



Transcript for S10 E9 Using communication to build trust with James Ball

Cathryn Barnard (00:43)

Hi and welcome to a bonus episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I am your co-host Cat Barnard and I'm joined as ever by Dominic Walters and Jen Sproul. Today's bonus episode stems from conversations that we had at the start of 2024 when we realised that the Institute of Internal Communications IC index report was going to focus quite heavily on trust. I don't think it's an understatement to say that as we continue to seemingly fumble our way through new ways of working, how we create and maintain and sustain trust at work becomes ever more of a pressing issue. I think, you know, we can point to engagement data collated by both Gallup and volunteer movement Engage for Success that points to engagement levels here in the UK certainly being as low as 10%. So we know we've got quite a significant amount of human work to do as we try and rebuild some sense of momentum within the UK economy. And trust is a really interesting topic for us just because when you start to try and research it or even define it, it becomes very, very nebulous and quite difficult to qualify and quantify. So on those grounds, really, what we wanted to do was identify somebody with more knowledge than we had, which let's face it, probably wasn't that difficult, but we wanted to try and identify somebody who's done some work in this area to come and have a chat with us today.

So I'm really, really pleased to welcome James Ball onto the podcast. James is an award-winning journalist, broadcaster and author. He's a fellow of the think tank Demos, and he's also the political editor of the New European. He's worked as the global editor of TBIJ, a special correspondent at BuzzFeed and has been special product projects editor at The Guardian where he played a key role in the Pulitzer Prize winning coverage of the NSA leaks by Edward Snowden, as well as various other offshore leaks. So I think it's fair to say that James has got quite the steer on the role of trust in society and actually also what can happen or what does happen when trust becomes at a premium in society. So I would like to welcome him onto the podcast. I know he's got lots and lots to share with us. And I'm really thrilled that finally, yeah, we were able to get to this point where we could record today. So James, welcome.

James Ball (03:43)

Delighted to be here.

Cathryn Barnard (03:44)

Thank you so much. I feel like even the call that we had to set up this podcast, my head was bursting with snippets and information after we chatted initially. And I know you've done a lot of work in this area of trust and ethics. So I wondered if I could defer to you and just kick off the conversation by asking how do you personally define trust? And then my part two of that question is, and why is it so important?



James Ball (04:18)

We can end up sort of dancing around and getting very philosophical when we talk about trust, which sort of perhaps ironically can make us sound quite shifty. And generally it comes down to when someone says something, how widely believed in it. And I tend to think we get ourselves in a lot of trouble by asking people lots of questions about trust. And that tells you less than you'd hope.

Lots of people, for example, say that they don't really trust the British media. And there's lots of reasons not to trust the British media. We get things wrong. There are biases. There are all sorts. I would say generally we're doing our best in a very fast moving world. But part of that in British culture is that a bit of scepticism is encouraged. People know that the right answer is not to be too naive and not to be too credulous.

It is, if you say to someone, well, you can't trust everything you read in the papers. They're not going to look at you like you're being strange. That's a good opinion. People are going to nod along. And so we have quite low reported trust in our media. But actually, if you look at how people live and act day to day, people tend to actually act like they do trust the media. People generally do watch a BBC report and think they're getting more or less the truth of the story.

People, for all that they say, they don't really trust newspapers. They might be buying fewer print papers, but they're going to them online in higher numbers than they ever have. And so when you look at what trust means, we do actually, we are still lucky to live in a high trust society. People generally don't worry too much about corruption. You trust your bank to make a payment. You trust generally that the law will protect you at work.

We don't tend to worry most of us, thankfully, that we'll be illegally fired or that we won't get paid. We don't all demand our wages at the end of the day. We're happy to wait a month. You know, we will trust that parcels will be delivered. Trust is sort of what holds society together. And it's generally that we believe the system will work as it should. Now, I would say we're in a good place generally in the UK, although it could be better, in that it is valued to be skeptical. You don't have to say, no, of course I trust Pravda, of course I trust the government, because you fear what would happen if you said otherwise. We value skepticism, but we generally sort of trust but verify. And I think, that we will probably end up touching on some quite worrying areas because you tend to with this topic. I should start by saying generally, I think in this country we're in a relatively good place.

Cathryn Barnard (07:07)

Yeah, it is interesting, isn't it? As you were speaking, I was thinking, is that, it's almost part of the British persona, isn't it? To be cynical, to appear cynical and to appear a bit kind of half-hearted about your full-blown belief in things, which I suppose extends to institutions. But I guess also we've had some pretty interesting years in politics in the last decade or so, haven't we, in terms



we've all been taken down a path of, white lies and, on a spectrum to blatant untruths. And I think that's done. I guess on the one side of things, it's heightened the curiosity around what is trust, why is it so important? But on the other hand, I think, you know, obviously we're now a month or so into a new government administration. And it's quite nice to wake up in the morning and feel like our politicians are actually doing the job that we hope they will do with nothing to see here, you know, to some degree. I woke up the morning after the election and felt, gosh, thank goodness for a return to boring politics, that we would just resume the very British diplomatic way of being.

I find myself just endlessly fascinated by the construct of trust and how one becomes trustworthy and what that means. And I know we talked about it internally. Sorry, I'm going off on a bit of a rant and my point of curiosity is that it's such a personal thing and it's such a context specific thing. If you asked a hundred people what trust is, I think you'd probably get a hundred different answers. And if you were to ask them today and then ask them again tomorrow, you'd probably get a hundred different variations on what the answer was that they gave you today as well.

James Ball (09:03)

That's sort of why I tend to lean towards the pragmatic on these things. I think there's things that people like, even if people would define it differently or say what they're looking for is differently. I've tended to find people really like it when people talk about the limit of their expertise. I don't know is a really good answer for trust and it makes your other answers look better. Or if someone says, okay, here's what I know.

And then here's what I'm figuring from that. You know, they can say the rest of this, I'm sort of speaking from guesswork. I don't have data on this, but, so I know this bit, I'm telling you this bit. or also even things just as simple as going, actually, there's a bit more to this, but I can't tell you, you know, there's an ongoing court case. There's rules that mean I can't do it or perhaps in a work context actually there's a disciplinary process, there's legal reasons I can't tell you. I think that'll be done at X time. And if you ask me then, I'll tell you everything I can. But here's what I can tell you for now, rather than, I think sometimes people don't want to look like they don't know something or don't want to look like they can't say something. And in trying not to look evasive, you look more evasive. And so there's things that tend to, I make them sound like tricks, know, work on us all.

James Ball (10:27)

That sort of carry forward and they tend to be different now than they were a while ago. Authority used to be the big thing in trust. You know, who's saying it? Do they have the right accent? Do they have the right tie? Do they work for the right place? I think that's a lot less true and people rebel against that. But I don't think you're ever going to get the very earnest American, I believe in everything, I'm fully signed up brand of trust here.

It doesn't feel British. Everyone wants a little bit of detachment, a little bit of cynicism here. But that doesn't mean that we don't trust. It just means, people are always going to look a bit well guarded. And also there is a reason the phrase is healthy skepticism. Cynicism is incredibly damaging, but skepticism is good.



Jen Sproul (11:18)

I think the way you say that, James, is really interesting. Like you say, it's part of the being a skeptic is kind of, it's part of that character that we have. I think thinking about, you know, trust the way we think about it from internal comms point of view, it's kind of, well, if we have that commodity that we can't quite describe or put a value on it, then that means that then perhaps that will create the behaviours and actions or the loyalties or the things that we need to deliver as a company. But putting that aside, think one of the things that I'm quite interested by what you're saying as well is that we've used the word trust, but there's also then the word belief. So where does trust become belief? And where does fact and truth come into that? Because we can trust something because we believe it, but do we know it's fact and truth? And I think if those constructs, I guess if belief and what you say happens breaks down, I'm trying to use inverted commas on trust now because I think we're trying to be too delicate about the word. And I say that in the context of communications and content, you know, in the way that we live and we have an attention grabbing deficit economy with so much content and things and the rise of disinformation perhaps and ideologies or other things that are going off. So I guess from what I'm going to is from your point of view, what work do you do in journalism to build that trust and how do you think trust and belief come together, but how does truth and fact play within that? And why do you think it's necessary for us to have, I guess, that trust?

James Ball (12:50)

I mean, there's something immensely frustrating for journalists in this. My background is actually data and statistics. I used to be data editor at The Guardian, among other things. And as someone who's researched trust, one of the incredibly frustrating things is there is good evidence that fact and evidence do not move beliefs. You will not change someone's mind if you give them figures, even if they are true. And essentially, what's pleasing about this is it hasn't really moved anyone in the evidence community. People still keep trying to change minds with fact checks or with, you know, updated briefings or with sort of this kind of stuff. Now, this doesn't mean we should abandon them. And it doesn't mean, if you can back these things up, it helps your credibility, helps that kind of thing. But it's not going to change your mind. It might help your individual reputation. It might help your corporate reputation with people who will hear it but essentially this is the old thing to go to politics of someone says, well, my mum and my brother, they both go out and try and buy their weekly shops and they can't feed their families. And someone goes, well, actually food poverty is down 3 % versus two years ago. And things are getting better on that. They're not going to turn around and go, is it? Well, great, thanks. And so they're similarly in an organisation if someone sort of says, actually, we've got none of the equipment we need, and it seems to take longer and longer to replace. And you go actually across the company, we've taken it from three weeks to two and a half weeks on the typical order. They're just gonna hear you denying them. Even if everyone's telling the truth, it doesn't work. And not much changes people's minds. We know that. But what works in terms of trust as far as we can tell and, as far as we can measure in all of this is a bit abstract is people like it when someone starts where they are. And so if you go, I'm sorry to hear about that, , and if it's something people can look into, actually, if you've got any ideas as to why that's



happening, can you let me know? I'd like to know more about it to see if we can tackle that. You know, maybe that's there to your site. And then you can get into it. You can say we've been working to make this better.

It may be that we've missed something and we can do that as well. And that can help. But the more you can get to, we still tend to think in terms of us and them, you know, it's right to the point of if someone you like sort of shouts at someone else in front of you, you might go over to them and say, I'm so sorry. They're a lovely person. They're having a terrible day. You know, they're, they're dogs, very sick at home. I think they're quite stressed. They've been up all night.

They're not like that. I will try and get him to apologise to you later. If it's somebody you don't like, just go, he's always like that, isn't he? What a bad person he is. Circumstances versus character. And so the more that you can, not falsely, but the more you can get within to someone's in group, the more you could be talking about we, how could we tackle this? What can we do? The better it tends to come across with people.

If you are actually taking it on board. If you start just treating the word we like a magic tool, people clock it pretty fast. All of this is so layered and so nuanced. But it is a lot of that. If you start going, no, here's the facts, it doesn't work. If you sort of start where they are, you can introduce some of them and they might be more listened to.

Jen Sproul (16:28)

Totally take that on board and I think I like the way you described that, listen and that we action. I think that's really fascinating what you say is like a evidence doesn't change a belief or a mindset necessarily. So I guess with the picture of trust as well what have you done or is going on do you think to build that trust in journalism or is you know where do you think that sits within that context?

James Ball (16:51)

So one of the things I write about is conspiracy theory. How do people start to believe that a mass shooting was a false flag or that a terror attack didn't really happen or that there's satanic rituals going along? And again, the trick is when you're talking to someone individually, it's to sort of say, well, what's made you think that? What's the evidence there? Because people who believe this stuff

You know, some people want to just say, you have to be an idiot to believe that, wouldn't you? And no, you wouldn't. People are curious. They're trying to get their own answers. What evidence there is on people who go down conspiracy rabbit holes tend to have a slightly higher IQ than average. They often have advanced degrees. There are some Nobel laureates who are now very, very strange conspiracy cranks. And so, being clever is no insulation against these things.

And so if you can start by going, why would you believe that? What makes you believe that? And then, and then sort of treat the curiosity as legitimate go, well, actually I know what happened in this instance. So I'll go, you know, someone asked about Jeffrey Epstein and go, yeah, that does look



strange. I don't know the answers on that one, but a lot of the things people used to say about it aren't true. And they're actually being used to sort of sow a bit of division and stop us looking at the real one. And so it's that thing of, even if a conspiracy can lead to some very strange places. Don't look at the people who are already fully down the rabbit hole, but look at the ones who might go into it. And in terms of the media, I think rather than cover, look at these weirdos who believe this weird thing, it's, well, what's really happening with this? You know, if ask the question, you know, go into it and go, well, why do people think that that's there? How do we know it's not? What does this photo really show? And showing in context, well, here's the viral post that a lot of people think proves this. And actually, here's how we established its doctored. And sort of also go, here's what we still don't know, but we'll try and find out. And if people think you're taking it seriously and they're being respected and it's not, well, you don't agree with this obviously correct opinion.

I think it tends to work a lot better. And there is a danger in the media that we all know the rules that we work by. There's all sorts of codes and restrictions and rules and what it means to say a government source versus the government spokesman versus the, there's all sorts of little bits of code that often we just forget the public don't know and have no reason to know.

James Ball (19:35)

And so we're asking them to just take a lot of trust when we're not explaining our workings. And people tend to like to see the workings. That's the thing that's changed. They're not just going to take it because you're saying it. And that, I think, can be healthier provided we move with the times and do it.

Dom (19:54)

James, as you're speaking, I'm thinking about how we can apply what you're talking about to internal communication. I had a quick look at your Wikipedia entry and I see that once you gave a talk which you called bathing in bullshit, which is a fantastic title, as well as being great alliteration, but it did strike a chord actually because having been an internal communication manager, I have been accused in the past of being a source of bullshit or things like it. And I think in my experience, people in organisations tends more towards cynicism and skepticism to use your very useful definition. So it would be really helpful to try and apply some of what you said to internal communication. I think I could pull out a number of things but it'd be good to get your take in it. First of all I love the idea about being able to say I don't know because in our experience leaders and managers and organisations are even less likely to say that than perhaps people outside because of politics, because of position power, because all the stuff that goes with that and I find it really hard. I train leaders a lot and helping them to say I don't know is a really big thing. I think the other thing you mentioned was about starting where they are. That's incredibly helpful too because establishing a shared agenda and trying to avoid this competitive aspect I think is a really good way of bringing people together. And I think you also talked about, it's about the fact that figures and facts don't convince. And I sort of knew that, but when you said that loud, I thought, well, that makes a huge amount of sense.



And I know that reflects a lot of the stuff around people who driven by emotion. Was it Kahneman's stuff around you're more driven by emotion than you are about facts? That sort of thing as well. So those are some of the things that struck me. But from your experience of working in organisations, what do you think are some of the key aspects of trust and authenticity? Why they're so important for internal communication and what we can do as internal communicators?

James Ball (21:41)

I mean, the only sort of role in which I've had what we would have called a senior management job was quite a small organisation. It's about 40 people, but most of the employees of the organisation were investigative journalist and that, firstly, generally, actually, they're a lovely workforce, the reputation of investigative journalists is like it's herding cats. But also you've got a whole bunch of people who are quite good at finding things out.

And so naturally, even in trying to run quite an open culture and try to run a thing, there would always be times where people wanted to keep something under the rug. And my experience was every single time that was a mistake. And any time that we thought, isn't it better to know more before we communicate, that turned out to be an error. And one of the big things for us would this is TBIJ, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, great organisation, strongly recommend anyone look it up if they like good journalism. But a lot of funding would come through grants. And so you'd have a three year grant for a particular programme and they'd come up for renewal. And because you've got to go through a very formal grant making process, you wouldn't know.

The default attitude was always, well, let's try not to have people worry about their job. I would just say, no, it's fine. No, it's fine. And it was such a mistake and such a source of stress for people because actually just being able to say everything we've heard from this is good. There's no guarantees on it. They have stressed there's no guarantees, but they like our work. We've had no concerns raised. We're going into this expecting it to be renewed.

And I'll let you know if that changes. It was amazing how much people appreciated that. But we did then sometimes have to go, okay, actually our programme managers quit. We've been told not to worry about the new one, but there is a new programme manager. I wanted you to hear from me first. And we generally found we got a much better response from communicating what we thought was unnecessary detail that would bother people.

James Ball (23:56)

I think it was that they trusted us that they'd hear when there was bad news instead of it being saved up. And we did have times where grants weren't renewed and sort of came out and said it very quickly. But similarly sort of handling things during COVID, I tended to find as a senior team, especially when we were in uncharted territory of trying to move immediately to remote work, having not done it, having to try and deal with people being scattered.



James Ball (24:26)

Some people had gone to sort of stay with parents in the country and had no internet or terrible internet. There's this thing of, for one person, we did have to say, actually, if you're going to work remotely, you need to be able to work remotely. You may have to come back to your London flat because you can't work. You're not working. We gave them time and some weeks.

But what we tried to do initially was work out what we thought people wanted and then present that to them because we thought we were saving stress. And I would find each time I'd hear through people's managers, actually they would have preferred to do this or why did you rule that out. And I found myself quite often going, we could have done that. There's no reason we couldn't have done that. And actually once I took it back to the senior team, that was fine. And so, increasingly we started consulting before and actually going here's what we think works what have we missed and again that helps now that's something you can do a lot more easily in an organisation of 40 than in an organisation of 4000 but being a bit more open and a bit more unsure and also saying why we couldn't do some things that were popular. There's always something people want and actually going, well, we could say we could do this, but it costs 10 grand and they will have to cancel X, Y and Z. And you'd hear back quite quickly. Someone else on senior team would be going, they really, really want this. We really have to do this. You know, let's make the hard decision and cancel this stuff. I go, actually, before we make it, shall we tell them what it costs? And somebody go, God, no, if it costs 10 grand, absolutely not.

James Ball (26:12)

We'd much rather you'd sort of do X, Y or Z or, know, we still have a training budget or we still have a travel budget. And just sort of, it really surprised me how even in a news organisation, kind of sort of quite flat, non-traditional organisation, the instincts went to, let's communicate when we know things, let's communicate when we've got an agreed line, when it's clear, and how often that was a mistake.

James Ball (26:38)

I really, really think, my experience as a manager and then as a more junior manager in bigger organisations was that every organisation under communicates. And the longer that you wait to be sure, I think there's an instinct among management and I've done it myself to assume that while you're not saying anything, everyone's sitting very quietly and waiting for news. And instead they're filling it with all sorts of things that they've heard or half remembered or guessed that are probably much worse than the worst version of what you have. Sorry, that's a very, very rambling answer, but yeah.

Dom (27:15)

That is a very good answer because I think it reinforces some things that I guess ring bells with many of the people listening, which is particularly during change, even nowadays actually, lots of change managers will say, wait until there's something to say for fear of saying the wrong thing or giving the wrong impression. I understand that, but you're right. The downside is people start to make things



up or they speculate about stuff or they fear that nothing's happening. There's no sense of momentum. So I think they forget sometimes that communications we've talked about a lot on this podcast is around connection, regularity, it's around a feeling of safety as well as giving people information. think you've illustrated that point really, really well. I'd like to go back to your point about saying I don't know and saying here's what needs to happen before we can tell you this or here's the information behind it. From your experience, there must be a balance to strike between saying I don't know, which I get, and at some point people roll on their eyes saying well let's go and talk to someone who does know. In your experience, how do you strike that balance? Again, a very difficult question, I suspect, but what's your experience on that?

James Ball (28:16)

It's very good question and I don't know if there's a good answer to it. He says cheating, but I think if you're saying it all the time, people are going to suspect you've been put in front of them because you know nothing. It is a good answer if you are answering other questions with information, especially if you're saying, I'll try and find out, or we don't know that yet. We think we'll hear it in a week or two or let's say it's a big office move and going, actually, who's sitting at what desk? I don't know yet. I know you'll be on the second floor. Someone else is taking care of that, but that's actually a bit down the line. If people can sense that you're trying to answer what you know and not answer where you don't, it adds to your credibility. If people think that you're there to stonewall them, it works when you are staying in your lane, so to speak, I think. And if it's beyond that, it probably doesn't. We see this sometimes in the media, you realise that someone's been put in front of you because they don't know any more than the briefing. And it tends to go quite badly for those people because you eventually go, well, why don't you just give us the piece of paper in front of you since you're just reading out from it? And they tend not to want to do that. And then it's like, how happy are you about wasting all of our time?

Dom (29:41)

I will pass over to Jen shortly, but I think to add to that as well, it's the ability of that particular manager or leader to be able to ask questions as well, to get the conversation going. Because you're right, it's not just about me standing up in front of a group of people and being expected to know everything. I need to engage them in conversation, go back to your earlier point to find out what they think about stuff, how they value things, their priorities. So I totally get what you say.

James Ball (30:02)

I mean, there's sort of two ways you can get surprised in these things. Someone can ask you a question and you go, I don't know if we've thought about that and we need to, thank you. I really will get back to you on that because that's a good question and we need to know the answer to that. But there's also the number of times, and I wish I could think of a specific example, someone asks, so you're not going to do X, are you? It's like, I've heard we might do X.



No, of course we're not going to do that. That, yeah, no, that's absolutely off the table. That hadn't even occurred to us that someone might think that, but I promise you, no, that's not part of this. And so those opportunities where people actually do feel they're getting actual answers and they can ask proper questions are very useful because, I have heard after things like that, you know that people have been worried about that for weeks. Or, you know, someone a bit more senior has come and just who was on my team has gone, that's true then, you really aren't doing that. The team's been worried for weeks about that. It's like, well, you could have told me and it's like, well, I didn't know. And so,

Dom (31:12)

And just very quickly on that, I'm sorry, but that's a really interesting point because from the point of view of the credibility and the trust of the leader, it's far better for them to say, so what issues of people, what are people hearing? And then get the information out that way and respond to it rather than being appeared to be caught on the hop like you've just described. So it reinforces the value of asking questions.

Cathryn Barnard (31:51)

It's really interesting isn't it? It immediately puts me in mind of a quote from Brenne Brown who is a world famous vulnerability researcher from the United States and one of her kind of adages is this, clear is kind, unclear is unkind.

And to mirror what you were describing when you were managing, James, I worked in staffing and recruitment for a long time in the nineties, to the mid 2000. Majoritatively with people who were impermanently employed. So inevitably, I would have to deal with contract extensions. And I found out at a pretty young age that the most effective way to build trust and integrity was to be completely honest and not to lie and bluster in the absence of knowledge. So just being open, what I know our American friends often refer to as radically transparent, I think it yields massive dividends. I think it's perfectly okay to say, and I loved something that you said specifically, I think it's perfectly okay to say, I don't know yet, I think yet is such a potent word, but I think it's probably also true to say that actually within most organisations at the moment there is probably exacerbated cynicism because we've just spent the last eight years at least since Brexit not really knowing what the hell is going on and certainly not having any kind of national plan. I was also minded and I know I'm jumping around now. When you guys were talking, I was thinking about some of the COVID media updates. And if Patrick Vallance or Chris Witty were asked their opinion by a journalist, you absolutely respected them because of their capacity to say, I don't know. That's not clear. Whereas some of our departed political colleagues would just blag it and it was awful, it was painful to watch. Actually, it's humility, isn't it? It's having the humility to say, I don't know, but I will, to your exact point, James, I will go and find out, or it will become clear and we'll tell you as soon as we know.



Massive bonus.

James Ball (34:06)

The honesty points to one that jumps out at me and it's one I can remember from recruiting. And it was a sort of slightly more senior recruitment and it had been complex. We've gone through lots of people and eventually we had two candidates who were above the line and were appointable and we offered to one. And in the way that you often do when you're recruiting, we didn't get back to the second candidate because, in case the first person says no.

We had quite a drawn out two weeks with the first candidate where essentially we kept padding off the second one and they accepted and then dropped out two days later, but it was over a weekend. So we still hadn't communicated to the second one. and I sort of made the decision of how to handle the other candidate that we were now going to offer to and I decided to go, look, I'm really sorry we haven't been more clear with you quicker. I said, I'm going to be honest, we offered the job to someone else. I said, we thought you were brilliant. There were two of you that we thought were appointable. I went, I've got no third place if you now don't want the job. I said, but we offered to someone else for this reason. And they've said, no, but we still think you'd be brilliant hire. I would really like to work with you. And I thought rather than tell you some nonsense as to why it's been two weeks. Let's do this. And he sort of was quite thrown and asked for a day to think about it and phoned back and said I was thrown but actually I appreciated you saying that. And he said, I probably would have said no, because I knew I was obviously not your first choice and I felt quite messed around. But I appreciated you saying that and it makes me a bit more confident to come. And, I put the phone down the day before and thought, have I really screwed this up? But I just couldn't see a way through the phone call without levelling, especially since it's someone I'd have to work closely with. He joined and was absolutely brilliant. I was glad to say we felt really lucky that he'd joined and that the first person that had dropped out. But it was a much less comfortable conversation than it might otherwise have been.

James Ball (36:21)

But I do think people respect actually being treated intelligently. And I think companies often don't do that. There's this approach where sometimes there's, we're all one big happy family. Or we all really believe in the mission. It's like, well, no, actually, ultimately, the company's job is to look after itself. And that can be enlightened. It can want people to progress. It can be happy that people will leave and go to other places.

The company is about the survival and the success of the company. There may come a time when that doesn't align with everyone who works there. And I think most professionals understand and respect that and would rather be taught to like that. We like having you here. We value you, we want to develop you, let's not pretend that we're some permanent family unit. And I think often



there's a desire to make it like that. And I think it lands quite badly. Especially I think, most people I know, I'm coming up to 40, I've worked in five or six different places and I've been very signed up to where I've worked when I've been there, but I've also known I would probably leave one day. And I think that's true of most places now. You don't think you're with one place for life. And I think somehow communication hasn't quite caught up.

And so people do like that honesty of, okay, yes, you were the second choice, but you were the second choice. We rejected a lot of people before that. And we thought you were very appointable and let's see how it goes. Or look, my job is to represent the company's interests. That's why I'm there. I think sometimes HR is quite bad at that.

(38:06)

You often see that during redundancies, etc. HR is trying to sort of almost say I'm here for you. And it's well, no, you're here for the company. And that's that's okay. We could deal honestly with each other, we can have a good round interesting of redundancies, but you don't need to pretend you're on my side, because you're on the company's side. And that's fine, that's okay. It's not a divorce.

Cathryn Barnard (38:28)

I think that is the way that the world has changed, that business at large has yet to catch up with. We as consumer citizens expect greater degrees of transparency and openness. And sometimes, well, often that is misconstrued by people in the exec team as thinking, my God, I don't want to have run every minute decision past this huge mass of people, but actually inclusion and openness go a long, long way. And you said something earlier about, if you are open about, the fact that you've got a finite amount of budget and you can spend it here or you can spend it there, if you are open, your colleagues will say, my God, no, I don't want you to spend that money over here if, this is going to be more beneficial to the business. We are all adults at work, but there's still a very patriarchal kind of paternalistic attitude towards leadership. And I know Dom, you've talked about this. So one of the things that I think would be really interesting to talk about quickly, and I know this is a huge topic to talk about so quickly, but one of the things that came out of the IC index report earlier this year was the extent to which AI may obscure leadership communication or may impact leadership communication and the perceived authenticity of it.

(40:08)

And I think what's really interesting and I may be clutching at straws, so just bear with me, this is a hypothesis, is I think it's not unfair to say that most people think communication is easy because most of us are verbal and most of us have two ears, but most people think it's easy and yet it isn't. It's a skill set and it is an art form, I would say. And to your point, Dom, there are many leaders in the UK and beyond who would benefit from some development in the arts of communication I believe there's a real concern that much of the technology that's being developed by Silicon Valley is being developed by people who don't value social skills bluntly. And so the question that I have is, to your



mind, what threat do you think AI could pose to leadership communication? And obviously there's a flip side, which is, and what could the opportunities be?

James Ball (41:13)

So people want to feel empowered to take the very, very simple thing. You know, I used to say at work, I find being emailed when you're going to go to the doctor and do all of this very, very boring. I will trust you until I have a reason not to. Please don't give me a reason not to. I don't want to track your time. And every now and then, I found someone was they'd claimed a weekly doctor appointment and they were going to the gym and I sort of went, look, busted. I went, I've got to ask your line manager to have a look for the next couple of weeks. I went, but can you just respect you've been busted? I'll go back to trusting you like if you do this, but otherwise we are going to have to introduce a whole system of tracking hours and that's going to suck. But you get issues with it, but generally it worked and it really helped us when people needed to stay a bit late. Because people had got the feeling that we hadn't chased them if they had, a builder coming in or whatever. If they did have to suddenly work till seven or eight, they'd still be in on time the next day kind of thing. But you know, we found that great. Automated systems really, really ruin any sense of autonomy.

People feel quite powerless if they're not dealing with a human. And so if you start outsourcing certain functions to a machine in that way, you will disempower people and people will feel much more sort of zoned out and unhappy with the engagement they're getting. Even if you've got a really good fair algorithm that's going to allocate holiday, if people are making the case in a message and ChatGPT is getting back to them in three seconds with a yes or a no versus someone taking an hour or two to look at it. That's different. Now, could you set up a system so that AI is assisting on the holiday? Probably, someone puts in a request, it comes to the human, you know, it comes to their line manager with a recommendation. You know, the AI suggests you approve this, this person's got loads of holidays still to take. We know that they need it in the school holidays. We know they're a parent. We think you should approve this. Do you need to overrule? Give a reason why if you overrule. It might make doing the holiday a much quicker and easier process for the managers. And you could have something tracking how often they overrule it. So you've still got a human in the process. They've still got someone to go to, but you can have the AI in it. That tends to work. That tends to be empowering.

You know, one thing I've seen people do is test emails by asking chat GPT, you are a worried employee. What's the message you get from this email or, what different ways might someone interpret this paragraph and just test whether they've written as clearly as they thought they had. And so they don't ask it to write for them. They ask it to test their messaging.

And so AI as an assistant could be very empowering, could help make things quicker, could sort a lot of mundane bits. It tends to not communicate very clearly because it's essentially, one of the people who helped develop all of this calls it spicy auto complete. So, you know, when you're writing a message in Gmail and it's sort of, I hope to see you soon or hope to see you next month. And it sort of guesses for you.



(44.48)

All that AI is, is a fancy one of those. And so it's averaging out words, it's averaging out guesses. It will come up with something bland and okay. It's not going to be very clear and it's not going to be specified to your audience. So someone sending low stakes emails and isn't a very assured communicator, it might help them compose an email. But if you're a communications professional, it's probably better used to test your messages and hone them than to write for you. I think people can really overstate what they think it can do. It's good for research as well. If you want to go, hey, what's some good quotes or what should I read? You know, I want to recommend a book about X. Can you list me five for me and say how they differ? It can help you think of stuff. It can help you find stuff. It's not a good fact checker and it's not a brilliant messenger. But the key thing is people, as much as they can, should feel like they're interacting with humans and not a machine. Because that disempowers people, that disengages people, and there's really good research on that. There is evidence for that.

Cathryn Barnard (45.58)

Yeah, I think those are some really good pointers for mainstream adoption of generative AI in organisations actually. I think that is the gist and I think, you know, internal communication does have a key role in shaping the way in which generative AI is adopted because it is a communication tool and understanding it as an assistant rather than something that you can delegate your communication to as a manager or a leader in trusting that it is going to come up with a finished polished product for you. And I think this is going to be an ongoing narrative, isn't it? Because the point I think is that the technology was released into the mass market without a user manual. And so everybody is left to figure out for themselves how best to leverage the advantages that the tools bring. And I think your points are absolutely on point and very well articulated.

Jen Sproul (47:00)

I think it is conversations about what's it for, what's the purpose, what's the end point. But I also think there's the piece around whilst we're careful of how we feed it, because it's all an algorithm that's going to just kind of decide. Because if you go back from a mass media perspective or from a social media perspective, it's using that constant data collection to kind of go, this seems to be really appealing to you. Let me push more of that same content and I'm going to tell you what you should consume rather than work out what you want to consume for yourself, which comes back to the piece around trust and what we then believe fundamentally. Because as you say, it's not a fact checker, but then do we need fact checking? So I think it's about understanding what that does in the rounder piece of society as well. And how we work alongside that, I don't know. That's just my perhaps philosophical view on things.



But James as well, I've jotted down quite a few notes as you've been talking quite a lot. And I think what I think really we've clung to with the crux of this trust, which I think has been really interesting when referencing back to what you were talking about earlier, was about how you've used that in your work in journalism is when you're thinking about conspiracy theorists, and how if you go in combative nature. But if you go in a we nature or let me understand or let me see where that comes from, it really, really helps with how we approach those differences. So I think that one of the things that I've put is don't be competitive, but don't also let the hypothesis and the curiosity go by themselves. And be consultative, be open and unsure, be adult to adult, be real, and empower people and make sure we keep AI in the middle, not at the end. I thought those were some of my thoughts.

James Ball (48:47)

That's a brilliant set of summaries. That sounds much clever than what I said. That's great. One sort of thing to add on that is you can challenge a lot more effectively if you've built a bit of commonality before. And we need to challenge in journalism. If we don't ask a hard question, it's a hopeless interview. But it's amazing what you can do if you've asked a few nice questions, built a bit of rapport, but also set some common ground and go, okay, we agree on this, we agree on this, but come on. And then you offer the challenger and it will be taken a lot more constructively than if you opened with it. And that work means having hard conversations. And if you can sort of start them in that way and frame them in that way, I think you're much likelier to get a better outcome, even if it's still a nasty conversation. So it doesn't have to mean being nicey -nicey and just saying what someone wants to hear. But if you can sort of get that bit of commonality in that bit of we, it means the challenge will be taken a lot more constructively. And also if you get pushed back from someone, you might be more in listening mode than sort of diametric mode of we must now stick to our lines. It is that critical thing of sometimes you're into fight for a project or there's something you don't want to happen and you might be in a meeting, it might be in a one -to -one and you suddenly realise, I'm not sure I'm on the right side of this. And that's useful, someone else has got to you that way. And, there is that thing of, okay, okay, I might need to think about it.

Jen Sproul (50:20)

But I think it's that remembrance we all listen more than we speak in general. We will consume more than we let go in general. So if you're playing into that let me have the we in the dialogue then you're going to play into that mmm that curiosity in that thought process I think that's really interesting. I guess that's will be would that be your without wishing to presume this is your answer, but I'll ask it would that be the one thing that you think internal communicators are due toto help restore trust in their organisation switch on the We?



James Ball (50:49)

I think probably that, yeah. think that and communicate more. Do not wait to know for sure because every organisation I've worked in has been a news organisation that puts out news constantly and has still under -communicated. And so if we do it, and I've worked in good newsrooms where I've liked the senior management and they've always under communicated. And so if we're doing that, I can only assume everyone else is. Maybe it's a newsroom problem, who knows, but I tend to guess not.

Jen Sproul (51:39)

I doubt not. No, think that's a general thing. I think to communicate seems really fearful in these times, but we shouldn't let that fear silence us. Actually, we should go against that fear to communicate more, to bring back honesty and clarity to the world that we need. So James, but for me, thank you so much. So many things, hopefully, for many of our listeners to take away, and all the great work that you've been doing as well to rebuild trust in journalism and things like that as well. So thank you so much again for your time, James.

James Ball (51:58)

Thanks for having me, I've really enjoyed it.