

Transcription - Gary Ross Part 3

Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, sh's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. We are at Part 3 of our discussion with Gary Ross.

Now we're going to get to question two. Looking at your background, you've worked with organisations I gather that have a volunteer workforce more than paid workforce in terms of the not-for-profits or the smaller organisations. Do you see that they do that better in that they can make people think and motivate them to know what they need to do and tell them what to do because it's a little bit more obvious to them than the larger organisations where it sort of gets lost in the mire of these are our values, this is our mission.

Well, yeah, well, most of my work has been on the for-profit side actually, but I think you're on to something where in a company where the mission is easier for people to grasp, then yeah, you've got a little more material to work with there when you're going for that feel piece.

So, you know, if it's in healthcare, for example, you're helping to make medicine that makes people better. If it's in the food industry, you're making affordable, nutritious food for people and their families. It's a little tougher in some industries where perhaps the end product is a little bit removed from a consumer or even a B to B provider. So at that point, well, what do you do? You think a little bit more about the impact that your organisation might be having on economy or society. Society is a whole, but there are ways to if you kind of drill down and think about that.

So for example, I was working with an industrial products company and they made, one of the things they made, was the handle that go on gasoline or petrol, as you call it there, for cars. And it's like, well, okay, I guess somebody has to make those. How do we talk about that? But it enables transportation, enables people to go about their daily lives. So it's looking for that greater message. I think back to a story also about a landscaper who was working for, happened to be working for a pharma company. So the company itself had that medical values and mission and so forth. But this guy was, this was the landscaper for the front of the building. And somebody asked him to talk about his job and he said, I'm in charge of first impressions. He wasn't in charge of cutting the grass or trimming the bushes or planting the flowers. He was in charge of first impressions. He found that meaning in his work. And I think no matter what it is we do, we can find that deeper meaning.

So I'm going to get back on my soapbox again. For whatever reason and I'm glad we're talking to an executive audience here, for whatever reason, it seems that it's become unfashionable or uncool for some executives to show that they actually enjoy their jobs. That they strut around a lot of times, like they're almost there. We have that expression "too cool for school", that they're a little too cool to be showing that enjoy what they do. I think that's nonsense, frankly.

Think about how much more exciting and fun things would be if we all were better at, and I know I could do this too, we were all better at expressing our inner sense of wonder. There was, at one point, that we thought what we do is cool. That was the day that we were, maybe it was our first day on the job or maybe it was when they were first approached for that job

opening, or maybe you're in an industry that you've always been interested in as a kid. By talking about why we're excited to do what it is we do, why we're excited to be at the company we're at, talk about why you joined the company, why is it a good place to work. Why is this a great time to be at the company right now?

Those sorts of things are so inspiring. And yeah, they may make you feel a little vulnerable, but vulnerability for executives is a good thing to show more often than not. And to show that sense of wonder, why you think it's cool and it's fun to be where you are and to do what you do, that's incredibly motivating for others.

It's catching, it's contagious. And if we look at that, we should do more of that.

If we look back in history at organizations that treated their work forces as though they were family and knew everybody, knew the families interacted with them, didn't put themselves above or beyond their workforce and didn't wear this badge of how stressed and busy they are, which seems to be prevalent these days, we look back at those organizations and say how successful they were. Why isn't it like that today? We've made it like it is today. But I think in some cases, there's a little bit of the, I'm not good enough, someone's going to tap me on the shoulder and say, you know, you shouldn't be here. And so we have to show that we're stressed and we're busy and we're different to the workforce so that we can stay where we are.

I really like the approach of something human in the role and saying, yeah, I have problems. I have things that I don't like, but on the whole, this is really good to be alive and to be here and to be able to do something. You know, you're there for a purpose after all. We all have our moments. We're all going to have our times where we're stressed and that's just the nature of work. I guess all I'm saying is, remember why at one point you thought this was a cool job to take.

Yeah, I thought it was a cool job, cool company to join or a cool thing to do. Yeah, yeah, there was a purpose to, yeah. And then share that with people because that passion is contagious.

But it also opens up a conversation because if you say, I joined this company for this purpose because they had these things and you have someone who's just beginning their executive journey who says, well, I've had all these other views.

It opens up a whole other dialogue and other opportunities to think about what the organization is doing as well. So it is an open communication session.

Absolutely.

And we might get onto question two, do you think?

Sure. I'm sorry, am I totally derailing what you wanted to do?

No, because I think question two is about, is there a place for multi-modal communication within an organization? And I think we've probably touched on it here and there. But what I meant by that question is, in these days of so much technology and so many ways of communicating with people wherever they are, should organizations be looking at the way they communicate in writing or whether they do it by video or whatever, whatever way they do it remotely and having some sort of hierarchy of communication?

Yeah. And it depends on the workforce. So if you've got an audience that's mostly in front of computers every day in offices, then you'll be communicating with them in a way differently than you would if say a third of your people are in offices and the third of your people are say, staffing restaurants and then another third of your people are working in the warehouse or are drivers that are supplying those restaurants and they're not in one place every day. So you've got people in one place in front of computers and people in one place and not in front of computers and then people not in front of computers and moving around. So that's just an example. So what do you do?

Fortunately, there's a lot of technology now that's enabling those unified communications across workforces like that in different modalities. There are apps and full platforms that you can adopt that will tie into your intranet, into your email, into text messaging and so forth, where you can reach out to people.

So think about, there's that old rule about go to where people are for when you're communicating. So let's say if you've got a bunch of professional drivers, for example, truck drivers in your organization, think about reaching them through a podcast, through an internal podcast they can listen to while they're driving.

So, there's a lot of different ways to do that. Again, it goes back to knowing your audience and what people need to hear, what they want to hear and then how to get to them where they are. That's the key part of it. And because of technology, there's of ways to do that now. One of the barriers though to that, I'll tell you is, that I've heard is, and then I've encountered it also is, there's some concern about information security and privacy and interoperability in general. One company I was helping, they had a big e-commerce website and they were concerned about deploying any piece of technology on their system, because they thought it might bring down their website and crash sales. Okay, theoretically, that's an issue, but I mean, that's why we've got legal departments and IT departments to help us solve these things and not to stand in the way of those things.

So again, as an executive, I would urge folks, if they haven't already, to look at those kinds of departments as business enablers, rather than gatekeepers and stopgaps. If there are concerns, security concerns, then partner with the vendor that you'd like to work with that has this platform and look at it and find ways to get around that to your satisfaction. These are established technology applications that work with companies all over the world. They've likely run into the same issues that you're concerned about as well. Legally, the same thing. So as long as they've got the mindset of, hey, let's help you solve this problem versus we're just going to say, no, whatever you suggest, then there's a way to do it.

Do you see a decrease in the internal newsletter, for want of a better of phrase?

Yes. So I know in my day, we used to have the monthly newsletter that came out that told us all the things that were happening.

Is that still a thing?

It's a bit of a dirty word in communications circles or can be, I should say, but I've seen a lot of places where it still works. And I'll give you an example This project that I had been working

on with the great team, we did have to communicate on a regular basis. And one of the things that I also tend to talk about is you want to stay away from radio silence or silence in general because if people have a sense that something's going on, you want to be communicating about it, even though you might not have a huge update because with silence people are going to make up their own stories and they're never as good as the story that you want to get out there. So what ways to do that are, indeed, a newsletter, but a lot of times if a newsletter is kind of flat people won't even open them, they won't read them, they'll be ignored. I think part of the reason why it can be a dirty word is sometimes people just fall back on, oh, we need a newsletter. Let's do a newsletter and there's not much imagination put into it and it falls flat and it's not read.

Going back to this example of this project I was working on, we knew we needed something like a newsletter and we knew that there's a lot of clutter. We wanted to make sure it was read so we wrote it in a tone that was it was consistent with the brand, but it was slightly off and edgy. And we were, we had a little bit of snarkiness to it and it got people talking about it. So people would see it and say, oh, did you see that? Can you believe what they said and the thing? And so they would go and look at it and we'd have our little snarkiness, but they also got the information that we wanted to disseminate. So it's a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down as they say.

They're good to do other versions of regular communication like videos. We did a lot of regular video communication as well, but again, if they're all saying boring videos, nobody was going to watch them. So we also were a little edgy in those as well and word of mouth spread and this was a technology roll out. It was kind of a dry subject. And so we had fun with it and did some kind of interesting things with it and it certainly got word around good. Yeah. So newsletters can be good if they're done well.

That's good. Dangers on the horizon, communications wise?

Well, there are a few sort of the traditional dangers and then there's some of the new dangers. So the traditional dangers would be, and you see this every day, companies, organizations with the urge to just clam up if something gets the least bit dicey or inconvenient. And in today's world where things get on social media and circulate at really literally almost at the speed of light, it's bad for that to happen because, as I said earlier, if you're not out there with the narrative that you want to create, somebody else will create it. Or people, because of fear of the unknown and so forth, it's human nature people created in their own minds and it's never as good as the story that you want out there. But because of risk appetites and certain industries and so forth, they're still looking for people to clam up and you can look back at countless examples of organizations that did that and how they got bitten by it in the end.

And so resisting that urge, I think some of the more newfangled challenges with the proliferation of misinformation, unfortunately, and some of these ways where people can, more sophisticated ways to get out there and fake things, whether it's deep fake videos or some of these AI generated images. I don't know if anybody has the answers to that, but we've all got to be vigilant about it. And it's a new one, it's diligent and vigilant. With generative AI as well, people relying on that. It can do some amazing things, but it also screws up a lot. And so we've got to resist the excitement, the urge of the shiny new toy and

make sure it's being used responsibly and accurately to help us.

I think that there are people out there in the communications world saying, oh my gosh, AI is going to take all our jobs. I don't think that's going to happen. I think the people who are going to take the jobs are the people who know how to use AI in communication, not the AI itself. At least now, five to 10 or 15 years from now, or if we're all living in a world where the machines control everything, then I don't know what to tell you, but at least now that's the things we have to be on the lookout for. And that stuff's changing every day. It really is. It's another thing that we're going to be bombarded with, right? And that's the new things that are coming out and what chat GPT's been around for what eight months. And it's gone from wow, look at this thing to oh my gosh, it's going to take everybody's job to well, that's old now.

Look at the next thing. We've got to be on our toes about those things and understand what those things can and can't do. And it's true that it's about responsibility. It's a bit like getting the spelling right that we have to be responsible always about our communication and about the style that we're using and about what we're communicating. But that we also acknowledge that it is our responsibility and not get lazy, I guess is the bottom line is that technology has the potential to make us lazy about all sorts of things. And that's not using our skills as humans to their best ability as well. So there is responsibility for us to be vigilant about all sorts of things or diligent or the combination of the two.

Yes. And words are powerful, right? We see that every day, words are powerful. So we're not just messing around with little toys here. This is powerful stuff. The words that we use, in the way we use them, is part of how we frame our world. So we need to be responsible about it. And as executives also it's part of how we get people and we have people follow us, part of how we inspire people and drive them and all of those things. As executives we need to do that. And sometimes communication feels like that's the one thing everybody knows they need to work on, but they're not exactly sure what to do.

This podcast is a case in point, you know. We've been going for eight years and this is the first time we've talked solely about communication. And yet it's been every week for all of that time.

Yeah, well, and that's why I enjoy the work that I do too is that I work with people who are really smart and really great at what they do and I help them lead their teams, help them bring their teams along with them through good communication.

So we have one last question that is more for our new team leaders. So as a new team leader, how can you recover from a history of poor communications?
So if you've joined a team where the communication previously was bad.

Yeah, well, that's where you've got a balance. I think as a new leader coming into a new team, there's always things that you're going to want to do differently, but you don't want to walk in there and stamp your feet and say, OK, from now on, we're going to do all these things differently. It's got to be a nuanced approach and you've got to drive that, got to buy in and bring people along. So it can't be a switch that you turn on and you wouldn't do that with anything else. So from a history of poor communication, I would as a new leader joining a team, do some of that listening, talk to the

team members, find out why the communication might have been poor, what might have been lacking and see what it is that you can do to make up for that and to change that and then you've actually got to go ahead and do it.

So much of leading is doing what we say we're going to do. So you can go in and say you want better communication and because you think it's going to make people happy, but then you've got to go ahead and actually do it, otherwise they might lump you back in with their history with the people who had just left and with the communication that's not good. So following up on what it is that you say you're going to do. I think that and part of doing that also is being open to things that you necessarily might not want to hear. Making sure it's OK that people tell you things that might be tough for you to hear, but that you've given people permission to bring those things to you. So that shows two way authentic honest communication and it can't just be you, you've got to model that behavior, so you do what you say you're going to do and you begin to communicate differently. There needs to be then some expectation that that gets followed by the rest of the team. So whether you've got managers that then have individual contributors, you need those managers then to emulate the new communication style that you're bringing or if you don't have managers reporting to you then you need to make it clear to the folks on the team that OK, this is how we're going to communicate with folks and these are some examples of how we're doing that and we're going to roll this out over time and I'm expecting, over time, for people to communicate that way as well because I think this is how we can best function and I'm here to support you and this is the way I can best support you as a leader and so forth.

And then modeling that behavior, continuing to follow through with that over time, that will build the trust and the better communication over time, but it's not a switch that can be flipped on. That's going to take time so I would I would urge patience with it as well.

Gary, it's been fascinating having this conversation with you. We do have one last question that we don't send you. We get you to think on the spot. If we were having this conversation in 12 months time, what would you like to look back on and say that you were happy had happened in terms of communication?

Generally that people are paying more attention to the objectives of their communication and understanding their audience and are using the precious limited time and attention of their audience to be more thoughtful about how they communicate, what they want their audience to think, feel and do about that communication, so those lines of communication are more open and everybody's work life is enriched as a result. And I hope the machines haven't taken over too.

We'll keep an eye on that one as well. Gary is there anything else that you would like to add in terms of the conversation we've had?

No, this has been great and thank you so much for having me and, as I hope you can tell, I really enjoy this, I really enjoy working with people and I've worked with executives at all levels from CEOs to executive teams, executives individually as well, on how to communicate with their teams, with each other, with exterior audience or external audiences as well and something I really enjoy doing so if anybody would like to talk further about that please reach out.

We will have all of Gary's details on the website as we always do. Gary we thank you for joining us today, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn in absentia and this is Inside Exec.