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## Candid Comms

Transcript.

Season Five. Episode Seven.



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## Transcript. Season Five, Episode Seven. November 2023

**Rachel:** [00:00:00] You're listening to the Candid Comms podcast with Rachel Miller. Tune in for practical advice and inspirational ideas to help you focus on all things internal communication related.

Hello and welcome to the show! You are about to hear a conversation between Alli Cary and I and as we were recording the episode she heard that news that her team had been shortlisted for a couple of awards at the Institute of Internal Communication National Awards 2023 and since recording I am delighted to tell you those awards have happened so Alli and her team were successful in scooping two awards on the night which took place in September 2023 and they won Best Magazine and they also won Best Wellbeing Programme as well to well done to Alli and the Voyage Care team. Let's go to our conversation.

On this week's episode, I have a very special guest for you and we are focused on all things internal communication team related. So Alli, welcome to the show. Thank you. So Alli, would you mind introducing yourself and share with us your name, where you work and maybe describe your internal communication experience to date?

**Alli:** [00:01:25] Hi, I'm Alli Cary. I am head of internal communications at Voyage Care. We're a social care organisation supporting working age adults in England, Scotland and Wales. My background I started out, like many IC pros, in more generalist communication roles, but think I've always kind of delivered that blend of internal and external communications. And internal has always been the part that's fascinated me most. Reflecting on it now. So I've got some NHS in my background. I've also worked in education and yeah, that's brought me to my role in social care today.

**Rachel:** [00:01:57] Brilliant. Thank you. Today we are talking about how to build a strong internal communication team, and I thought it'd be really interesting to pick your brain really, and ask for your experiences, because I know that you started out at Voyage Care seven years ago now as a team of two, and then over that time, you've managed to very successfully build your team and build the awareness and understanding of internal communication. So I'd love to know, how did you do that, Ali? How did you go from a team of two people to the team you have today?

**Alli:** [00:02:29] I started in my current role at a really exciting time, so prior to my arrival, there wasn't an internal communications function. So that was an amazing opportunity to build from the ground up. And really the early focus was putting strong foundations in place. And at the same time as investing in internal communications, the organisation had also invested in some new marketing resource.

So together we set about getting under the skin of the organisation, ensuring we put the right things in place to achieve those early goals. There was an assistant in post who joined just around the same time as me when I joined the organisation. I think even at that stage, I was very clear that to achieve even our early ambitions, we were going to need more resource. But I think it's all

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about making that case and setting out your goal. This is what we want to achieve. This is how we're going to do it, and this is how we believe we need to be resourced to do so. So the key really was focusing on short term goals, putting in place building blocks for a future. We knew we'd maybe need to revisit some of the things that we were doing, but we needed to get things in place quite quickly, really, and even at that very early stage had ambitions to be award winning.

That was something I really wanted to drive towards. I saw a lot of potential and was really keen to kind of move towards that quickly. I think one of the things we did early was build relationships with other teams across the organisation.

They'd not had that internal communications resource before, so building those relationships, working with them on how we could support how our new team could professionalise some of their output and bring things on brand. The marketing team were focusing on working on the brand at that time as well. So there's a big role for us trying to bring people on that journey, because there was an older brand that people were quite wedded to at the time, so there was a real journey for the organisation to go on there.

By working with those teams, we were able to evidence growing demand and then put together a case for additional support. And in the early days we had some success bringing in fixed term contracts. So bringing people in to kind of evidence, this is what we are going to do with the additional head.

**Rachel:** [00:04:39] Ah that's nice. So you're proving, you're saying we need some more people, and then you're bringing people in on a temporary basis to say, look what we can do with these additional people. Oh, that's very smart, nice.

**Alli:** [00:04:51] And we very successfully been able to keep them as well.

**Rachel:** [00:04:55] Even better.

**Alli:** [00:04:57] That's in no small part due to the people that we got. I think that's the other thing to say, really. I'm under no illusion that the journey we've been on to grow the team has benefited massively from a healthy dose of luck with getting the right people, great people, passionate people who really live the values of the organisation. And I think that's in part because of how we recruit. But also, I'm just very blessed to have a brilliant team of people around me who buy into what the team is trying to achieve.

**Rachel:** [00:05:27] Excellent. And you mentioned being an award winning, and I'm going to come back to that because I love the fact that that was your ambition at the start, that you wanted to build up the team and you wanted to have that mindset already of being an award-winning team. Can you share how many people are in your team today? So you started with two, seven years ago and now you've built up what does the team look like today?

**Alli:** [00:05:48] So there are five of us and we're hoping to build on that very soon actually, but there are five of us at the moment. Me and a team of four. We do have one team member who's currently on maternity leave, and we've got a great cover for that role as well. Again, I've been very lucky. Again, think part of building and maintaining a team is that development. So  
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everybody's been able to start with us and then we've been able to find them development opportunities. So we now have a digital communications manager dedicated to internal comms. And we also have internal communications executives and a senior internal comms exec as well. So that's kind of the current structure of the team. And we are currently 4.6 full time equivalent.

**Rachel:** [00:06:28] We love all the points don't we? We get when we're trying to resource a team, we end up with 0.6 of a person or higher. It's all very complicated. But Ali, tell me, what advice would you give to other internal communicators who want to build their teams based on your experience of the work that you've been doing to really build the business case? It sounds like from your answer, they're really helping the business understand what it is that you could do and the potential there, it sounds like. So what advice would you give if someone's listening, thinking, I really want to build my team.

**Alli:** [00:06:58] Use all the tools in your arsenal. Use everything. All the things that are our advantages as communicators. Use them. So relationships across the business, relationships influence across the business with key stakeholders.

That's always key when you're trying to demonstrate the value of the work that you're doing. It's an oldie, but it's a goodie. Measure what the organisation treasures. So how can you demonstrate that impact? What objectives have you set for yourselves and how are you achieving those? What outcomes can you demonstrate, not just what the outputs you need to make it meaningful for the organization? Think in terms of business case. It's demonstrating this is what we do. This is where we see potential and with more resource.

This is what we feel we could do. So really mapping out that journey and laying it out really clearly for senior leaders because that's what they need from you. Ultimately, they need to understand what the additional investment will buy them essentially.

**Rachel:** [00:07:58] Very clear narrative, isn't it? This is what you have today. This is what the potential is with investment. And I love that you're talking outcomes. I think regular listeners will know, and regular readers of my blog will know that moving from outputs to outcomes is so important. It's the so what's happened as a result. So I guess from listening to you talking there, it's mapping those outcomes is so this is what could happen as a result of investing in a team or in resourcing us.

**Alli:** [00:08:23] Yeah. And I think that's getting easier as we mature as a team. And we reflected recently actually, that it's a real barometer of the maturity of the internal comms function, that we are able to think about those outcomes. Now, think in the early days, we didn't have any tools that really allowed us to accurately measure. And it was very much sentiment and the conversations we were having and things.

But then you bring on board tools like email tools and things like that that the organization hadn't had. And actually there's a lot of value in in the outputs of those early measurements. They were a part of our journey. They did really help us to demonstrate the impact that we were having in the early days. But now it's that recognition that it's about more than that. The organisation needs us to bring them more than that. The outputs are something we consider when we're thinking about new tools to bring on board and what will we get from it. But actually, for us as a team, we're

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much more focused on where have we added value, what results have we seen from that piece of work? That's something that I think our leaders are valuing from us.

**Rachel:** [00:09:26] Excellent. I think it's having that constant conversation, isn't it, of we're measuring as we're going and the conversations with stakeholders and the people around us. It's that continual conversation around measurement where it's part and parcel of what we're doing. So you're doing great work. You're able to evidence the work that you're doing and love the fact that you're using the word impact to demonstrating the impact.

So as a result of the work we've done, this is what's happened. This is the changes of behaviour or whatever it might be, where you're able to really evidence what we do. I think so much of our work as internal communicators is rigorous, and we're robust and we have processes, but we're not so great at working out loud and helping people understand all the things that we've put in place. So what I'm hearing from what you're saying is you're showing what you're doing and you're helping everyone else around you understand that because we've invested in this team, it's weird to talk about people as resource, but the resourcing of the comms team, this is the benefit to the business, which is how you get more resource. It really isn't it. In a nutshell.

**Alli:** [00:10:23] For me, it's about staying close to those things. So our structure across a month, we have dedicated 1 to 1 time with each team member, which obviously helps me to understand their goals, how I can support them better, how they're feeling in their role, etcetera. But then we have a review meeting and we do look at the outputs in that meeting. So we look at some of the data that's available to us, but then we try and move that from okay, these are the outputs. What are the outcomes. What are we seeing. So that meeting is always really valuable in terms of our reporting to senior stakeholders. And then we have a forward view meeting as well. So we kind of look at what this is, what's come, this is what's coming. And what do we need to prepare for. How could we measure some of these things. So we're staying really close to it on a monthly basis to ensure that we're keeping up that ongoing conversation with those around us. And they know what we're planning, what we're doing, and we can make sure that we're meeting organisational need always.

**Rachel:** [00:11:15] Love that. That is strategic internal comms and action, isn't it that looking back and planning forward, where it's so easy to get locked into a review cycle where we're just looking back and we're not actually going forward and we're not pulling through, how do we feel about the things that we intended to do? What changes are we going to make over the next month, quarter, whatever it might be, as a result of the work that we've done? I think that's such a healthy thing to do, to be constantly looking back and also planning forward the forward view.

**Alli:** [00:11:25] Actually especially important when you're trying to build your team because it lets you see where are your pinch points, what is coming up over the next more extended period of time, and then you know that you need to start making that case and identifying resource needs.

**Rachel:** [00:11:58] That sounds super smart. So when you are in that mindset of recruitment and when you're looking at building a team or looking to bring someone in to cover parental leave, what do you look for? Ali. So in your mind, what makes a great internal communicator? What skill or behavior do you look for?

**Alli:** [00:12:16] It goes back to those key personality traits for me. So creativity, enthusiasm, values, being really purpose driven and a great team player, it's important to be able to build connections with people and different types of people as well. I think that's important. You need to be quite an outgoing person to be a really effective internal communicator. I've often find I think that's probably more specific to our organization. We're often in our services meeting people we support and teams, and that can be a really vibrant environment. It can also be challenging. So you need to kind of have that resilience.

**Rachel:** [00:12:50] It's interesting to hear what you're saying about that, almost that personality of how you need to be as an internal communicator. I certainly did a blog post maybe five, six years ago, maybe earlier, around being an extrovert and internal communication. So featured Helen Devereaux came to blog for me and wrote about what it's like to be an introvert working in an internal comms. So you talk there about having conversations with the business. So is it about introvert? Extrovert? What do you look for when you're building a team, or is that too black and white?

**Alli:** [00:13:18] That's probably a little bit too black and white. I think there's a range of personalities in the team, and there are some members who are more comfortable in that environment, but actually it's great for them to go out with people who maybe are earlier in their journey with us, don't have that much exposure to our services. They're able to take people on that journey because it is important that they can build relationships with our services. They're the lifeblood of our comms. Essentially, we take a real storytelling approach, and we're the first to shout about the incredible things that our services are doing. So building those relationships is absolutely critical. We have lots of thirsty channels to fill our magazine, our intranet. They're always full of the kind of smiling faces of the people we support and the amazing things that our teams have done. So that's pretty integral part of the role is being able to engage with them. But that said, yeah, there's a range of different people in the team when we're recruiting. It's not necessarily about, oh, well, you know that person. I wouldn't send them into a service. I'd never look at it like that. I think it's more about being really clear that they have the right values, they have the right passion for our purpose, and you can be any sort of person to have those kind of core elements, but it brings so much value when somebody can be passionate about what's happening and it shines through in their writing and and the way that they do engage with the services, even if they are slightly quieter or slightly more introverted, as you say.

But I think going back to those core things that I look for, it really is more for me about the person than the skill attributes. I think you can teach a lot of things. You can develop a person around a lot of the skill attributes that you would look for, but you can't necessarily teach them to be the right person for the organisation. You want them to have a certain level of experience, and you want them to have a really good foundational base of skills. But ultimately, when somebody comes into an organisation like ours anyway, there's a lot for them to learn in terms of tone, of voice. How we do things as a team. Sounds like I'm blowing our trumpet a little bit now, but we're a very highly effective team. We work on a really fast paced basis. We've got very established.

**Rachel:** [00:15:29] Blow away Ali, you are. I've had the pleasure of working with your team. You are a highly effective team who you're very mindful, very thoughtful in and what you're doing. And I think something that I see you doing is nurturing that team and coaching them and advising them and upskilling them and giving them good opportunities to really thrive in the roles they're

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in. And you're coaching and stretching developing them. So blow away because you are. We talked about awards earlier. We alluded to it. You are an award-winning team. That was an aspiration that you set. Tell us about that. What awards have you won?

**Alli:** [00:16:01] Quite a few. I think we'd won 20 at the last count in total now.

**Rachel:** [00:16:06] Amazing.

**Alli:** [00:16:07] We are currently the reigning, if that's even how you would describe it. Best in-house team, 1 to 5 people. The National Awards, and we've won that for the past two years. We've won awards for magazine, Best print magazine, intranet awards, event video, various things over the past few years, which is super exciting. So a real spread. And what makes me so happy about that is that it recognises all of the individuals in the team, the things that they're passionate about and the things they work on. We really have kind of achieved a spread across there, and we just found out that we've got a further four shortlists at this year's IIC awards, so we're really excited about that. Fantastic.

**Rachel:** [00:16:50] Congratulations. The Institute of Internal Communication Awards are the kind of the jewel in the crown for internal communicators, particularly here in the UK, isn't it? I judge them every year and they are rigorous. They're tough to win as well. So congratulations for all of your success today and fingers crossed for the future awards. I think it's September 2023. Those awards will be announced, so I will be there with my team on that night. So we will be there cheering you on. Alli.

**Alli:** [00:17:16] Yeah, I mean it's always really exciting to be shortlisted. And having recently had experience myself of judging in the awards, I think it's really clear that the standard is really high and it is difficult. So I think that's brought new perspective on it for me as well, in terms of how well we've done to actually pick up the number of awards that we have.

**Rachel:** [00:17:34] Amazing, brilliant, well done and fingers crossed for the for the future ones. I'm going to ask you to cast your mind back and ask you, what's one thing that you wish you knew before you started building your internal comms function?

**Alli:** [00:17:49] I wish I'd known that it's okay to do it your way. It's really easy to overthink things. Let imposter syndrome creep in. Am I doing this right? Particularly when you're in an organisation where there isn't really an established way of doing things. And that's certainly something I've been guilty of and was guilty of in the early days of my role at voyage. But in building my team, investing in them, trusting them, developing them and their confidence and skills, I feel like I've created something that I'm really proud of. I'm proud of each of them individually for how far they've come, but also how far we've come as a team. And we've done that by doing things our way. In the early days, that was a harder thing to do, but actually I'm now much more comfortable with this is who we are as a team. This is how we work. This is the value we add and actually proactively using that knowledge within the organisation I suppose. We remain a really small team in a large organisation actually, but our impact is greater than the sum of our parts. So it's a result of how we work and how we work together, how we live our values. And yeah, I just want everyone to come to work, love every day. And that's how to get the best out of them and their

skills. And it just comes back to being true to kind of who you are as a communicator. What do you want your team to achieve? And really sticking steadfast to that.

**Rachel:** [00:19:13] Excellent. Thank you. So I know that you studied the Institute of Internal Communication Masters and Internal Communication Management, and I'm curious just to pick your brain on that, really, and just to ask you about that, because I think as much as you're investing in your team and your nurturing them and you're guiding them and you're coaching them and you're developing them, I think it's so important when you are leading a team that we continuously invest in our own professional development as well. So I'm curious to know from your perspective about the Masters particularly, and how important do you think professional development is for internal communicators?

**Alli:** [00:19:45] I mean, I'd say to anybody thinking about the Masters, do it, maybe don't do it in a pandemic year like I did. That was not part of the plan. I found it really invigorating to work alongside like minded internal comms pros, to really get under the skin of why we do what we do. It's incredibly strategic. The course leaders are really passionate. So actually, as an aside, that course I'd really recommend I really enjoyed it. I think the broader kind of topic of professional development is something that I bang on about all the time to my team. All of them now have done not only training courses that help them build like specific skills within their careers, but they've all done a qualification as well, mainly **with IoIC actually.** So that's a mix of foundation diplomas, advanced diplomas, depending on the point that they're at in their career. It's such a valuable thing to do because not only did they gain confidence in their skills and really grow in their profession and their career, but they bring all that value back to the team and you get to share new thinking. Obviously, a lot of us did courses a long time ago thinking changes. They should have that confidence to come and bring ideas to the table that we pick up and we work with, and hopefully that's something that they all value in terms of being able to have a voice in the direction of the team.

**Rachel:** [00:21:08] I think one of the other benefits I find when people do training courses and they're meeting other internal communicators. So it's very often we get quite locked into what we're doing in our own organisations, and there's some real value to be found, I think, in having our heads up and looking around and meeting with other people, whether you're studying together or you're at conferences or events, swapping notes and asking them, what do you do? And I think bringing those ideas back into the team as well, that constant professional development for me is not just about the qualifications and the paid for things that we're doing, but listening to podcasts and reading books and reading blogs. I think even if you've been working in internal comms for a long time, there's always something new to learn. There's always something that you can pick up from somebody else that you can try in your organisation, or you can discover new topics to learn about. Then you bring back in to enhance the work that you're doing. Any final thoughts for our listeners? You've shared some amazing insight and tips. Thank you. Is there anything else you think we should know or you want to tell us?

**Alli:** [00:22:12] I think probably to just sum up what we've been talking about, really, I think it's about having a really clear vision, and there's no substitute for really understanding your organisation and understanding its needs.



Staying really close to senior leaders and having really positive relationships with them is super helpful for that. If you understand what the organisation needs from you, then it makes it far easier to construct a team that meets those needs, and those things change over time as well. So I think what we've probably done quite successfully as well is recognise when there's been a change and kind of shift our delivery and shift the way that the team works to support that and think the dreaded P word again, the pandemic really changed internal communications in our organisation as it did for many, I'm sure, and we were able to adapt and change and shift our delivery.

Yes, to deliver what was required of us urgently during that very intense period, particularly in social care. Obviously, it's a very challenging period, but actually the legacy of that for us is that we've kind of emerged stronger and more connected to the organisation, and we really do understand what our role is, what's required of us, and we're able to build the team around that. So having that understanding, engaging that in what your vision is and then finding the right people to come on that journey with you, I suppose that's the best way I can describe it.

It's not about having somebody who's really good at this and then somebody that's really good at that, and they just do their thing. It's about a team approach. It's about everybody contributing and being empowered to work on things that they're really passionate about. That's certainly my kind of mantra for getting the best from my team, developing them, allowing them to experience new things and try new things, but also to develop rich skills in certain areas that they can kind of bring together when they're working collaboratively.

We have daily catch up calls in the morning where they can chat if they need to chat and have some head space. But also, you know, we talk about what we've got on that day, who can support who, where are the gaps, what are we trying to drive towards, you know, how are things going with some of our bigger campaigns and projects.

So staying really close to the team, really driving towards that vision and really focusing on the value that you add and being alive to the times when you do need more resource. But specifically, why not just, oh well, we're too busy, we need more resource. It's like, what do we need more resource for? What's this role going to fulfil for us and the organisation? And let's build a case towards that.

**Rachel:** [00:24:48] Brilliant. Thank you so much for all of your efforts and energy today. Thank you for sharing your many pearls of wisdom with us. Alli. It's been a total pleasure to have this conversation today. If people want to find you online, where's the very best place that they could perhaps connect with you?

**Alli:** [00:25:02] I'm on LinkedIn.

**Rachel:** [00:25:03] Brilliant I will include your LinkedIn profile in the show notes for this episode. Ali, thank you so much.

I hope you found this episode useful. My thanks to Alli for being so candid during our conversation.

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I've got some exciting news to share with you as we close this episode. I've just announced the return of All Things IC Live, for 2024. These are in person training sessions that are taking place in London UK throughout the coming year for up to 25 in house internal communicators.

Each day is focused on helping internal communicators to succeed through training and networking. I'm not having these days sponsored. They are provided by my business All Things IC and are led by me. All Things IC Live is a mixture of learning and masterminds, this means you benefit from the collective wisdom of the room and your fellow in house peers. You can also ask me anything.

Upcoming 2024 dates are 31 January 16 May 10 September and 10 December 2024. Tickets are going on sale on Monday 13 November 2023 at 9am UK time. We've worked really hard to keep the costs low so your investment is £299 per person per date and there's also an All Things IC Live pass available. The pass is £999 and this is how to get a ticket for all four dates in 2024.

This gives you four opportunities throughout the year to learn and network with other inhouse internal communicators. Full information can be found on the All Things IC website and I do hope that you can join us.

<https://www.allthingsic.com/all-things-ic-live/>

As ever, I love hearing from you. Thank you for listening to this episode of Candid Comms. Why not find me online. You can look me up. Rachel Miller on LinkedIn. I'm @rachelallthingsic on Instagram, or why not send me a message via the website? Hello at allthingsIC.com, I'd love to know what you are taking away from this episode, and what you hope to do differently as a result of listening to candid comms. And remember, what happens inside is reflected outside. See you again soon.