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Transcript.

Season Six. Episode Seven.



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Transcript. Season Six Episode Seven. April 2024.

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[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 on today's episode. We are going to be examining the purpose of internal communication. And in particular, we're going to be looking at why does it exist in your organisation. You will leave with one thing to know, one thing to do and one thing to think about. Are you ready? Let's get started.

Why does internal communication exist? That's a huge question, and there's many different avenues that we could go down. But for today, I want to share with you the definition that I use when I talk about the purpose of internal communication. The purpose [00:01:00] of internal communication isn't telling people what to do.

It's to create a shared understanding and a shared meaning. Only then can our people align themselves with our company's goals, purpose, and priorities. Now the reason that I say it's not telling people what to do is because often there's a sense that that's exactly who we are. We're here to tell people what to do.

And that's just not the case. That shared understanding and shared meaning has many different levels. So what we need to know today is the purpose of internal communication through that lens. That's what I'm going to examine. Those layers are things like what's said and done inside an organisation, what's prioritised by employees and leaders, how communication happens, and that includes things like tone of voice, accessibility, and inclusivity.

[00:02:00] Another layer is ensuring there's a clear alignment between employees and the purpose of the organisation. What that means is they know how their role fits into the wider picture and why the company exists. Another layer is having clarity of thought from leaders. And that means there's no organisational integrity gap between what is said and what is done. Your values on the wall or around your lanyards are reflected in the day-to-day behaviours and there is no say do gap. Promises are made and promises are kept or an explanation is given as to why not. And you may recognise that if you've studied employee engagement. That wording is from the MacLeod report by MacLeod and Clarke in 2009.

Another layer is stories and peer to peer communication that employees really identify with. Also, analysing assumptions, testing recall and [00:03:00] jargon busting. And then finally, sense check in and creating frames of reference for employees. So there's a lot there. So when I talk about a shared understanding and the shared meaning, I mean, any or all of those things, what's said and done, what's prioritised, how communication happens, and that's the tone of voice, accessibility, inclusivity, alignment between employees and the purpose of the organisation, clarity of thought from leaders, and there's no organisational integrity gap.

Stories and peer-to-peer communication, analysing assumptions, testing recall, jargon busting, and then sense check in and creating frames of reference. I wonder what that means for your
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organisation. If I asked you, how are you, in your organisation, creating a shared understanding and a shared meaning through the way that you communicate, what examples could you give me?

I look for this when I'm working with organisations [00:04:00] and working with in-house communicators. I'm trying to get a sense of how internal communication happens and I want to be really clear. Have we set our stall out here? Is it clear why internal communication exists? What I'm looking for is a correlation between what the business is here to do and therefore How the internal communication shows up.

What are we prioritising? What are we focusing on? How are we helping our people understand the importance of their work and how they fit in? Whether we're curing patients, selling widgets, transporting people, whatever the purpose is of your organisation. Do your people understand day in, day out, how their role ladders up into that overall purpose of your organisation?

In my mind, that's really clear. And those layers that I've just talked through are the evidence, if you like, or the proof points. When I'm analysing an organisation or I'm working with internal communicators, [00:05:00] I'm looking for those evidence points, those insights, those proof points that show me. That correlation is in place.

I use the words alignment when I was describing the alignment between employees and the purpose of the organisation in the layers, they know how their role fits into the wider picture and why the company exists. I wonder what that looks like for your organisation. I can tell you from experience when these things aren't in place.

It's so evident. Communication breaks down. There's no sources of truth. And what happens is people do their best guess. They work on assumptions and they work aligning themselves to something that they think is important. And I've experienced this many times in my internal communication career over the past 20 years where maybe there's a new leader in place in an organisation and they haven't clearly articulated their vision for the organisation.

And it's been going on for a long time. [00:06:00] Maybe they've been enrolled for three months or six months. And what happens when you have that information gap where your leaders are, your most senior leader, particularly when they aren't setting their stall out, if you like, and saying, this is the vision for the organisation, this is our purpose.

This is what we're doing as a company. Then what are you laddering up into? What are you hooking into? If you're trying to write an internal communication strategy, makes your job really hard because we need to show that clear correlation and that clear alignment. So that's what you need to know. It's the purpose of internal communication inside your organisation through all of those different layers.

It might be that you have a very clear purpose, that your role exists. And in fact, one of my in-house roles when I was working for a pharmaceutical company. That role, very clearly, was to equip our frontline colleagues, our sales force, who were with [00:07:00] healthcare professionals in hospitals, day in, day out.

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So my job was to make sure that those amazing people that we had on our frontline, that they had the information they needed to do their jobs well. They understood what was going on in the organisation, they understood how their role fitted in, and that was a very clear, laser sharp focus for me. We had a wider purpose as an organisation focused on pharmaceutical particularly, but as a comms team, the purpose of us as a team was very neatly divided, if you like.

I knew that the sales force was my responsibility and my job was really clear to help create a shared understanding and meaning through the lens of those people. So they understood when they were not on site with us, when they were out in those hospitals or medical centres, wherever they were in their cars, wherever they were, that they still felt connected to the organisation.

They had that shared understanding and shared meaning. [00:08:00] You'll have your own version for your organisation, and that's why I want you to know, when you're talking to your stakeholders inside your company, how are you describing what you're here to do? You could consider perhaps creating this as a statement that you share, maybe when you're recruiting to your team, maybe when you're inducting people, maybe even on your section of the internet if you have one, where you make it really clear, this is the purpose in internal communication. This is why we're here.

So that's what we need to know. The second thing I want us to consider today and what I want you to do is when I think about these layers that I've just described, how they manifest themselves inside each organisation is different. And that's down to a variety of factors, not least your culture, the way you do things around here, your leadership style, the type of business that you are, how and where your employees are working.

So, the history, you know, [00:09:00] how, how old your organisation is, how mature it is. It also can depend on ownership as well. So how a business is owned can also show up in different ways from a communication perspective. So how you talk about what you do day to day, how you talk about maybe your legacy company, a family owned business, for example, or maybe you're brand new, you're a start-up that will shape.

The way you communicate and that shared understanding and meaning and that's why comms friends, why I find the world of internal communication so fascinating because it varies from company to company, those layers, what's said and done, what's prioritised, how communication happens. That will vary and it doesn't matter if you've got two banks, for example, or two pharmaceutical companies or two travel companies.

Those layers will be unique to your organisation. So it's important that we know what they are. I love calling on [00:10:00] research to help me in my role as an internal communicator, and I'm going to draw on some today, and it's from the State of the Sector survey from Gallagher. And I've got some stats to share with you from the 2023 version, and as I'm recording this, the 2024 version is hot off the press.

If you've never come across the State of the Sector survey from Gallagher, I encourage you to check it out. It is Always a useful read. It is packed with data and insights to help you have a sense of what your peers are doing around the globe. It helps you see what types of channels people are using, how big their teams are, how much they're being paid even.

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I'm sure that's always the most popular section of that survey. And when I'm looking at that report, and Dan in my team blogged for us recently, I'll include the show notes at www.allthingsic.com/podcast. I'll include a link in those show notes for this episode. But he blogged for us about what the survey means for internal communicators this year.

The [00:11:00] question that was asked was around the purpose. Of internal communication. So why do we exist? And in the 2023 survey, 74 percent of respondents said culture and belonging. Is the purpose for internal communication, creating an inclusive workplace where employees feel valued and energised. And that was followed really closely by strategic alignment at 67%.

That means creating clarity around your strategy and a sense of ownership. Now for 2024 strategic alignment rose in the ranks since last year and it's now neck and neck with culture and belonging which again has nabbed the top spot once again. According to the commentary from Gallagher they say culture and belonging surprised us all in 2023 by ranking number one in the purpose stakes but it's important to note respondents could choose three unranked options so it might not have been everyone's top [00:12:00] choice.

This year, interestingly, 82 percent of respondents who report into an internal communication department chose culture and belonging as their purpose. So that's the purpose of internal communication. While 86 percent chose strategic alignment. Respondents who stated they report into HR, however, were more evenly split, with twice as many selecting managing risk.

I found that really interesting. There's a graph that goes with this. I'll put, I'll include that in the show notes as well, so you can see it. So the choices there for people to choose from. The question was, what is the purpose of internal communication in your organisation? And the options included culture and belonging, strategic alignment, organisational agility, managing risk, customer experience.

Talent retention and employer advocacy. What would that answer be for your organisation? If you had to look at that list, and again I'll include it in the show notes [00:13:00] so you can see the graph that I'm referring to. What would that be for you? If those were your choices, would you say that culture and belonging is the purpose of internal communication in your organisation?

Would you say it's managing risk? Is it employer advocacy? And more importantly for me, how does that show up day to day? If you've nailed the purpose and you know why internal communication exists inside your organisation, then how are you pulling that through into work streams? How are you pulling that through into the standards that you're setting, into the roles that you're recruiting into, into the choices that you're making when it comes to your channels, for example, Or prioritising when you're creating conversations with leaders around priorities for the next three, six, nine, 12 months, how does that show up?

Because if you're really clear, the purpose of my role, the purpose of internal communication in this organisation is to focus on culture and belonging. What an [00:14:00] incredible opportunity that is, but how are you evidencing that? How are you making sure that that is your laser focus? And you're saying no to the other things that don't feel as important because you've nailed that purpose and you've got it really clear.

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We're going to take a short break and when we come back, I'm going to leave you with one thing. To think about. See you in a moment.

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Welcome back in the final part of today's episode. I'm going to share something for you to think about given the conversation that we've just had, where I've encouraged you to think about the purpose of internal communication inside your organisation. If you've not written that down, I encourage you to do that because what I want you to do is be really clear why your role or why your function exists.

And then what I want you to do is to test what you've written against what your other team members, your leaders or your stakeholders say the [00:16:00] purpose of internal communication is for your organisation. I wonder what they would say. Would it be exactly the same? Would the way that they describe internal communication match up with what you say?

And this is a really interesting exercise to do because it helps you uncover any integrity gaps or disconnects or misalignment where it might be really clear in your head. This is who we are, what we do, how we show up, what we're prioritising, etc. But for those other people I mentioned, employees, leaders, stakeholders, if it's not clear what the purpose of internal communication is, then that's when communication can break down.

That's when assumptions get made. That's when you have that never ending list of requests to work very tactically or to whatever it may be. You know this better than I do for your own organisation. Those things that feel like they really jar [00:17:00] with you and you think that's not my job. That's not what I'm here to do.

This, Comms Friends, is our opportunity to really think about it. Think about the purpose of internal communication inside your organisation. Write it down. Articulate it. If you've not done that before, if you are in a team, then why not individually, however many people you've got in your team, write it down.

Internal communication exists in this organisation. To fill in the blanks. So internal communication exists in this organisation too. And then whatever your answer is and then compare them. Swap notes. This is a conversation that you can have as part of performance reviews as part of, if you're

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looking back at a year that's just happened or a quarter that's just happened you don't really need an excuse.

To focus on this, but it can be helpful to hook it into performance reviews or if you're analysing your internal communication on a quarterly basis or monthly basis, [00:18:00] whatever it might be, so it doesn't feel like it's come out of left field. So do that, write that definition down and then test it. And you may find, let's hope, comms friends, I've got my fingers crossed, we may find.

That it's super clear, you know, what the purpose of internal communication is for your organisation. And so do those around you. How can you make sure that you are constantly reinforcing that through your work? So you are saying yes to the things which are priorities and no to the things that aren't. Or if actually doing this exercise makes you realise, Oh my goodness, there is such a misconception of what we're here to do.

Then what are you going to do about it? What impact would it make? What's the outcome? The so what? What would happen as a result of focusing on this? And the reason it's a good thing to do, I think, is because if you are feeling frustrated that you're being asked to do things that you don't [00:19:00] think sit within your remit as internal communicators, then it starts that conversation, a really good quality conversation.

Let me help you understand this is what we're here to do. Those sorts of discussions where you're not being difficult, you're being constructive, but you're helping the people around you understand what you're here to do, because we're focusing on the purpose of internal communication for your organisation.

So you're mirroring things which are important to your organisation. So all of those layers that I talked about. That's why there's not a perfect blueprint here. It's why I can't give you today. Here are the exact answers for each of those layers. I described them as nuanced earlier, and that shows up every single week in my work.

All the different organisations that my team and I have the pleasure of advising. We see the differences and that, that variety is what makes workplaces so fascinating and our jobs as internal [00:20:00] communicators, endlessly fascinating. It's celebrating the differences inside organisations. What makes you special and unique?

So that answer for you will be determined by all of those things that I've just mentioned. I'm going to leave you with a final thought, the Institute of Internal Communication say that the core role of internal communication is to enable people at work to feel informed, connected and purposeful in order to drive organisational performance.

Consider that if you're running that exercise through the core role of internal communication is to enable people at work to feel informed, connected and purposeful in order to drive organisational performance. organisational performance. I hope you found this episode useful. There was a lot in there to get our heads around today.

As ever, I love hearing from you. Do get in touch and let me know what you're going to do as a [00:21:00] result of listening to this episode of the Candid Comms podcast. You can find me, Copyright All Things IC Ltd. All rights reserved. Cannot be reproduced without explicit written permission.

Rachel Miller, on LinkedIn. Look me up on Instagram, @rachelallthingsic or why not send a message via our website. Hello at All Things IC.

And remember, what happens inside is reflected outside. See you again soon.