

Iain - Intro

Hi, welcome to our fifth CIPR Engaged podcast. In this conversation, we'll be exploring what it means to be a strategic communicator. To be seen as a strategic communicator, and have the influence that comes with this. We'll look at what it means to be a professional, and how communicators are elevating and repositioning themselves.

Sharing their insight and experiences are Alex Akin, Executive Director for Government Communications, James Powell, who's Head of Group Communications at Irwin Mitchell, and recently a chartered CIPR member. And up first our host, Sarah pinch, MD, of Pinch Point Communications, independent advisor to the Welsh National Assembly, non-executive Director of monk's care, and on top of all that co-opted trustee at the University of Bristol Students Union.

Sarah 1:09

We find ourselves in 2021, in a place that none of us expected to be. The entire world has been changed by the pandemic of COVID-19. And as communicators, we have found ourselves at the forefront of often having to deliver incredibly bad news. Of having to manage incredibly complex information and many having to give advice to boards, some of which they've never met before.

We've seen boards come forward and ask for interventions and advice in ways that have never happened before. And yet, we know that there has been a huge amount of work undertaken both by the Chartered Institute Public Relations by other professional bodies, and indeed by our own government to ensure that communications is a strategic management discipline. And we are seeing that progress. And I believe we have now an opportunity to ensure that the professionalism of communications is understood as a vital part of the success for all organisations, large, small, independently owned, nationally operated, government, private, public, and everything in between.

So, today's podcast is looking at how can we ensure that this opportunity, if indeed, my fellow speakers believe that it is an opportunity, can be harnessed and brought forward to ensure that organisation's really do understand, communicate, listen, and engage with those people for whom they are reliant upon whether that's to make profit or to make change. So, I'd like to bring in first of all, Alex. Alex, you have a reputation for really driving forward the professionalism of communications within central government and indeed, local government before that, do you believe this is a great opportunity for us?

Alex 3:02

Thank you, Sarah, I do. And I was inspired by the work and the CIPR in the early 2000s. Which is why at Westminster City Council, we became chartered members of the chartered body. So my success is so is built on the shoulders of others and we've learned a lot from the CIPR. And that's why, when we thought we were getting through the pandemic, I got the CIPR, and some of the other professional bodies together, and we sat down with the CIPR director, general, and we produce the advisory report, which you can see on the GCS website, government communication service, that set out some of the early learnings because I think a theme of this conversation will be the necessity of learning. And we wanted to capture those lessons at an early stage. And we did that. And some of the things were expected about the importance of strategy over tactics. Some of the things were relatively new, like the fact that you need to provide a total communications offer to the board. You can't say the PR people are there and the marketing people are over there. And oh, I see internal comms down the corridor. And on the point about internal communications, the advisory panel did recognise that internal communications was absolutely vital, and had possibly been the Cinderella service so far.

Sarah 4:29

Thanks, Alex. I think that's really important point, isn't it? I think there's something that I always talk to boards about is that actually, they're sitting on a whole load of people who could defend, increase awareness of and be their advocates for their brand and often you're right, they're forgotten the staff or the sort of lost people on the list rather than the first people on the list.

Alex 4:49

I think that's right. I mean, I remember when I was asked at Westminster City Council to set up an internal comms team. It was like, why bother with that? We have very exciting media relations. In the wider public relations things, why do I have to do that – I was forced to do it. I was struck this week I was visiting a communications team working in central government. And they were complaining that their internal comms channels were not working. And they were doing websites. And they were doing paper briefings and electronic briefings. And I said, look, great internal communications, as you said, Sarah, is about people. What you need is a traditional, but modernised camp cascade, where the chief exec says, right, this is where we're going. This is our mission. And every manager every level communicates that back. And also, as you said, during your introduction, we listen, as well as broadcasting. And so, the cascade takes messages back up the chain as well. So, I think that what I was saying on internal communications, is if as internal communicators, you find yourself discussing the state of your intranet, or the quality of your e-messages, you're in the wrong place. It's always about people, talking to other people to inspire them to deliver that discretionary effort that makes organisations successfully.

Sarah 6:10

Thanks, and James, we were talking before we started recording here about your most recent accolades. I know it means an awful lot to you. Do you want to just talk about the importance of having professionalism really, and proof of it, James?

James 6:28

Yeah, well, I mean, I've been working as a communicator, primarily, going back to Alex's point internal communications. And it still strikes me that when I talk to people they don't see it as a professionalised practice sometimes. And that's completely opposed to my own view, which is actually to be an excellent communicator, you have to build up experience, but you have to consider that development is a key part of that. And, being a member of the CIPR, which have been now for 10 plus years, and gaining qualifications, year in, year out completing my CPD cycle. And working to charter status hasn't been a tick box exercise. It's been something that I've been truly invested in because I believe the power of that development leads you to be a better communicator, leads you to help other people leads you to share best practice, have great conversations, support your teams and ultimately, help your business, the organisation you work for, your stakeholders, whether they be internal or external, understand the purpose of what you're trying to achieve and why and the role they have to play in it. So, I will always be investing in it. I know we'll always talk about professionalisation within the industry, because we're often working with people who are professionalised themselves, whether they be accountants, solicitors, year in and year out, there doing the same thing. And we should not be doing anything different. And as you can probably tell, I'm quite passionate about it.

Sarah 8:02

Well, many congratulations on becoming chartered as having gone through it myself. It's an incredibly testing experience. But I think something that we would really, really recommend to anybody listening to our conversation today. And Alex, I know that's something that's been very important to you in the government communication services, that demonstration of work. So, as James said, if you're speaking to people with other qualifications, being able to demonstrate that you yourself are qualified, and it's not just, you know, flying by the seat of your pants and what you wrote on your fag packet, although sometimes, that can also be

quite helpful. But Alex, talk to us a bit about how professionalism has become a bit of a watchword in government communications.

Alex 8:45

Yeah, government communicate, government has a 26 professions from economists and engineers, to scientists, and communicators. And that responsibility means I felt very strongly that if my colleagues are going to get a hearing around the ministerial or the Permanent Secretary desks, they need to really understand what professional is. I agree with what James said, and I agree with you, Sarah, that the chartered status is very important.

To me, professionalism means that we have a theory of practice. We have a code of conduct, we have case studies, and we have standards. And then we have a curriculum to enable people to learn and through their professional development to test their success. It was interesting what you said about fag packets Well, actually, your intuitive advice will of course, be based on years experience and case studies and the theory of practice and your learning. So, I don't think we should undersell ourselves that even off top my head, were probably saying things that are built on deep experience some successes and not a few mistakes. I think the point of challenge I would bring in, is I fear that communication get bored and want to do things differently on internal communications. And James made these points eloquently, but actually, there's a way you do internal communications. The engagement success project set out the four principles as internal comms in terms of the vision for staff, engaging managers, as a requirement, listening to staff, and that's a novel idea, and managers walking the talk. And that's how it should be done. And we all know that teams succeed if everyone knows their roles and implement them to a really high standard, but too often, I get the impression that people want to create new and different roles to ways of doing things. So, a bit of brilliant basics, and leading to high standards, creates professionalism. In my experience,

Sarah 10:47

I think I think you're absolutely right. And I think that's something we talk about a lot in my company is how, you know, we might be able to answer a clients question really quickly, but that's because we've got collectively, you know, more than 100 years experience. And so, you know, I think you're absolutely right, those that kind of intuitive thing that you think is right. And James, I don't know, if you want to come in and talk a bit about some of those things that are explored in the chartership assessment, which is, you know, strategy and often that strategic thinking, we know what's right, and maybe you want to pick up on Alex's point about why is there an obsession with reinvention all the time?

James 11:28

You know, going back to the point around strategy, every business, every organisation, every industry should have a strategy to know where they're going, what's the endgame? What's, what's our future state look like? Where do we want to be? What's our vision? Now, as a communicator, as a communications team, we need to have that shared vision, we need to have that shared understanding as we build our own strategy. Otherwise, it's completely out of tune. It's not aligned. And why should anyone believe what we're saying? And so, when I look at the past 12 months, especially, having a seat at that table, being a trusted advisor to the board meant that our communications strategy was completely in tune with the business strategy. So, we could share that actually, the outcomes and outtakes of what we were doing, would effectively help our colleagues would be in tune with what we're hearing from our clients was based on really strong insight. And, essentially, that we were protecting the business. And internal communications is been a key part of my role for a number of years. But equally, making sure that's aligned with what we're saying externally, the grey areas don't really exist anymore. And that's why it's ever important for there to be a joined-up strategy between communications and the business covering all those various elements that Alex covered earlier.

Sarah 12:52

I think that's absolutely right. And I think goodness, we've seen the grey areas almost completely disappear. You know, we've seen the insides of people's homes, we've seen people's families, we've, you know, we've seen people very distressed, we've seen that, that kind of lifting of, if you like a professional front, I see in terms of I must behave like this, I must pretend that I've got it all together, has gone I think for a lot of organisations and people want, if we go back to the points we're making people want to hear from people. They really want to get to know, the organisation that they're working with. And as many people might know, I chair the Taylor Bennett Foundation and our young people are ethnically diverse young people coming through the programme, have very high standards about how they are expecting organisations to engage with them as people as well as professionals and professional communicators, but as individuals. And Alex, is that something that that you see, changing? Perhaps there's some of the ways that what might be seen, as you know, very serious government communications, and at times, thank goodness, it is very serious government communications, but there's also that real need for personal connection, isn't that?

Alex 14:13

Yeah, I'd like your spot on. I recently done a careers day for Pimlico Academy. And it was evident, although I was there to speak about both the civil service and working communication. A lot of the young people there is a very diverse and very exciting school. But they don't want to work for the Civil Service, it's boring. It was interesting. It was an interesting brand exercise for me. So, when I stopped dropped the Civil Service said, okay, so ultimately I work for Boris Johnson. Then everyone changed because they were interested in that. And then that was that was an interesting brand lesson for me. But I think perhaps more relevantly, when we brought in our apprentices, our 16-year-olds, there was some sort of resistance from the Civil Service. From this, I mean, if we have a 16-year-old in the office, they won't be able to buy me a drink on Friday to thank me for my brilliant management. Some of my colleagues and one or two of my colleagues said. Well, we ignored that. When we got our intern programme start and working with the Taylor Bennett Foundation, 50, black and minority ethnic interns, many of whom have gone on to good roles in government comms, they bring a different skillset, they are in what is a slightly cliched term now – digital natives. They represent communities that I do not, they bring an energy, and they are the future leaders. So that's all upside. And I'm quite happy to cope with the highest standards, there is a two-way challenge. Yeah, you demand the best, quite rightly, but I need you to deliver the best. So we're going to put in place the professional development and teach you to be a data scientist or behavioural expert, or wherever is as well as being a brilliant internal communicator and core PR should not be forgotten as well.

Sarah 16:01

And James, you know, you're working currently with a firm of solicitors not always known for their humanity at all times, although I suppose what I'm thinking is, you know, a lot of what is our experience of the law of the legal profession. For most people being told off being read a set of rules and actually, it's a little bit like you're saying about the brand exercise that the academy Alex. You know, there's, it's so much more than that. And, you know, that humanity piece, James, have you seen that change in your, in your in your area?

James 16:38

Yeah, well, I'll take you back a little bit further than so. My dad was a solicitor, he worked his way up to become a solicitor, he went to the Open University to get his law degree, is possibly one of the most human people I know. And if you met him, you wouldn't have a clue what he did as a profession. I didn't want to follow him into law, because you have those preconceived ideas of what it might be like, actually, I've now worked for Irwin Mitchell sure for the best part four years. And our purpose line is expert hand, human touch. And I feel really privileged to work with our legally qualified, incredible people who do fantastic things

for our clients on a daily basis. They are the epitome of human touch. So yeah, I mean, you don't know what you know, until you experience it first-hand. And it's very difficult to give a judgement on that and an experience and in terms of how they communicate. Whatever we need from them in support of what we're saying, as a group communications team, they're the first there. And they'll probably be the last at the end of the day as well, because they're that committed. So yeah, I could wax lyrical about the company I work for and the people I work with, because it's very easy to do. So they're fantastic. So yeah, you're anybody is welcome to come and find out about how we work and out that human touch at any point. And I've just like to say, if you see our campaign, it's based on the human touch that matters and very much focused on inclusivity and diversity. So, yeah.

Alex 18:16

I think you are illustrating Sarah's point James because expert hand human touch, at Irwin Mitchell and Varsha, your client, your case study does both say that you need to say human touch because people might think as I might think, as Sarah said about well, perhaps that's missing. But I think there's a wider point Sarah in that lawyers have to be right. Because you don't want to go do a housing, transaction or marriage or God forbid, a divorce and get it roughly right. In PR you can generally land in a zone where you can be roughly right, so perhaps that greater pressure to be precisely right, does mean why lawyers get the reputation that you've offered.

Sarah 19:02

And I must say that we do a huge amount of work with lawyers, and we're very grateful for their support of my point. You know, my point, I made exactly the same point the other day to an NHS organisation. And I said why on your website is every single picture to illustrate your hospital, a building? Where are the people? And I suppose that's what I'm driving at here is that I think we have found ourselves going through a process over the last 18 months, which none of us ever thought we would go through. But we have seen the insides of everybody's kitchen we have seen, you know, sometimes ill-advised placed photographs of people's you know, family holidays, or, you know, we've met people's children, whether that's officially when they're interrupting their dad on the news or whether that's in team meetings, there has been a humanisation of how we interact with each other. And I guess I'm driving it. I believe that that will be and is being reflected in how we operate as communicators.

Alex 20:03

I think that's right. We all remember, and the public responded to brilliantly the stay at home, protect the NHS save lives campaign last March. Less well known is the look into their eyes campaign, which is the one we ran from January, which used real people, patients in hospital who agreed and signed up to be the posters to lead the campaign and that campaign had extraordinary cut through and impact, serious business. And I'd rather not be running the COVID campaign, its campaign to mitigate death and tragedy and so on. But it was a very powerful campaign, because as you say, people responded to the images of other people absolutely got the message that if you looked at a patient hospital, and the idea could break or bend the rules, you couldn't do it. And the public responded in a way that has helped all of us.

Sarah 21:05

And James, do you want to just talk a little bit more about what you see as the kind of future of maintaining really good internal communications of us talked about great passion of yours, and ensuring that the org that that target markets, audiences understand the humanity of what we're about, and how we balance what perhaps might be seen as counterintuitive, you know, professional services, human touch, as you said, I don't think Alex and I are gonna forget that that's a really powerful phrase,

James 21:40

The first thing is, they're not mutually exclusive. So, the voice that we talked about, so whether it be colleague voice, client voice, our own voice, everyone has an equal share of that, or should have a more equal share than previously was the case. There's always a time for cascade, but increasingly, there's a need for conversation. And what we found is, the more we have opened those conversational channels and routes, and the ability for anyone to be able to be part of that conversation, guess what the better ideas we get. Here, we increase diversity and inclusivity. Guess what, we find out new things that we didn't know before that add to this stuff that we did know, that improves the stuff that has been working for us.

Alex 22:26

James, that's always been part of my frustration in the internal communications cascade is two-way. But people seem to forget that the route back up is the point of doing the cascade is the same way I find it slightly frustration when we talk about communication. And then say, oh, we've got to listen as well. I mean, communication. And the last look, we had two ears and one mouth and communicate in that proportion. We would forget then and endless people say to me communication when they mean broadcast, but this is part of the professional.

Sarah 22:57

I wonder, do we need to change it? Do we need to change the name? Would that help to talk about conversation rather than cascade?

James 23:06

Yeah, the simpler the better. Whenever we start trying to come up with new things, we have to consider actually, what's the purpose behind what we're trying to achieve? And often I think, as communicators, we find it highly frustrating when we get to tactics first, before we've considered what the purpose of what we're trying to achieve is, and what we expect to measure and the behavioural change that we expect to see as a result and for companies, organisations, government, what ultimately, are we trying to achieve through that? So, tactics first, never. Strategy first, always.

Sarah 23:39

Yeah. And that that thing that you both mentioned about, you know, trying to do new things, because you must do something new, because new is always great. You know, it's not, is it sometimes to try it? Well, A, we should always try and test through evidence. But, you know, I think there are many individuals who are frustrated by chief execs coming in after the weekend and having this great idea that everything needs to change tomorrow. It's not always the best option, is it?

Alex 24:07

I think that's right. I mean, to think of a recent example, during the fuel crisis, when you are at the top table, and what do you do to mitigate the fuel crisis? And essentially, we decided to do less, rather than more than we sought the advice of behavioural scientists. We looked at the opinion polling, we looked at the digital media sentiment, and we recognise that government communicating, and a sense of broadcasting will probably add to the problem rather than mitigate the extraordinary levels of fuel purchase that were going on. That is an example, and we did do some communication during that, but it was quite a battle to say to the people around the table. Less might be more, communication might add to the problem, rather than help solve it.

James 25:03

Now, just Yeah, I just like to agree with that often what we find is we're battling noise and messages, the key messages that people need, the key information gets lost amid the noise. So, you know, when someone suggests a new channel, maybe it's going to be the best channel ever. But also, does it add to the level of channels we've got out there to channels

proliferation? You know, when someone says, Well, this is the key message or the key brand, or whatever it might be, is it going to take away from actually what you're going to try and achieve, of what people really need to hear? So, we have to question not whether a new thing is bad. But is it going to affect value? Is it going to replace something effectively? Do we need to retire something instead? So, I think there's a rounded picture.

Alex 25:44

I agree with that.

Sarah 25:46

And I think that there's a lot of complexity in communications. And there are many, many, you know, theory books coming out of our ears, case studies coming out of our ears. But one of the things that I have been reflecting on post and I do flipping well hope it stays, post home-schooling is actually clarity of messaging is so important, and telling someone what you want them to do, not what you don't want them to do, is also really important. So there's this balance isn't there between what we're doing of demonstrating that we are professional, that we do have qualifications that we do have experience. And if we're starting out that we're open to qualifications, we're open to gaining more experience, we're open to learning. But also that don't be afraid of the I think it was your phrase, Alex, the brilliant basics. It's nothing to be ashamed about, about having a campaign that is brilliant. In its basics, is there?

Alex 26:43

That is exactly right. And I hope that stay-at-home campaign, is an example about that, that goes back to the formation of the government communication service as the ministry of the department for information in 1917. That the, if you look back at those 100 years, the brilliant campaigns have often been the simplest. But I would take the discussion on Sarah in terms of it's also got to be a simple, you were talking about objectives, and the precision of the objective. James has something very powerful earlier about, you know, his role is to protect the business. Three little words: protect the business, I think, and James can tell me means making sure the business has a licence to operate, because it has a good reputation, which means it can do business, which means it can employ people which means it can serve its customers, and succeed. So the job of protecting the business is no small task. This is an integral part of the task. But too often communicators and PR practitioners when you say well, so what do you do? They don't say protect the business. I was at the local government, local authority earlier this week. And I said, what do you do? And they said, we do media marketing, internal communications, digital, etc. I said, no, you don't you help build a brilliant community in this place because you keep them healthy, and you support their prosperity lives and livelihoods. They said, really? And then that, of course takes into a brings into a conversation about well, how do you measure what a communications team does, which might get on to, but nevertheless, brilliant basics in execution and in purpose, I think are absolutely critical. And I think James illustrated that earlier.

James 28:20

Yeah, just yeah, thank you, Alex, I think that that point about protecting our business, a business is much wider than just the four walls that you might work in. So when I talk about protecting the business, I'm talking about our colleagues, protecting their jobs, protecting their well-being, protecting our clients, making sure they have the very best service and that ultimately, we're protecting our wider communities. So through the pandemic, we often considered, what our actions the actions we were taking, what impact they would have on our wider communities, the charities we work with the communities we work in. You know, what are people did on a daily basis, had a massive impact. You know, we're a business of 3000 plus colleagues. But the impact we have on the wider community is much wider felt. And from a comms perspective, I don't look at it as a will what we post on the intranet make a difference. I look at it as our advice and counsel to our overall strategic decision making, will that make a difference? And that's where our focus has been.

Sarah 29:21

And I think I think, you know, I think we're all in fierce agreement here that the business objectives of the organisation or whatever kind of company you're working in, have to be reflected in the communications objectives, don't they? And I remember, you know, starting my first career in in comms more than 20 years ago, and you know, the comms strategy was sort of literally in a completely opposite direction to the strategy of the organisation. And I think we have seen that come together. And we also have seen the need for much more robust evaluation. And I know Alex, you've done huge amounts of work on this, so has the Institutes. James, I'm sure you have as well in your organisation. It can I just ask both of you, you know it, if someone's listening and thinking, oh my god, people are saying to me, you know, how do I demonstrate success, and I've just been running and running and running and running for the last 18 months trying to, you know, keep the team together, keep myself together, keep the messaging going, listening, feeding back evaluation, I haven't got time. What would you say?

James 30:30

Sarah. So this will be where Alex probably builds on this quite heavily, but we use the OASIS model, which obviously comes from the government communication service, in our planning. So our team, as part of our strategic planning, goes through that. So what are our objectives? Do they align to the business objectives? If they don't, they're not objectives for us to follow. So they come straight out of our strategy, focus on our audience who were communicating and why are we communicating them? What are we expecting from them? What they say now what they gonna say, in the future? What is our overall strategy? So what's the path we're following? Does it follow the vision of the organisation? And, you know, through to implementation? So, are we using the right channels? As we've discussed earlier? We've been clear on what to expect and the timescales for delivery of those. And then obviously, through to the last element, which you've talked about there, which is evaluating. Now, if we can't effectively measure and show the outcomes of what we're doing through communication. Why are we bothering in the first place? Is my. my question. Because to get better, to learn to understand, to pick up from the mistakes to build for the future, you have to be able to show what you've achieved through what you've just done. Alex can probably say that much more eloquently than I've done his much closer to it. But it's definitely using those frameworks using the OASIS model as an example. It's how we can get better as communicators.

Alex 31:49

Well, I completely thank you, James, for saying that. But you said it very eloquently. And I'm not going to repeat it. I agree with you. What I would say Sarah, is I've seen two communication teams this week, who are both told me they're too busy doing stuff to measure what works. I think that is unprofessional. And James is talking about OASIS, there is another approach to public relations, SOS, which stands for sending out stuff. And the communications teams I've talked to are busy sending out stuff and they say we're busy and we're overburdened. And there's too few of us, it's like, well stop. So to address your point to people who say they're too busy, write down all the things you've done in a week, and work out which ones are the most important and rank them. And I bet you'll find the first, second, third, fourth, produce far more out there and protect the business to borrow James's phrase, much more than five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. And then there's a tough discussion, the chief exec or the lead partner to say, actually, if we're going to help you within the resources, which have to be paid for, then I advise that we focus on these things, and we can do more, but we will do them less well. And that way you create the headroom to do the scoring and evaluation that James referred to.

Sarah 33:11

And I think it's important, isn't it that the evaluation as the as the ways this model and other models demonstrate is intrinsic to the model, to your work? It's not, oh, let's do that later. Or

we better do that, because we want to enter an award, which I have heard more times than I care to remember. But actually, it becomes part of that living and breathing process that you go through

James 33:33

Well, Sarah. I mean, it's not just around communications or communications teams is not about proving our worth. It's not saying the work we do is fantastic, which often it can be. It's about the fact that our stakeholders, whether they're internal or external, have an expectation that we'll be able to tell them what change has happened as a result. I'm positive or negative. And if we're not measuring what we're doing, if we're not using insight and data, then how are we possibly going to respond to that question?

Sarah 34:00

Absolutely. And I was I was privileged to be asked to judge the NHS communicators awards. And a number of those spoke really passionately about the importance of evidence-based work, evaluation, measurement, and how you know, I, I always say to my team, when we're particularly when we're working with the NHS, or indeed any public sector organisation is this is public money. And actually, even in the private sector, James, you know, this is spending money is a really serious business. And I get really fed up when comms people say, well, I'm not very good at the figures, because I'm just like, you need to be really good at the figures. And you need to understand the figures.

James 34:40

And Sarah, I think I think that's fair. And look, I, you know, talk about learning. I'm as guilty as anyone 10 years ago, I probably had a similar opinion. My idea of thinking about figures and about measurement was nowhere near where it is now. But you learn, and that's why we're here today to talk about our experiences to talk about professionalisation to talk how the industry has moved on, and what we need to keep it moving on and keep it in line with the strategic evolvment of other industries and businesses and the government.

Sarah 35:09

Completely. So, what do we think is going to be the next big learning for our profession? Probably should have warned you that I was gonna ask you that. But, you know, I think in a sense that that is that planning that evaluation, those models are there they are being very widely used. And Alex, as James has demonstrated, the OASIS model is, is available for anybody to use or follow, isn't it? And I'm sure that there'll be a link to that for people who want to see it. But what do you think is going to be the next big challenge in terms of continuing to develop our professionalism?

Alex 35:41

Well, I'm going to focus on data, partly to just mildly show off in the, you know, I worry, as a 55-year-old man that I will become redundant, I won't be invited on these shows anymore. So I have to keep learning. And I've done a course in contract management, which involve taking a small short exam. I've just done a Civil Service Course in data science for leaders. I had to score 70% in this course. And I got to the final question I was on 69%. Embarrassing to fail. I got three marks on the final question. I finished on 71. So, I passed, I got a certificate. I'm very proud of this, as you can tell. But I do want to use that little story just to illustrate the importance of us continuing to all learn my answer your question is the proper use of data and understanding its use, and its abuse. And I think that is one thing I would focus on as a technical skill. The other broader thing, which I have been frustrated by is leadership, and communication colleagues, who lead because they are able to influence, they build relationships, and they know their profession inside out, and they can convince others. So, I think that those are, perhaps you would expect me to say that, but those are two things where I think we can spend some time learning and improving and would have success from.

Sarah 37:10

And I have an enormous passion for leadership. And, and I, I'm always keen to talk to communicators about how we should be not only having an eye on leading our own teams really well, but the contribution that we can make to the overall leadership not just to the organisations that we work in, but others. And giving back and becoming school governors and joining boards, because I think communications is an extremely valuable tool for leadership. James, what do you think might be some of the up-and-coming challenges?

James 37:44

Yeah, well, I think I think it's great time for that question. Because obviously, coming out of the chartered assessment day, we had three key topics to focus on. And it was talked about strategy quite a bit already. Alex has talked there about leadership. And I think our role as leaders then traverses into our role as counsellors, almost as guidance as a conscience to the people that we work with. I often find myself having conversations very much in that area where we're talking about what, what the reaction thinks is gonna is going to feel like through people, so then you get into all that the realm of responsible business. You know, we're moving to the likes of ESG, you know, being a leading responsible business, we talk about greenwashing, a lot nowadays, I think those topics around ethics, essentially, around the topic of ethics is going to be key for our industry, and we have a huge role to play. A huge role is communicate is to be that conscience, to stand up for what we believe is right and to, to work in the most ethical way possible. And that will only help our business, protect our business, as I said before.

Sarah 38:53

And will only help with some of the things that we've been talking about in terms of being human in being clear in being trusted in being honest in being able to affect change. And I think, you know, again, with the young people that I meet through the Taylor Bennett Foundation, you know, ethics is really, really important to them, understanding the organisation that they're joining, you know, are they really serious about the things that they're saying? And, you know, and young people who do due diligence in a way that I did not when I was starting my career. I don't know if either of you want to comment on that, but I think it's both the ethics of communications, i.e., being clear and telling good stories and making sure that they are based in, in data, but also the overall and I guess it's links to strategy and leadership as well as ethics. The overall ethics of the organisation.

Alex 39:52

Look, we're very clear and working in a political environment is contested is challenging, but the Civil Service Code is so second nature and the government communication service code of ethics about only spending money on things where you're asking the public to do something, spending money, wisely, and so on all these documents that are published. So, I'm pretty clear and watch very carefully about how we implement our communication work. The point you make about colleagues is interesting as well, in that they do come with the sort of strong views that you set out. I think that I need to make sure that all sides of the debate are represented when we have discussions about broader social policy. And also there is a education argument to be made that particularly in government, where you are dealing with policy choices, explain to people why government does things and why government can do things and not others is really important, as well. But certainly on the ethical point, when we sit around the table doing discussions on national security, there is on the table, the summary of the Chilcot recommendations, from the RAC inquiry, to remind everyone not to engage in group think, not to all follow their leader, not to forget to bring evidence to the table, and to speak truth to power, and the cost in blood and treasure from the Iraq invasion, of course, is a pretty solitary reminder to all of us about bringing our best judgement and absolutely ethical approaches to the discussion.

James 41:40

Yeah, that's hugely powerful election. Thinking about it more local level within our organisation over the past year and a half we co-create across the organisation, our DNA. And a key stronger that is about valuing you for who you are and what you bring into the organisation. So going back to that group thing, moving away from that, now, we're not saying we're perfect, we've got a long way to go, like, you know, most of the people we're learning on a daily basis, but to be truly inclusive, to allow people to bring truly who they are to the business, to engage in conversation. Whether you be a client or a colleague of ours, it's hugely important because that's where we can, you know, we can continue to improve.

Sarah 42:20

I sit as an independent advisor to the Senedd. And I was really lucky to be asked to join the staff awards last December. And they made this incredibly powerful video about everybody saying why they were proud to work for the Senedd. And they were asked to bring something or wear something that demonstrated who they were. And it was the most wonderful visual representation of difference. And I think, you know, we can we can learn a lot can't we, by really doing the things that we say. And you know, one of our watchwords in, in the company is you mustn't just do the right thing, you must be seen to do the right thing. And really demonstrate that and live that in a way that is engaging and real.

Alex 43:07

I think I'll just call out, Lorien, my former colleague who is now head of communications. And of course, she's a chartered public relations practitioner. But her journey from I think starting in local government, certainly working for the government communication, the Cabinet Office, and now going to the national parliament, I think is also helps build our ethical awareness, and certainly our professional practice, because he works in a variety of different situations. So, you can see both sides, you can see what to do to avoid getting into trouble and to do the right thing.

James 43:40

I was just going to build on your earlier point Sarah that actually, all of that work means that to support our communities to support the various different people, we work with or work for, we have to become true allies. And I know from a personal perspective, I've got a long way to go. I've got a lot of things I need to do better, that will help me in my role will help the business and will help me support those people whose voice isn't as well heard as it should be. And I think the professional is going a long way to support that.

Sarah 44:08

I think that's right. And I think that one of the things I've been absolutely delighted about is the reverse mentoring scheme that the Chartered Institute is running in, in partnership with Taylor Bennett foundation and you know, it's just been absolutely amazing. And I'm participating in that. And just having a few conversations with colleagues who are also part of the scheme, it's a real well to quote professor Anne Gregory who gave me the inspiration for it, it is a game changer. It is a game changer to sit opposite somebody for whom you are perceived, whether it's real or not to be more experienced, more senior, and to have some of your thinking challenged. And I think we must, we must do that massively. And I think that is, for my two pennyworth, I think that is the thing as communicators, that we must continue to do in terms of development for the future is to challenge ourselves, you know, to pick up the newspaper that you never read, to go to a football match if you absolutely hate football. So to listen to the opera, if you've never done it, you know, to do something that is outside of our comfort zone, and to challenge our thinking. And I think that is really, really important to us. And I think we're nearing the end of our conversation together. And I'd like each of you, if you were just to sum up some of the things that you think people listening to this could reflect on in terms of those key areas that we've talked about. And they are I think about strategy, the importance of data, providing leadership, and remembering that everything we do must be driven by ethics, and by our experience. So Alex, I'll come to you first and then to James.

Alex 45:56

Thank you, Sarah. It's been a pleasure to talk to you and James today. I just touched briefly on strategy, evaluation and learning from being outside your comfort zone. Strategy is often misunderstood, and certainly a much abused word in terms of communication and strategic communication. Strategy is the combination of ends, ways and means. And we're used to define the ends the goals, the ways we usually know how to get there, we can advise on that, but are the means are the resources, the pounds, sufficient to deliver the ends? And too many PR campaigns are asked to deliver the moon on the budget of a bicycle. That is where PR people have to stand firm and say, well, we can do so much, but we can't do everything.

On evaluation. Colleagues listening to this call, where do I start, you start by measuring the things that you can your inputs and your outputs. And what you can do is go and talk to people. I knocked back a comp plan I saw recently that sought to impose on our own group of organisations a white hole view, I just said you haven't talked to them. Evaluation starts at the beginning of the project, go out and talk to these good people find out what they're really like walk in your shoes, their shoes, and then you'll have a better idea and colleagues did that. And we got a better campaign as a result. Finally, I've got to mention the magnificent Arsenal Football Club. But of course, our winners. And the men haven't won so much time so many times this season that it will, but taking my daughter who plays football to see the Arsenal women and the Emirates Stadium was of course an education for me. And she and I enjoyed it, but also looking at the way they play was much more beautiful and the men, which taught me a little bit about football tactics that I wouldn't have otherwise recognised and also a lot about teamwork, which should be at the heart of our practice. Thank you.

Sarah 47:59

James.

James 48:00

How do I follow that? Well, firstly, Alex being an Aston Villa fan, I wish you absolutely no luck on Friday night.

Alex 48:02

Yeah. I'm going to that.

James 48:03

I hope you enjoy that. But in all seriousness, so I guess I'd look at what what's the I think there's a question around what's the value proposition for, for industry for communications. And I had a similar conversation with my team yesterday. And the two things that stuck in my mind were having a clear and coherent narrative. So what's, what's the story, we're trying to tell? What's the purpose behind what we're trying to say? And basing that on very strong insight and aligned to the business strategy, which we've talked throughout this session on? I think it's about sharing success. We have to engage with our audiences in meaningful, meaningful conversations about the roles we have to play in making our businesses success. It's focused on outcomes and activities, which you see for the OASIS model. It's about health and well-being it's about recognising our approach to communicating is evolving. We've all lost face-to-face interaction to a degree, we've moved to more virtual engagement. And it's more important than ever to stay connected. So how do we go about doing that?

We talk about agility a lot and the word agile is used and misused on a daily basis, but for me, it's about clarity and speed of sharing information about decision making, and extending that information. Which Alex knows only too well. And making sure we're able to flex and adapt our approach to those needs, whether it be colleague clients or across the country and the globe. It's very much about relationships. And just one more to come from me. You

know, we have to ask ourselves questions, we have to listen and act on feedback is great communicators, we should be doing that. And finally, it's about purpose. You know, going back to Simon Sinek, it's all about why, why are we doing anything? What are we trying to achieve? We're gaining loyalty and belief in what we do. We're enhancing the credibility interest in everything we do as communicators back to our ethics, purpose, strategy, vision. That's enough for me, Sarah.

Sarah 50:00

Well, thank you both so much. I've, I've really, really enjoyed the conversation. And I think the final word for me and we haven't really got round to talking about what we've learnt from when things go wrong. But I think is just that don't be afraid to try things. It won't always go right. And to quote my seven-year-old daughter, when I really messed up with something I was trying to cook the other day. But Mommy, all you've done is make a marvellous mistake. And we're told to make marvellous mistakes at school all the time. Because otherwise, how do we learn. So, I hope people have really taken something from this discussion. I know I have. And, and thank you both very much for joining me today.

Alex 50:46

Thank you, Sarah.

James 50:47

Thank you.

Iain - Outro

Thanks again to our guests for an enlightening and far-ranging discussion. And thanks to you for joining us for this conversation. If you'd like to explore any of the government communication service frameworks, such as the OASIS model discussed, you can find them at [GCS.civilservice.gov.uk](https://GCS.civilservice.gov.uk) or by searching for government communications service.

It will be great if you can continue the conversation on Twitter and LinkedIn with the hashtag CIPR Engaged, and we'll be back again in the next quarter with episode six of our CIPR Engage podcast.