year, and this individual wrote a very impassioned long-form blog of their experience of what it was like to exist on Hawaii as this whole catastrophe was unfolding and the two things that really struck out for me were one, the comms went down almost immediately. And two, nobody came and rescued them. So actually that brings me into, you know, I've almost got goosebumps as I say that, like all of these assumptions that we make about everybody and everything and how things will work in a crisis situation, I think we could probably kick holes in the vast majority of those assumptions. And so what I would love to ask David is bearing in mind that we cannot possibly, we can anticipate given the climate crisis that, you know it's not out of the realms of possibility that we will see more heath fires, you know, as we saw, was it two summers ago? three summers ago? kind of licking at the outer edges of London. It's not outside of the realms of possibility that more and more areas will be submerged by flooding. It's not outside of the realms of possibility that homes and offices will be consumed by extreme winds or whatever, whatever.

But if we work on the assumption that almost certainly one of the first things that is going to happen is that the electricity supply that sits behind internet and mobile phone coverage gets taken out, what is the one thing in your view that organisations should be doing to improve their crisis preparedness and mitigate their risk? Because I think we're agreed all of the crisis comms that we're kind of notionally talking about works on the assumption that everybody will have a mobile phone.


David Wales (42:13)

It does. And I guess if I knew if I could give you one sentence answers that would be very much in demand. But it's.

Cat Barnard (44:22)

I hope you will be after this podcast, but yeah.

David Wales (44:25)

I think what you see is we've had a fixation with plans. And again, it gives us a degree of comfort that we've got emergency plans and crisis plans and we all know what to do and everyone's got a job. And as you say, the reality is it takes one different event and a lot of that just crumbles away or miscommunication and it doesn't quite come as we expect. I think you have to be much more about what capabilities we do we need.

And I always go back to, I don't know if you remember, but there was a report, Every Child Matters. And they had a really simple structure in there, which I loved, which was universal targeting specialist services. I always come back to it, universal is something everyone can do by its nature. And I think if you build your thinking and resilience for community crisis from the community upwards, it's more about then looking at saying what's important to this community, because they will be different.

Who are the influencers in there? Who are the figureheads? What are the resources? What can they do without our involvement? What could they do if we invested a little bit in them? So it might be equipment or a bit of training and knowledge. Because actually what you really want is self -reliant communities. And Australia and a number of other countries have had to face up to this because as you say, the scale of the crises and the duration of the crisis quickly overwhelm the services. And if you look at COVID, we quickly went from a health service to save the health service. At the time, we wanted it to be focused on us. We were having to focus on saving it.  That is not where you need to be because it's not separate. The National Health Service isn't separate from the health and wellbeing of the communities. It starts there. We put on plasters, we take simple medication, and occasionally we have to go into the specialist services. So I think to answer your point, it's much more get over this fixation of plans.

Think about the sort of characteristics, even for longer things, what's the human impact? You cannot be a leader for 24 hours and effective and function effectively. At some time you need to switch off, go home, or even allow for the fact that your leadership team may have something more pressing. One of their family and friends may need them personally. There's a huge ethical choice, you know, saying to somebody, just stay here. They have to live with those choices. So I think building in a different approach to what does that look like for us?


David Wales (44:36)

What do we need to do? How quickly can we get these resources? Because often you can only work with what you've got. Your best plan may say we'll have all these things, but if they're not available, you haven't got them, they're no use. And so I think building up with a mindset of community first, co -create, and what would we do almost without the specialist equipment? What can we do effectively without having to rely on things to come in? When they come, that's brilliant. But it's really for me almost reversing that top down to a bottom up approach and being practical and having conversations about what is good enough. What is it we're trying to get to? Because again, if you're not having those conversations, you don't ever start in the same place of what's important to you as well. And you see that across departments in organisations, you see it across the emergency services. It takes actually a long time to agree what priorities are. And the time to do that is not when the dynamic situation is unfolding in front of you. So I think, as I say, I guess this build relationships, as I say, you can't prepare for a crisis with a notepad and pen. You have to speak to people. You have to be out there, build the relationships, build the trust, because probably the greatest risk we've got is trust. Because even if we do have the mobile phones, we know how good deep fakes are now. Give it a year, give it two years. How do I know who to trust? Because they can recreate me, they can sound like me. I think in all honesty, that is the biggest crisis we have coming up very soon, that we won't trust the comms that we've got.

Dom (46:05)

I think David that could be the topic of another podcast actually because also we've seen that trust has come out recently in the IC index as well. As we bring this to land I think one of the things that's come out very strongly for me is this again you can't turn off communication it's always on that means you have to have regular conversations and so if you want to be an inspiring lead if you want to connect with people if you want to take on board what you have to say you've got to understand them and I think you've made it very clear about how that builds communities having regular conversations and there's a direct read across I think for internal communication and managers and leaders. So for internal communication practitioners listening to this to bring us to land what's the one thing that you would like internal communicators to take from our conversation today?

David Wales (46:51)

I think it comes back to that human piece that we need to be careful of not getting tripped up on our own language of we're professional, if we're professional then nobody else is. It's good to be professional, of course it is, but we have to understand what that means. It doesn't create, it shouldn't create a boundary. We can't be successful in comms if we aren't taking anyone with us, if nobody's listening. It's a partnership and it has to be. And like any partnership, it takes the work to make sure that you understand each other in that respect.


So I think it's about curiosity, it's about ambition, it's about ultimately working with people and seeing them as on a human terms and not being dismissive of the things that they tell you. If somebody says it's important to me that I achieve this, it may not be to you, but if that's what they're saying is important to them, it will drive their behaviour. And you have to respect that. If you want to be useful to them, you have to take that on board. So I think, as you say, it is some bits of the people you'll never be revealed and quite rightly so, but thinking much more about who you are influencing, who you're working with in the design stage. Because you don't have any conversations in that moment. So I think you say the human nature is what it is. It's dynamic, variable, complex. We know that. And you'll never know all of me. There's some bits you will know, some bits you can guess, but you'll never know fully me. But you can take that package and put it into the design and how we think about comms early on, which gives you more flexibility as we were talking about earlier.

So I think as I say, this very much work with people, use your knowledge and skills to enable them, not to tell them, I hate don't. It's the worst messaging ever because it doesn't help me what I can do. So I think those things, really just be mindful of anything you're creating that puts a distance between you and the people that you're trying to help.

Jen Sproul (48:37)

David, I know that we'll never know all of you, you know, but I would say for what I have learned for you today, it's been fascinating. And I think that there's things that you said that just me as a human, and even my personal interactions, and you think about the conversations and how you connect and how you support those closest to you in times of crises as well is a place actually is a point of reference we can get it's because it's who we are. But I think I'm going to take your phrase as well as comms as a partnership. I love that. And I think there is so much more we could delve into. But I think we might be out of time at this point, but I think we could come back on many things. But it's great to hear you talk about trust and all the things you talked about. But I found that really illuminating. Cat.

Cat Barnard (49:17)

Well, yeah, just to wrap up really, thank you so much for coming and chatting with us. I knew it, I knew it when we started talking back in January or whenever it was. But I've got a hunch that this isn't the last conversation because I think you've got more to share with us. And I suspect heavily that we are not out of the perma crisis, poly crisis, whatever that thing is that we keep getting told we're deep in.

So David, thank you so much for coming and chatting and sharing your observations and reflections with us today. And I look forward to having you back at some point, hopefully 2025.


David Wales (49:54)

Thank you very much. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Cat Barnard (49:56)

Thank you.