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Internal communications leaders share lessons for overcoming barriers

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COHESION

COHESION PODCAST SERIES

Contents

Series Introduction

In our Cohesion Podcast, internal communications (IC) industry leaders and change makers from every industry share their observations, lessons learned, and predictions for the future of the internal communications space. Their insight and best practices provide a roadmap for other IC professionals to drive IC success.

This ebook series aggregates these interviews and highlights the battle-tested experiences and insights these expert communicators have shared.

Leadership Lessons: Themes

Throughout the podcast series, some questions frame the discussion. Still, some of the most enlightening conversations are unscripted, uncovering stories that weave a unique tapestry that becomes an important part of the fabric of each company's culture.

These conversations have been organized loosely around a set of themes, and in this roundup, we invite you to explore further by listening to the full interviews on our podcast page.

You'll discover insight around change management, using storytelling to drive cultural shifts, crafting an empathetic approach and being authentic. We also provide tips and predictions for the future of company cultures, workspaces, and the internal comms function itself.

Interestingly, many, though not all, of the interviewees are women, we also captured another theme—the challenges female leaders face. In fact, our first interview focuses on precisely that.

Leadership Lessons: Themes
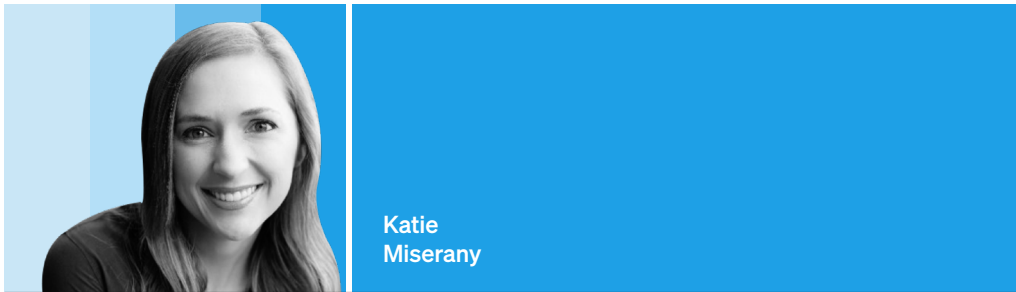
Katie Miserany

Katie Miserany, Vice President of Communications, Momentive on working as a woman, embracing ambiguity, change management and future IC tech challenges.

As a woman in the workplace and leader who has founded tech startups, Katie recounted experiences that many women face, tips for rebrands, and predictions for the future.

Working as a woman and embracing ambiguity:
There were challenges and opportunities in her early years—from deciding between paying rent by working with a wildly inappropriate executive commenting on her looks, to feeling empowered on women-led teams.

Taking inspiration from Sheryl Sanderg, she started a 'lean in' circle with other women focused on pay raise negotiations and other issues. This non-typical working environment opened her eyes to possibilities—and supported her ability to embrace ambiguity.

In startups, in particular, she has learned to reframe that chaos and ambiguity into opportunity, and encourages others who are self-starters to remain watchful for paths found in the jumble and raise their hands to run with it.

"As long as you're aligned on the goals and you're organized and can stay focused on the objectives that the company is trying to achieve, you can learn a lot, take on a lot of responsibility really early in your career—and it can be really powerful."

Leadership Lessons: Themes

Change management tips for rebrands:
Change management is about telling stories. The trick is sorting out which stories to tell, and to whom. The stories that her team wanted to tell stakeholders when they were rolling out their rebrand needed to "resonate with employees, as they were our number one audience." The goal was to "make sure that they felt connected to this brand and excited to work for it going forward."

And the way they did this offers solid change management tips that any IC leader can adopt. The process can be boiled down to three steps:

1. Acknowledge the unique position you're in and identify what you want employees to believe in at that moment.

2. Create "a single source of truth that houses everything they need to know to come on board" or transition to this new approach or process.

3. Have a box of swag ready to arrive to each employee ahead of the announcement, accommodating the time zones for deliveries and announcements.

An internal satisfaction survey revealed a standard-setting 93% employee satisfaction rate, and this happiness is undoubtedly due to their progressive work model—which is built around a pretty basic premise: choice.

"Every year in open enrollment, all of our employees get to opt into one of three options. You could be fully remote. You could be hybrid where you could be in the office committing that you want to be there for four to five days. And even within those other categories, there's a ton of flexibility."

This choice addresses a key challenge companies face right now, and will in the future.

Internal comm challenges of the future:
Internal comms teams are tasked with a pretty intense burden—trying to make our cultures go digital, while at the same time facing resistance to increasing their digital transformation budget.

Companies are hesitant to invest internally and IC professionals need to draw attention to changes in the industry as they impact referrals and recruiting, and this supports the need to strengthen that internal function.

IC folks will be best served by staying abreast of new tech as it emerges, as their value will inevitably be undeniable to businesses lagging behind and you'll want to be ready to hit the ground running!

Laura Klieves
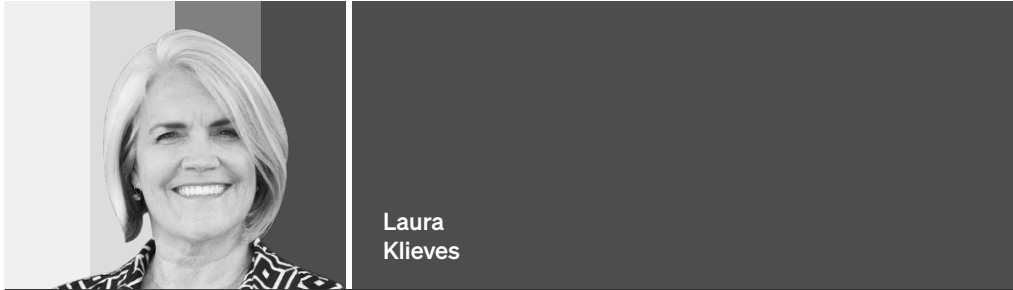
Laura Klieves, VP, Head of People, Malwarebytes on overcoming learning curves, creating culture with a digital workforce and storytelling.

Laura understands the importance of connecting culturally and leads by example.

Overcoming learning curves
The best way to ramp up and conquer in a new company or industry is by asking questions and getting curious. "I've heard this, can you share a little bit more? I'm just curious. Get curious and ask a ton of questions. Cause I guarantee you people love to talk about what they love to do."

Don't be shy about saying, I don't know. "When somebody pops up with an acronym that you're not familiar with, don't be embarrassed that you're either in a new industry or transitioning into a new role." Go to industry conferences and immerse yourself into the field. And reach out to well-established mentors who can help guide you.

Creating culture with remote and deskless employees in a digital workforce
"We need to have our executives communicate often, but be selective about engagement here, as they don't necessarily want to be front and center all the time. And figure out what your communication channels are, how to make the most of those channels, and at what time."

Work from a really robust intranet platform that really pulls people together and share knowledge asynchronously. If it's not a dynamic, interactive place, nobody will want to go there, as they can't find what they need anyway.

"I'm encouraging more people to use our intranet, including teaching our executives what to communicate when to communicate." They are retraining people in communication and a good bit of it hinges on storytelling.

Driving IC initiatives with storytelling
Effective storytelling requires starting with who your audience is––knowing who you're communicating to, empathizing with their challenges. Relevant and helpful topics and content evolve from there.

"I've learned it's not about me. It's about what the audience needs to hear so they can really understand what I'm trying to share with them and what they need to do with that information. "And whatever the communication, be empathetic and start thinking about the other person, get out of your head and stop worrying about what you need to say, but think about what they need to hear and what kind of evidence they need. And once you've got that mindset, now, all of a sudden the story begins to unfold.

It's about bringing people along for the adventure. And too many times in corporate communications, it's all about the stuff and we forget about the excitement in the journey."

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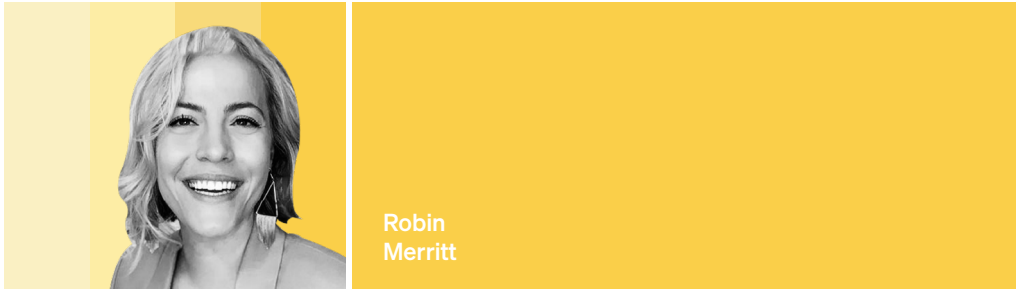
Robin
Merritt

Robin Merritt, SVP and Chief of Staff & Community, Gainsight on the role social responsibility plays in a company's overarching evolution.

Robin understands the importance of interpersonal connection and seeks to recreate that in a hybrid workforce.

**The role social responsibility plays in a company's evolution**
"Gainsight's mission is to be living proof that you can win in business while being human first. This idea that those two things are not mutually exclusive, they can co-exist and quite frankly, add value to one another. Give back to our community, engage with our community of customer success professionals and product experience," says Robin.

And this applies to the employee environment to an equal measure. There's an important give and take here, with two charges: one is making people effective and the other is not burning them out. It reduces effectiveness and it ultimately may make them leave. And we don't want that.

A quick example——maybe some meetings happen with everybody's camera off so that it sort of sets the example and it's okay to do that sometimes. We all know what it's like to be on zoom all day long, and there's only so much you can do.

We should never resort to a response of "well, I guess that's just the way it is." There's always something you can do within your team, within your company, whatever level you have the ability to, to have that control.

Leadership Lessons:
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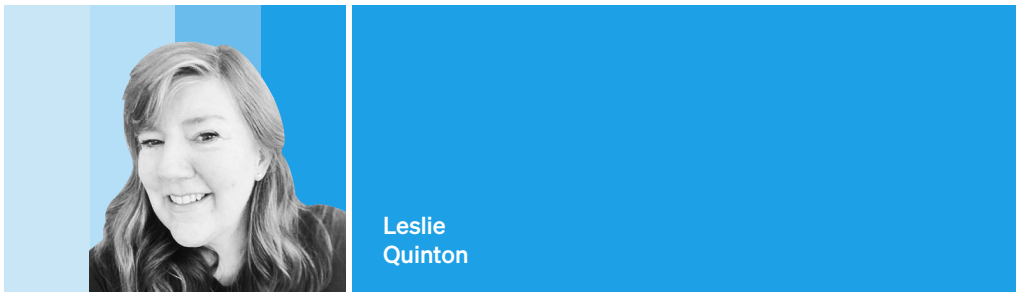
**Leslie
Quinton**

Leslie Quinton, VP of Communications, Ubisoft on tips for global communications, must do's for getting global communications right, advice for comms leaders struggling to win buy-in.

Leslie is a "walking global comms playbook" and the insight she shares proves it!

Tips for global communications
"Most communication is really about change management because in everything we do, whether we're talking to our employees or to an external stakeholder, we're really trying to influence somebody to think something or do something."

You have to be strategic—just because you have a degree in communications, that doesn't mean you're automatically strategic. It's a muscle you can develop. And one that must accommodate for both global interactions and different cultures, as we all see things differently.

For example, "most communications people around the world are responsible for getting everybody to sign up and make sure you read your code of conduct and that you understand it.

We opened an office in Russia and they misunderstood the whistleblower clause as something encouraging parking infractions and asset allocations, like 'why does he have two staplers?' It was ludicrous, but happened because they were unaccustomed to this notion of transparent access."

They didn't know how to adapt this transparency to the local culture. They learned as they went, and every IC professional at a global organization must watch for these opportunities to learn too.

Leadership Lessons: Themes
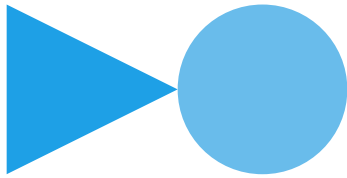
The secret ingredient for improving company culture
Having a sense of transparency from the leadership team and the people around them is key. But it's not merely transparency, but more of a super transparency with a side of vulnerability. And diffusing that power is part of it, having a group of talented people who are valued and surround that person at the top. This is much more impactful than saying we have one person who's kind of your demi-god and his and his or her word is gold.

Another reason to support this model is because the alternative (one supreme leader) leaves the company in an extremely sensitive position when any kind of leadership change happens. If everything is hinged, if your culture, if your identity is all hinged on one point, what happens when that point is gone? An example is what happened with Steve Jobs and the unnecessary challenges Tim Cook faced.

And finally, it also makes it easier to communicate the company's message when you have a number of high level messengers instead of placing that burden on just one.

Advice for comms leaders struggling for buy-in:
Create small gains to build confidence and credibility to then aim for the big gains. "You have to progressively win that sense of confidence and trust so that you can continue to go further."

And build relationships with people who are your supporters and can see the value in what you're doing. Speak for yourself, but let them also speak for you because that will help you to push forward on the projects that really matter.

Leadership Lessons: Themes
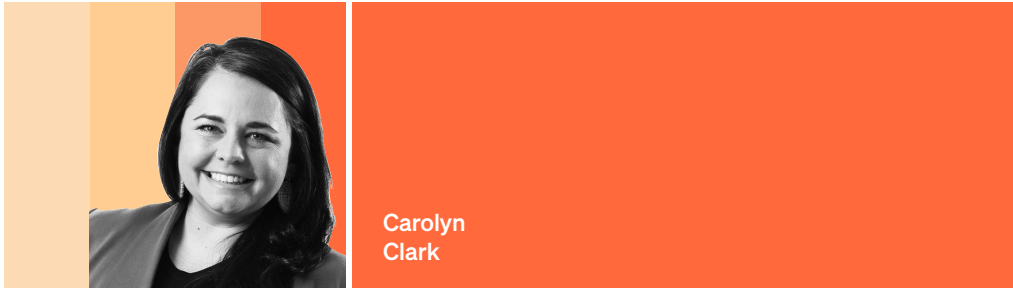
Carolyn Clark

Carolyn Clark, VP of Employee Experience Strategy, Simpplr on the role of IC in M&As and how to get executives engaged in IC.

Carolyn thinks about internal comms from the perspective of empathy, advocacy, and truth. Everything she does flows from that.

The role of IC for M&As
Mergers and acquisitions are always tricky. Everybody has what we call the 'me' questions. "How does this affect me? My job, my future, all of that." And as internal communicators who are based or rooted in this idea of empathy—empathizing with the employee, advocating for their needs and then telling the truth—it's important to tell the truth when answering. It's difficult, but important. And this happens even if the truth is uncomfortable. With that mentality, you get much farther, much quicker.

Also, it's crucial that internal comms is involved and in the room to advocate early on in the process. Leaders are often afraid and tend toward spinning the story, when saying the truth or even "we don't know" is the kinder path. Having an internal communicator in the room is crucial because if you don't, then you're playing catch up.

They didn't know how to adapt this transparency to the local culture. They learned as they went, and every IC professional at a global organization must watch for these opportunities to learn too.

Getting executives engaged in IC
"It comes down to figuring out how to talk their game, and using what they care about to prove your case––whether it's data, sentiment, content, or whatever it is. If you want somebody to believe that what you're doing matters, you have to learn to speak their language."

And then understanding the business is crucial. "It seems basic, but if you think about it, most of us sit at the top level and we don't go deep into the business because we're just communicating the highest level things. But when you need to speak the language of engineering leaders, or even your CEO and your C-suite, you must understand what makes them tick.

Conclusion: IC leaders embrace evolving roles

Although each leader showcased comes to the role from distinctly different backgrounds, they all have one thing in common: their ability and desire to evolve. Each shares lessons learned with experiences where a shift was required for growth—and these shifts were either thrust upon them or created by them, but all were viewed as opportunities and embraced with equal vigor. And that's probably the greatest lesson of all for those seeking to emulate their success!

Check out the full interviews on our podcast page. They're fast-paced, always insightful, and will keep your interest as no two executives are alike, offering up fresh insight to reframe your thinking and help you propel your own IC efforts and achievements.

About Simpplr

Who we are

Simpplr is the modern intranet that transforms the work experience for all employees — wherever and however they work. Simpplr is the only platform that unifies employee engagement, enablement and services, leveraging state-of-the-art AI models to deliver a seamless, cohesive and personalized employee experience.

Trusted by over 700 global brands, including Moderna, Snowflake, Splunk, Penske, Eurostar and AAA, Simpplr customers achieve significant improvement in their employees' productivity, retention and overall satisfaction. Headquartered in Silicon Valley, CA, Simpplr is backed by Norwest Venture Partners, Sapphire Ventures, Salesforce Ventures, Tola Capital and Still Venture Capital. Learn more at simpplr.com

Benefits

↘ Designed for the way you work

↘ Ready to use in weeks, not months

↘ Built for business users

↘ Unified, engaging experience across mobile and the web

↘ Powerful integration

↘ Secure and scalable platform

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