



Transcript for S11 E3 Mastering Professional Storytelling with Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua

Cat Barnard (00:40)

Welcome to a fresh episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I am Cat Barnard, as ever joined by Jen Sproul, Chief Executive of the Institute of Internal Communication and Dominic Walters, who is our leadership communication expert. And today I am delighted to welcome a guest who has appeared at the IoIC Festival not once, but twice actually in 2023 and 2024, Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua is a professional storyteller, having worked as a journalist and documentary for more than a decade, and she now supports international organisations as a business storytelling coach. She applies storytelling to engage, retain and develop internal audiences so that employees can advance in their careers, are more productive and lead with clarity of communication.

So without further ado, I'm delighted to welcome you Beatrice. I'm really looking forward to what you've got to share with us on today's podcast because despite having brushed shoulders with you on two separate occasions at the festival, I've not actually been able to attend any of your breakouts. And so I'm really curious to hear what you have got to share with us today.

Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (02:03)

Thank you so much, Cat. Thank you for the intro. And I'm looking forward for the conversation too.

Cat Barnard (02:08)

Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant. Let me start at the beginning. Without a background in internal communication, I'm always curious to learn as much as I can. So let me kick off by asking you why storytelling is such a powerful method of communication.

Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (02:24)

If we think about it, storytelling is something that we have been using, whether it was at work or outside of work, right? So when we are little, we tell stories to children and we tell them stories, first of all, because we want to make sure that they understand the language, but also because we are trying to teach them something and that we know that with the stories we are going to attract their attention, right? So when it comes to the workplace and when it comes to internal comms, obviously we are not communicating with children



anymore, but we are trying to get people's attention and we are trying to spread a message. And we can do that with facts and we can do that in a very dry and very logical way. And the message can pass, but we can do it with stories and then the message will stick. There is a saying that says that stories are a way to tell people to care about something. So that's one of the things that we do with stories. We tell people, okay, you should care or I know you care about this.

Cat Barnard (03:34)

That immediately puts me in mind of the Maya Angelou quote about how people will always remember how you made them feel. I mean, I'm an avid reader and I love fiction as much as I love nonfiction. And I always think that reading fiction imbues a far deeper sense of empathy than you could ever get from anywhere else because it invites you to explore and examine other people's lives, all the lives that you will never have lived yourself. You know, fiction allows you a foray into lives unlived. And so I'm really interested in the emotional dynamics of storytelling.

Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (04:20)

Yeah, and that's also the effect that it has on real lives, right? It's very difficult not to relate to someone of whom you know the story. So if you know someone's stories, then it's easier to be calmer with them. It's easier to empathise. It's easier to understand. And it's easier to see the world from their eyes and from their perspectives. I know that often times when it comes to storytelling and internal communication or storytelling and the workplace or storytelling and leadership, the emotional connection is what makes people go, I don't know, you know, emotions and the workplace they don't really fit with each other. But whether we like it or not, emotions are part of what we bring at work.

The only difference is that when it comes to stories, the idea is that there are those fluffy way of communicating or that it's something that is emotional in a negative way, if that makes sense, which isn't obviously the case. It's about really connecting to people. It's about explaining to people things. It's about making them care about things as well.

Cat Barnard (05:38)

And it's kind of a two-way street, isn't it? Because actually in 2024, one of the overarching trends that we see being realised in workplaces is demand for inclusion. And inclusion requires us to learn about other people's stories. So it's actually not singularly about the way in which the executive suite delivers information and knowledge that sticks with the workforce. It's as much about the requirement for organisations to know who their people are because of that human trait to want to feel included, seen and heard.



Storytelling is a really lovely way by which to strengthen intra-company bonds and relationships and kind of feed trust. Because if we can understand one another's stories, that is where a far deeper level of connection lies, right?

Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (06:55)

Yeah, and there are obviously some aspects that need to be thought of and some things that you need to consider when you are creating a storytelling culture and when you are in a way, attaching inclusion to storytelling as well because we have to be clear with the idea that sharing one story doesn't always seem safe for every employee. So the first thing, apart from the stories that the executive can share, and the first thing is to really listen to employees, but also to create that sense of belonging, but also that sense of safety where employees feel like they can actually share without having some negative consequences.

So there are different levels, which is also why I always say that it's not just about, I have to share a story. And it's just something nice that you do. It's something very strategic because you do create that storytelling culture in the workplace. And then people are feeling like they belong, they feel safe to share, they feel like they are more connected to the work, to the vision and to their colleagues as well. And in a way that's something that amplifies on the entire company. It amplifies on the teams; it amplifies on larger groups and then it has positive effect in the company. But employees do need to feel safe in sharing their stories which also doesn't mean that they're going to share their life stories or their entire history. You know, there are different levels to that as well.

Jen Sproul (08:44)

Beatrice, picking up on that point you said about it being strategic right, in that strategic point that you just talked about and you said a couple of words as well I think that really resonate in terms of why storytelling is so important - you said the word it's about getting attention. Now strategically we need more attention from our people because it's in short supply because we're very burnt out but we also strategically need our people to care about what we're doing and why we're doing it and their role. And we need messages to stick. So those words that you're coming out at and create that sense of it. And one thing strategically, I guess, and we've always known this is going on so continuously in organisations is change and transformation.

We know from our research and the things that we've done when you talk to employees about how can change and transformation be improved - the answer is not necessarily in the project management or the organisation of it. It often comes down to how it is communicated, the clarity that it comes with, me understanding what it means to me and how that changes my world. And we know that with the research that we've been doing recently with the IC index and everything that's coming through and with change being and



transformation being so continuous. My question is how can businesses use storytelling, specifically looking at change and transformation which really fundamentally to deliver will often require an inordinate amount of understanding of the message, an inordinate amount of care, an inordinate amount of then behaviour to understand what I'm supposed to do with that. And then fundamentally trust how that is coming to me. So I understand what that means for me, if you know what I mean. So I guess my question is, how do we use this as part of a toolkit or something that's really important in the transformation communication journey?

Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (10:38)

That's a very good point. I had an experience some months ago that really made me think about how you communicate change and transformation. And it's completely unrelated to the workplace and to internal communication, but I was doing aqua gym and I was doing it with a teacher that I really loved and she was really energetic, and then one day she said that she was going to leave for a couple of weeks and then someone else came over. And she was okay, but they were different. They had different styles and they have different music. And I found that it was really difficult for me to adjust to the new teacher. And then I thought, well, this is a tiny little thing that it's not going to affect my life forever, it's not going to affect my work. But if you think about it, that was what happened when there are changes in the workplace as well, right? There is something new, it's destabilising, it's difficult to get used to it, and it takes time.

So I think that when it comes to communicating change, it is important to put yourself in the shoes of who is going to experience that change and communicate that as well. So communicating through stories that you empathise with, that you understand what's happening because you have also lived, everyone has gone through change at work. So they also understand that. And it's important to express that because that's an emotional feeling that employees are going to feel. And when you express to them, when in stories you are expressing that you understand, that you can imagine what people are going through, people feel seen and they feel understood. And in a way psychologically that relaxes them a little bit more and it makes it easier for them to actually, okay, so let me understand what's happening. And they become less confrontational.

Then on top of that, you want to recognise that it might not be easy for everyone. So the first thing is empathising with them, the second thing is to listen to them. And these are all aspects of sharing stories. Oftentimes we think that sharing stories is just the actual story, but there are different elements. There is empathy, there is listening, and there is the explanation of the why.

Why is this change fundamental? And not just because it's fundamental right now, but also what it's going to bring in the future. So it's a why for now, but also why for the vision of the future. And the cherry on top is that in empathising, listening and explaining the why, you



also bring in the values of the organisation. And you say, yes, this is difficult. Yes, we understand that it's going to take time, and we are doing this because this is what we believe in, and this is how we do things in our company. I recognise that it's something that it's a little bit more structured and more difficult to create as a way of communicating, but it's much more effective with people.

Jen Sproul (14:10)

Absolutely buy that Beatrice. And I think that again, going back to the research that we've just done is one of the things that the values that has come back that employees want from their leaders, or in times of change is to understand what it feels like for me rather than for you. And that's something that really, really, really is important. But perhaps a more sort of, I guess, storytelling dummy for dummies question from me, if you like, is say you're approaching that, and I like the way you structured that. Is it about, when you're deploying storytelling techniques, for say a change or transformation - is it about thinking about it as a series of chapters or structures that you take people through that? You know, where you talk about setting out what's happening, then the explanation, and then the why and what it means, and then the values.

Is it chapterising that story as you go through it with some currents that go through the centre? I know that sounds probably storytelling for dummies type of question, but I guess it is kind of how do you structure the way you use storytelling in that kind of longer vision narrative, I guess. Is there a preface and hopefully a happy epilogue? I love a happy epilogue at the end of a book.

Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (15:25)

Yeah, it is a journey and it can be created, it's inevitably going to be structured in chapters because it's not like, okay, change is coming, we communicate it today and you know, get used to it, right? There are different steps and the change is going to take different times and different people and there will be different chapters. So there are primarily two directions in which it can go, it can be vertical and horizontal.

So vertical in terms of it comes from the executive teams, it goes to the senior leaders and then, it's kind of a story that is passed down to each team. And then it's also, once it's passed down from the executive team, I don't want to say that they are completely removed from the journey, but that can be a little bit more in the background. And then the story continues on a horizontal level. So in the structure of time, if it makes sense. So it's more about, okay, the story came from the top down and now it's going to proceed each week, each month, each quarter and everything.



Dom (16:41)

Beatrice, I love storytelling and I think one of the things I've found is that it's become one of the most successful and useful tools that senior leaders can use. It's very, very effective. But I remember speaking to a senior communicator about it and they said that in many ways storytelling is a bit like fire in so far as when it's harnessed correctly it can be devastatingly effectful and yet when it's not harnessed properly it can be disastrous. I think that was a pretty good analogy and the reason why they were saying that was stories can do all the things you say.

It can cut through, it can get people on board, it can make things human, it can make things understandable. But when they're not used properly, the risk is that people get bored and leaders talk about the wrong things, or they give the wrong context, or they give the wrong outcomes to stuff. So it'd be great to get your expertise on board and say, look, you know, business leaders, what should they know about storytelling in order to get the most out of it?

Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (17:34)

Yeah, I love that way of seeing it, that stories are like fire. And oftentimes when it's done incorrectly, there are two things that happen. The first one is that there is no ear on the audience. So the audience is not being listened to in some way. And it can be that you do a survey, that you do focus groups, that you simply have informal conversations with the employees and you get an understanding of where they are at the moment and what they need to hear.

So that's one of the reasons why usually storytelling doesn't work. And then the second reason why I've seen it doesn't work, it's because of ego. And it's very much related to the first one. It's about, you know, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me. And that doesn't work unless I'm connecting my me to your story, to Cat's story, to Jen's story. It can start with me, but just if it makes sense to connect to everyone else. But when it's just about me, me, me, me, me, me for no other deeper reason, then the story inevitably fails because the purpose of the story is to connect people, to explain to people, to talk and have an actual conversation with the audience. And if it's simply a monologue about one person or one group of people as well, it's not going to work.

Dom (19:11)

I think something else which again I welcome your view on is that some business leaders find it hard to share anything about themselves. Not all of them by any stretch of the imagination but many do because I guess they're very conscious of the position they're in and the fact that they don't want to reveal too much about their own concerns, emotions and failures. So what sort of guidance do you give business leaders about getting that right?



About using the right amount of emotion to be authentic but not making themselves feel uncomfortable? Or indeed the people around them who may not particularly be comfortable to hear too much insight into what people have experienced. What's your take on that?

Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (19:48)

There are different business leaders I'm considering now because it's not just about their position, but it's also about their backgrounds. So I can say that for leaders in any position who come from historically marginalised backgrounds, it's going to be much more difficult to feel like they can be vulnerable enough to share a story. So there are definitely different levels for different people with different backgrounds with different gender and everything. I will say that one thing is that first of all, they don't need to share everything about their stories or every detail - the most important thing is the self-awareness rather than the actual sharing of the facts.

So if I as a business leader, I'm aware of a story about failure, however we want to define failure, if I'm aware of the story and I'm aware of what that event brought, gave me, then I can give that lesson to someone else. I don't necessarily need to share all the details about the experience or all the details about how I felt in particular, but there is a lesson that I've learned there and that's the lesson that I can share. So one of the things that I always say to business leaders is that it's not so much about the actual story, but it's about the self-awareness on the story so that you can share the lesson. Because when we are sharing stories, that's what we are doing. We are sharing a lesson, right? But in order for us to share a lesson, we need to be aware of what the lesson is.

Dom (21:38)

Got it, so it's about making sure that people understand the so what I suppose that they understand what it means they have to do, or how it helps them decide what their response to something is going to be. You used a really interesting phrase there Beatrice and I'll pass back over to Cat in a second - but you said as someone from a storytelling marginalised background it'd be really good to hear a bit more about what that is please and what we can do about it as communicators.

Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (22:03)

What I meant was that when it comes to business leaders, and I was having this conversation a couple of weeks ago, I did an event in person on storytelling, on leadership and storytelling, and we were talking about how it's not easy for leaders to share their stories. And because the event was in particular with Black and Brown leaders, we were also



talking about the fact that for some leaders, it's even harder. And it's not harder because they don't know how to do it. It's not harder because they can't, or they don't have the skills or the abilities. It's harder because it's even less safe. And it has been historically less safe.

So when you are trying to be vulnerable, you really need to think about it more than other leaders, because you're kind of, first of all conditioned to believe that you have to be quiet, so that is that one level that you have to eradicate, but then you're also trying to protect yourself. So for them, it's a case of working maybe with someone, actually for everyone it's a case of working with someone. But it's a case of understanding of the importance of their voice, understanding the boundaries of their stories as well, how much they want to share, with whom they want to share, and what is the amount of story that they can share that will make them feel safe.

Cat Barnard (23:34)

I just want to cut in on that because funnily enough, I had a conversation with an American associate of mine yesterday and we were talking about, I mean, this is and isn't related to this, but we were talking about intergenerational trauma and the stories that families tell or don't tell about their lineage and she made the comment that British people are notorious for being quite repressed and quite buttoned up and quite formal and therefore unwilling to expose details of their, let's call it non-work lives or personal lives that aren't deemed to be relevant and yet actually, those are the moments that connect us most, aren't they? When we can share stories that reveal our vulnerability. That is when we create much stronger bonds between one another. And it just made me think, actually, gosh, if you work with big corporates, Beatrice, you must have seen differences culturally between national business units and the leaders of those business units willingness to divulge details about themselves that they may for whatever reason - and as you were speaking, it was making me think about if you've grown up in a place where revealing details about yourself is actually life threatening in the near historical past. That's a massive blocker, isn't it to sharing personal details.

So it's an interesting topic to discuss because whilst I think as internal communicators, we are now noticing the absolute value of storytelling in the toolbox, so to speak, it's actually far more nuanced and delicate than here's a tool or here's a technique. So on that basis, I'm just wondering, given everything that you've learned about storytelling, what advice would you give to internal communicators for how best to integrate storytelling into their suite of tools, so to speak?

Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (26:07)

There are so many different things that you mentioned that are very interesting, Cat. The intergenerational trauma, the differences in culture, which is true. And I've certainly seen



how it changes with the different cultures, because I've worked with leaders from so many different cultures, countries, languages, and it changes a lot.

In terms of the tools that the internal comms need, one of the things that I've seen being extremely helpful for when you're trying to create a storytelling-based culture or when you're trying to not just communicate through stories but also help others to communicate through stories is the ability to be a little bit of a coach. So it's not just about, okay, this is what we do. I do teach and train people in the structure and the framework that they need to share stories, but there is a difference in empowering or helping other people to tell stories as well. And that it's often made by coaching.

So it's not just about what we should do and I need your story and we want to hear from you. It's about asking the right questions and taking time to ask those questions and asking them in a way that people don't answer yes or no, but asking them in a way that it helps them to build that self-awareness, to reflect on things. Because as I said, it's not about just sharing everything with everyone at work, but it's about reflecting on things, reflecting on the lessons and then being able of sharing those. So there is from one side the obvious, more practical tools like the frameworks, the right structure for the stories and the idea that they have to listen to the audience. But then there is also the coaching side. So that is the ability to ask the right questions as well.

Cat Barnard (28:15)

And I just want to, again, chip in, because I'm thinking about everything that you're saying and thinking. And at this point in 2024, we continue to float into uncharted territories where no human brain can possibly know what lies ahead. We seem to be seeing in a whole host of different countries, increasingly diverse, farfetched political ideologies. And it's really hard to know how we will get back on an even keel. And a part of storytelling that I find myself pondering, listening to you speak, is the way in which leaders set the vision for the organisation because effectively you're telling a story about the future to paint the vision of the company. You're telling a story about a future that doesn't exist yet and inviting your audience to believe in that version of the future. And I know that we're slightly going off piece, but that is storytelling, but it's another level of storytelling, isn't it? Because it's really coming back to this point about how do you successfully invite your internal stakeholders onto - and I'm going to use a Seth Godin metaphor because do you remember when he came and chatted with us, he talked about, do you want to get on the bus? How do you invite people onto your bus and have them want to get onto your bus and travel with you into the unknown. Sorry, I feel like I might be rambling a little bit, but this is another layer of storytelling, isn't it? That is going to be so crucially important for organisations, their leaders, and the people, the internal communicators that help those leaders shine.



Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (30:20)

There is an element of trust in that, right? When I share stories as a leader, not just about the future stories, but also the present stories or the me story, I'm building trust. I'm building trust. And then when I'm sharing the stories of the future, in my opinion, it's very important to make sure that those stories have the foundation of the values of the company.

Because then you say, yes, the future is uncertain. Yes, there might be changes. Yes, it might be even challenging at times, because it's also important not to lie to people. But we believe in this thing and we believe in this and this is how we do things. And this is why whatever is going to happen, first of all, we as leaders will be here. And then we as an organisation, we believe in these things. So we will be able to still bring the transformation that we are trying to bring. And obviously this can be done - I'm aware of the fact that people also receive information and stories in different ways. So it doesn't have to be just one story. It can be done with data. It can be done with a mix of stories and the mix of prediction for the future. It doesn't just have to be like a speech or anything, right? It can be a mix of different things, but it's about building trust, inviting people on the bus by telling them, we have built this bus together and it has pieces of your values as well. So let's go and whatever happens, we will still lay on our values, and we will still try and bring the transformation that we want to bring. And it might not work out as we want to, but we will be there.

Jen Sproul (32:26)

I think that's a beautiful answer. And I think the other thing I was just going to say as well is that going back to your point around being a coach and I think that does kind of bring back where we are as internal communicators and building that skill set for us to be people that seek relationships, seek dialogue, seek conversation so that we can ask those questions the right way, get to know things and so that we can bring some of that to life.

Maybe this is an old analogy, but I agree with you. You do everything, and I go back to the podcast we did with the history professors, and Michael and Joe, when we were talking about change - why is history important when we've got, it feels different now, but as they say, with every change there's a constant. So your values have to be that constant. It's the thing that goes through you like a stick of rock, isn't it? So if you stick to that core, then that enables you to navigate through that. But I think that my reflection from what you're saying as well as for internal communicators listening is that - and we know this - is that a lot of it's about not just asking for the factual information to pump out the information, which is an element of our job, but actually a big part of our job and how it should evolve in the future is building those relationships with those stakeholders and those peoples to elicit the information that allows us to create the right kinds of stories for the purpose that we've got whilst making sure we maintain those values through that. I'm sure Dom, you're going to come in with a last hitting question for us, aren't you?



Dom (33:49)

I'm just reflecting on all the great things we've talked about actually. So I think Beatrice, we've looked at first of all, I think stories are a super channel. Thinking back on what you said we can achieve through stories, it was about clarity, it was about cut through, it was about getting people on board emotionally, it's about bringing things to life. So I think stories are a super channel. I think secondly, you made this great point about awareness and the fact that you can't just pour stories on people because after a while they're going to think you're the pub bore. But what you have to do is understand what they need from you and what they need from the stories. And I think that's a really interesting point about listening, being aware, and making sure you strategically, you said, use stories to achieve something.

Which leads on to that other point about being clear about the payoff. What's the thing? What's the call to action you want? You're not just telling a story for entertainment. You're telling it for a reason, and that reason is to get action. I think you've been very clear about what we can do as communicators to coach and I loved what you were saying about asking the right questions because I think often, sometimes - let's say that - sometimes as communicators we've been guilty of saying yes you must go off and tell some stories and left a bemused leader or manager thinking okay about what and what's it going to cover and what's the payoff?

So I think asking the right questions is a crucial skill and I love the fact you differentiated between closed and open questions, which is something we often forget to do. So that was brilliant. So I think there's lots of stuff there. So I'm going to ask you an impossible question. Forgive me for that, which is what's the one thing that you would like internal communicators to take from what we've discussed?

Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (35:30)

If I had to focus on one thing, and also based on the session that I ran with internal comms, based on the work that I've done with internal comms teams and what I've seen the feedback being - I would say that the one thing I want them to take from this conversation is to work on their stories first so that they will know how to coach leaders too. And then once they do that, they will be able to be even better or even more the connectors that they already are. So between the senior leaders and employees.

Dom (36:17)

That's a great point. When you work on their stories, what sort of stories are you thinking about? About their previous experience, about things that have worked. You used some



great stories in this conversation to illustrate how stories can boost change, for example. So what sort of stories are you thinking that communicators should develop?

Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (36:36)

It can be any type of story. The goal is primarily to get used to it, to experience it - so that they know what they're asking others to do as well, and also to bond with each other. So it can be stories around how and why. One of the questions that they often ask internal comms people is what brought them to work as in internal comms - and not just the process of applying for the job and getting the job and the interview, but what were they doing before, and what made them think about internal comms? Because then they go back to, actually I used to work as a journalist and this is something that I've experienced. And then someone else will mention the thing that I find so beautiful that happens every single time I work with internal comms team is that no matter how different their personal experiences are, you see that they have the same or similar set of values. And all those values come from completely different experiences, completely different countries, but they are there. And then they realise that as well and they're like, interesting. That's why we all work together so well, or that's why we can relate even more. And then they become closer and then it's easier for them to get into the habit of sharing stories with each other, asking questions to each other, and then do that for senior leaders or for employees as well.

Dom (38:15)

If I can just very quickly reinforce that because recently I had to work with a new group of people who let's face it didn't like each other that much or were very suspicious of each other, let's put it that way, for historical reasons and after about two hours of trying lots of different exercises and getting nowhere, we just stopped the agenda and said, right, let's spend half an hour just telling ourselves our stories and why we're here. And it was brilliant. And it just reinforced how useful that can be to break the ice, build bonds, make people human, and remind them what their commonality is. So just want to reinforce that from my own experience too.

Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (38:48)

And obviously I don't know the background of the people you work with, but the thing with stories is that they bring out what we have in common rather than what we don't have in common. No matter of the age, of the country, of the gender, of anything - you can really start and say, I've experienced that too in a completely different setting. But I can relate to that. And once I can relate to that, it's much more difficult to have a contrast, in a way.



Cat Barnard (39:20)

How lovely. Yeah, I love that. That stories accentuate our shared humanity. And my goodness, if ever we've needed that right now. Beatrice, wish I'd be in on those sessions now. So you must come back in 2025 and I shall be sure to be sat in the front row listening avidly. But thank you so, so much for coming and chatting with us today. I know I've learned a lot, and I can see Jen and Dom nodding as well. So that's absolutely been amazing. Thank you so much.

And to all of our listeners, you'll be able to find out more about Beatrice in the footnotes, the show notes for the episode. And we will look forward to tuning in for a new episode shortly.

Beatrice Ngalula Kabutakapua (40:11)

Thank you so much for having me.