GOVCOMMS PODCAST

EPISODE #126 NEVER BACKING AWAY FROM THE TRUTH

- WTH STEPHANIE SPECK

TRANSCRIPT

Stephanie Speck (00:00):

Never back away from the truth. I think it's a value that my parents instilled, in me from the word go always to be prepared of telling the truth gently clearly, but never be afraid to speak truth to power because you might be the only person in the room who actually does that.

Introduction (00:20):

Welcome to the gov comms podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now here is your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke (00:35):

Well, hello everyone. And welcome to gov comms. The podcast that examines the practice of content, key communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me today. I'm even more excited than usual because today's conversation is one I've been looking forward to for weeks. And one in which I know we are all going to learn so much from you see a friend of the GovComms family. Vanessa Liell was in touch with me recently saying that a friend and colleague of hers Steph Speck had recently returned to Australia to the role of Executive Director and Chief Communications Officer for the Department of Education and Training in Victoria, after spending many years overseas, and now having been away, her networks were not perhaps what they used to be. And Vanessa said, look, reach out and have a conversation. And I'm so glad that I did because what a story. When Steph was nine, her parents, both teachers moved the family to Tari in the Southern highlands of Papua New Guinea.

David Pembroke (01:45):

And since then, Steph has lived and worked in more than 20 countries accumulating almost 25 years of experience as a strategic and communications advisor, supporting democratic reform in fragile and often conflict effect in regions. Her expertise is in designing and programming, cross government reform strategies, strategic communication, and advocacy, public policy development, counter terrorism, communication, government, public affairs, and crisis communications. She has launched television channels, including the middle east most popular channel NBC action. She has led a US $1 billion governance reform portfolio in Afghanistan developed maternal health campaigns in the Vietnamese Chinese border regions work to eliminate family voting in Albania, reported on disasters, earning the Australian humanitarian award for her work post the Indian ocean tsunami and has held several high level, high profile, public diplomacy and spokesperson roles. Steph has just finished three years leading communications and advocacy for the UN office for Disaster Risk Reduction in Geneva. Before heading back to the relative car of Melbourne Australia, she joins me now, Steph, welcome to GovComms.

Stephanie Speck (03:22):

Such a pleasure to join you, David, and very, very excited to talk about the world of, GovComms.

David Pembroke (03:27):

What a story. Wow. You must be...

Stephanie Speck (03:31):

My life hasn't been boring.

David Pembroke (03:34):

You must be exhausted. That's just so much to do.

Stephanie Speck (03:38):

No, I think it's always the thrill of the next challenge that reenergizes me.

David Pembroke (03:42):

It's a massively unfair question, but I'm gonna ask it anyway. What's the single most important lesson that you have learnt from all of those incredible experiences.

Stephanie Speck (03:55):

Never back away from the truth.

David Pembroke (03:57):

Okay. Never back away from the truth. Tell me more about that.

Stephanie Speck (04:02):

I think it's a value that my parents instilled, in me from the word go, never to be afraid of, telling the truth, always to be prepared of telling the truth gently clearly, but never be afraid to speak truth to power is you might be the only person in the room who actually does that and that might save lives, could save a country, could save a relationship. So I think, and I think that's one of the values I hold probably closest to my heart that you have to be in the person in the room saying, I know it's gonna be uncomfortable to say it. It's gonna be uncom to hear it. But someone has to say how it is.

David Pembroke (04:44):

How do you encourage people to have the courage, to speak the truth? Because you know, we've all been there. We've all been in those really complex and difficult and challenging circumstances where it's like, oh, I really don't wanna do this cause it's just too uncomfortable and it's too difficult and I'm not sure what's gonna happen if I speak the truth.

Stephanie Speck (05:12):

I think you have to be Someone who doesn't want to leave behind regrets. And I would hate to be a person thinking if I had said that at that moment, this bad thing may not have happened. So I always think in terms of future regrets, am I gonna regret it will someone's life be impacted will, a reform programme be impacted to the detriment if I don't speak up now. And I think it's also then being extremely confident that it's not ... your ability to tell the truth, doesn't say anything bad about you. It just says actually you're an honest broker and that's a good reputation to have.

David Pembroke (05:45):

Mm. But is it, and did you learn this because often some of these high stakes environments that you were in meant that you really did have to speak the truth because it ...you know, the risks involved were so great.

Stephanie Speck (06:01):

Yes, very much. And sometimes in, in some rooms, I felt particularly in different country environments where I was not a national of that country, I felt I had a great freedom and an objectivity to be able to say how I

thought it looked and how the situation looked. And if you did A, what might happen and if you did B what might happen. I think that gave me an incredible, incredibly privileged position to speak truth into a situation that was often fraught with damaged relationships. And I mean, in a geopolitical level or damaged relationships between prime ministers and their cabinets. So I think that that external perspective allowed me to say things that perhaps other people didn't have, the ability given their positions... and what might happen to them afterwards in those rooms.

David Pembroke (06:51):

Okay. So let's, let's just back, back back a little bit, cause I'm, I'm intrigued as to the story arc of how is it that you started on this quite remarkable journey of being involved in, you know, so many complex, so many challenging environments and really acquiring such high level, you know, engagement and communication skills that were... enabled you to, you know, be able contribute and have impact at the highest level. So where did it all begin?

Stephanie Speck (07:24):

I think it began as you, as you said in, when you read out that potted history of my career in Papua New Guinea, when I was nine years old, my parents decided to move us up there, to teach, so that they could teach in a tiny little international school. In the middle of nowhere, it really was, you know, we didn't have hot water. To get hot water, my dad had to light a fire and a birthday treat was having a full bucket of hot water for yourself rather than myself and my two sisters, you know, that was the ultimate birthday, treat a full bucket of hot water. And I think that really showed me that people are people, are people anywhere in the world, um, no matter where they're from, what they believe,what their circumstances are and that you can love all people. And in fact,

Stephanie Speck (08:11):

That's quite easy to do once you are dedicated to seeing the humanity in every person you meet. I think that also taught me that some people have a lot more other people, in terms of material possessions and that's not very fair and we should probably do something about that. And it also showed me that the people who have the most aren't necessarily the happiest or the most productive. So I think that really set in me a desire, A to see more of the world B to see what I could do about fixing things that I thought were unfair, inequitable, or, you know, got in the way of people exercising their human rights and, and also gave me the confidence. It didn't matter whether it was a scorpion, a warlord, or a desert storm, no power, you know, 55 degrees in the middle of Baghdad and an earthquake, I could cope. I could be strong and tough and continue to contribute, continue to lead. And most importantly, continue to enjoy myself in those really harshest of harsh conditions.

David Pembroke (09:10):

So that's interesting, isn't it, that, that reflection back into your childhood when you consider where you were, you know, in that remote part of Papa New Guinea, that to be the thing that you could be most interested in was people because really beyond the people and the environment and the location, there probably wasn't too much else to do apart from get to know people and get it to enjoy people.

Stephanie Speck (09:36):

Oh, I don't know, David, I'm very good at hunting a pig with a bow and arrow.

David Pembroke (09:41):

With other people!

Stephanie Speck (09:41):

Doesnt really make it on my resume, but trust me, I can deliver.

David Pembroke (09:46):

Or come in handy that could come in handy.

Stephanie Speck (09:50):

Exactly.

David Pembroke (09:52):

But was it people?Given that, you know, there's not those, you know, the distractions of sort of first world country. And, you know, you're there with people thinking about people, talking to people, enjoying shooting pigs with bow and arrows with other people,

Stephanie Speck (10:07):

There was no television, there was no radio. Um, there was no grocery shopping. Our groceries came on the plane once every three months. And it was an into a national school. So I think like, I think we had about 30 to 40 kids at the school and they came from all over the world and all over Papa New Guinea. So it was a cross-cultural environment where you took people at face value. And, um, and you determined things about them through the process of getting to know them, not on a pre-judgment basis. And I think that is really a found traditional lesson that I've carried throughout my life. I couldn't do the job I do, which, you know, a large part of that is influence and persuasion and getting people to change their mind if they are making the wrong decision, if I didn't love people. I think I'm really proud of like my phone directory and thinking doesn't matter what country in the world I'm in... I know someone there's someone I can call to either go and have a coffee or a drink with, or get me out of trouble if I need it.

David Pembroke (11:02):

Would you agree with me that curiosity is the superpower of effective communicators?

Stephanie Speck (11:09):

Yes, very much so. I think that's the starting point and then knowing what to do with it and then how you help other people be as curious, because I think as government communicators, a lot of our job is getting people on board with sometimes quite radical or quite hard to sell reform ideas. And you have to encourage curiosity at the level of a community often, you know, what happens if we adhere to this reform, what happens if I do do what the government says I should be doing? What do I gain out of that? So it's curiosity from thepeople who are implementing the programme, curiosity often with policy makers, how could we do this better? Are we really addressing the problem and curiosity, spurning curiosity, not spurning... Igniting curiosity at a community level to get engaged, get interested and ultimately do what people need to do.

David Pembroke (11:53):

And how do you do that?

Stephanie Speck (11:58):

I think it starts with understanding what the problem is, all good policy deals with fixing a problem or anticipating a problem and putting a fix in place before that problem materialises. And I think bad comms and bad policy is when you haven't clearly identified what that problem is. Is it that people aren't drinking because they don't like the taste of water? Or is it people aren't drinking because there isn't a well? So I think good

communications and, and allowing curiosity to take an actual journey starts with, do we have the problem identified properly? And do we know who it actually affects them? How do they feel about that? What do they believe about it? And if we're gonna change it, what do we also need to shift in those people?

David Pembroke (12:41):

And how then do you find those insights? What have you found during your career as the most effective way to learn about the problem through understanding people and their environment and their context and their challenge, what's the best way to really, you know, get that certainty. So you can then move from insight to action?

Stephanie Speck (13:05):

I'll start in today's, you know, today's current way of understanding situations. And then, then perhaps move a little bit back his historically I think that is one of the great blessings of a digital world. Where we at the touch of a button flick of a screen scroll of a screen, we have access to so much information at our fingertips. Now not much of that is valid, useful, or even helpful, because a lot of what we see of course, just reconfirms what we believe, because we go to the sites and we listen to the people who we naturally feel an affinity for. But you know that if you wanna work through that natural bias, there's a world of information in the palm of your hand, and you can spend 45 minutes on the bus in the morning, you know, researching any topic. So I think that has really, democratised the supply of information in a way that we haven't seen before.

Stephanie Speck (13:55):

When I started my career, you know, we used to dial up the internet in the morning at lunchtime and just before we went home from work. And then you spent the rest of your time talking to people again, I think it's that connection with people. It's, it's not, it's being moving beyond being afraid to talking to people very proactive about saying, I know there's something I don't know here who knows it and going to the source of truth and figuring out who's affected by a problem who might know something about the theoretical nature of the problem who might know something about a practical solution and talking, cross-checking ideas sense checking those ideas, with the people who are affected. And I think that's, one of the great parts about development, the development world, and also the government communications world. I think there is a growing reliance on going to the source of truth rather than supposing we know how it is, which I think is quite arrogant and often leads either to the wrong problem definition or the wrong solution being applied to a wrong problem. So I think it's source of truth. You get that through people, the people who are affected, the people who know something about the theoretical, the people who want to change it practically and sense checking that once you think you've got a steer on it.

David Pembroke (15:09):

So it is your experience that, that level of curiosity to understand, the real problem, as opposed to the presume problem is more common now? Are you seeing that or are you not seeing as much of it as you would like to see?

Stephanie Speck (15:26):

I'm really pleasantly surprised at the level of which I've seen this in government communication environments around the world, including in resource poor resource constrained environments, where getting access to information is harder work. You might have to drive hours, you know, out to the middle of nowhere, to sense, check something with the people group who are being affected. You might need to work through language barriers, but I think at the government communications level, certainly in the countries where they're committed to democracy, you know, understanding what people want and therefore giving it to them in a helpful way. I think there's an incredible commitment to that. I think where I've seen less of that is probably, in

the United nation system. Not all, not all areas, but I think that probably if I were, if I had to point a finger mindful that there are fingers also pointing back at myself, cause I've worked with the UN, I think there is sometimes a preoccupation of getting things on the ground quickly, to spend dollars that might otherwise disappear and therefore not undertaking that rigorous information gathering stage at the start.

Stephanie Speck (16:36):

You will know it really quickly in the delivery of your programme. If you haven't done enough information gathering, I can give you an example, in Afghanistan. Working there on the governance programme where a multi-lateral agency had committed a huge amount of money to the government of Afghanistan to provide electronic court receipts. So getting Afghan's digital notification that they had a day in court because they'd identified a problem with the court system was struggling because people didn't turn up when they were meant to, and therefore cases were delayed and it kind of just accumulated. So the solution, according to this multi-lateral donor was that we put in an electronic system, but there was no power in the court system. And if there was, it was often seized by, you know, people who didn't want the government to succeed and did other things with access to power.

Stephanie Speck (17:25):

And I'm talking electric power, not, you know, not people power. And when we talked to the people inAfghanistan, in the legal system, we said, we just want books with carbon paper. Yeah, that's all we need because people, firstly, there's no power. Secondly, people don't, this is way back in 2009. People don't trust digital, you know, information systems. They think the government's spying on them or other people are spying on them. They want a piece of paper they can give to their mother, their father, they can keep in their wallet and refer to it and we need a carbon copy. So we can put it against our books when they turn up on the wrong day, you know, a multimillion dollar solution went to costing a fraction of that because actually we took the time to say, what is the actual issue?

David Pembroke (18:03):

That's amazing. That's amazing that, that took place, that it required that, and that, you know, the insights weren't there before, is there, is there a degree of arrogance around that or is it just not so much arrogance as expediency?

Stephanie Speck (18:21):

Well, I think it's expediency in the pressure to get something something done quickly and often to spend, you know, large amounts of money, uh, huge amounts of money by developing country standard. And sometimes all that money isn't needed and, and the UN is an incredibly complex system. Isn't it? You've got, you know, you're running a business essentially, which has a, a board of 180 people who don't agree. So trying to drive a through line, a sensible line through that, I mean, that is an extraordinary effort, in and of itself.

David Pembroke (18:56):

So listen, you've been away. You've had these incredible experiences over, you know, a long period of time, but you've arrived back into a modern democracy into a state government that is known for its excellence, known for its investment in public service, known for its investment in education. One of the, you know, top states and cities in the world for education. So, you know, that's the commitment, that's the understanding, you know, that's the level that, education has taken at in Victoria, how is the world of communications that you are seeing as you've arrived back in Australia to support a system like that? What's surprised you what's, what's delighted you, what's maybe frustrated you?

Stephanie Speck (19:51):

Firstly, I think, I can't think of a better policy space to be working in at the moment, apart from education. Although, you know, as, as I joked to you earlier, you don't pick education if you want a Christmas holiday given you've got back to school, hot on the heel of, of New Year's. Yep. So I think A it's a really, really important policy area. I think that communications people, particularly people who are interested in doing strategic communications - that is communications, that gets something to change for the better that moves beyond just telling people something, to actually changing something. I think our battle has always been that comms can very easily be seen as something you leave to the end of the process. You roll out a beautiful presentation, a lovely movie, a social media strategy at the end of the policy formation process and hope that then you can make it look pretty affordable, palatable, and sell it to the masses.

Stephanie Speck (20:55):

And I think that really undervalues the strategic power of comms. Comms, If it's about changing things is a management tool. You use it to understand where your problems are, what people think about the problems whose naturally on side and who do you have to shift to being on side and therefore what you can move into from a tactical perspective to get, you know, to the point where you wanna be. So I think, and one of the things I think I've been really impressed with, um, certainly in, in the education environment in Victoria, I haven't felt like there has to had to be so much of that battle. I feel like people have understood and respect the power of communications. And certainly as soon as you say, well, you know, we can make that look pretty, but it would've been great if you talked to us, then you know that you're gonna be in the room at the start of the next conversation.

Stephanie Speck (21:41):

So I think I've been really pleasantly surprised by people understanding the worth and power of strategic communications. You get what you invest in and you invest in knowledge and understanding up front, you'll get something that changes people's lives and minds at the end. So that's been really impressive. I think one of the challenges for us, anywhere in probably established democracies is what does social media media digital communications mean for government? Because I think it's been a very swift journey from governments. Being able to tell people what to think to governments. Now having to have a conversation with people about what people should think it's no longer will feed you this, you will understand A and do B. It's 'this is what we think let's talk about it and come to a mutual agreement'. And I still look at a lot of digital programmes and social media across the government as being essentially very one-way still.

Stephanie Speck (22:42):

And I think there's room for improvement. I think there's a wrong understanding and application of risk in this environment often. I'm not just, I'm not talking about Victoria in this sense, I'm talking about really what I've seen in the UK, in the US, in Europe, in that sometimes there's a perspective that being on social media is a risk. You know, people might say that they don't like what the government's doing. People might defame the government or defame other people. But I think it's actually more of a risk if you don't operate compellingly in the social media space. For me that means thinking about how do you manage community engagement and dialogue using the tools that we have, not just putting one-way messages and closing comments, but how do you actually engage, talk with citizens?

Stephanie Speck (23:31):

And I can tell you where I've seen that done incredibly well. And that was in Iraq where the government, when ISIS was in place or Daesh and controlled, you know, much of Iraq, offered a compelling vision of a, of a new caliphate, and good things for, for the Iraqi people. And the government Iraqi government didn't really know who it was talking to what it needed to say into that space, but knew that they needed to create a narrative of hope and engagement and that communities could be involved in the process of state transformation in this place. In this case, the rescue of the state from, from, you know, an extremist group, and we use social media

for the tool and the government of Iraq invested in risk. They allowed us to start shaping a narrative that people could interact with.

Stephanie Speck (24:29):

And by that, I mean, we could put things on social media and people would respond. And at the beginning we would see very intense pushback on the narrative. Oh, how can you say that the government isn't doing anything. But when we engaged and spoke to those people, we had a commitment to responding to a certain percentage of comments across any platforms. When I say we, I mean a full Iraqi Iraqi team, I had the privilege of, leading and shaping the work, but it was undertaken all by Iraqis when we, when we interacted and said, well, why do you say that? And why do you think that? And why don't you take a look over here at something that is happening, that's positive in this space that, has been thought about by the government. We saw in front of our eyes, because you could read the narrative people's minds changed to say, I didn't know that sister.

Stephanie Speck (25:15):

I didn't know that brother. I thought that this is what was happening. Thank you for telling me, okay, we will check that out. And over the course of eight or nine months, we were able to change a national narrative purely through the process of engaging online from being hopeless. What is our future? What is the role of the government? There's a very engaging, alternative vision here offered by Daesh. We were able to change that narrative. In fact, maybe the government does have something to offer. And in fact, I can see that starting to work in my community. And I strongly believe that that power of social media, that engagement with what was seen as a risky proposition combined with US military force, um, and, and the coalition there was responsible for turning Iraq around, and allowing the government to take its rightful place in a sovereign nation and to re-establish its, its, its remit and its ability to reach people for the good of the whole country.

David Pembroke (26:11):

But to the point that you raised then around perhaps the mindset though in Western democracies that are, you know senior executives speak the language of risk and they think about risk and they go to bed thinking about out risk and they wake up thinking about risk. And they're thinking about the minister and they're thinking about things that can go wrong. How in that sort of environment, can you start that softening of the attitude such that people, you know, can have the courage and the confidence that by engaging they're in fact, going to be doing something that is mitigating a risk rather than adding to it.

Stephanie Speck (26:55):

Firstly, I think that all governments, don't wanna waste money in policy. They want policy that sticks. So they are really invested in that, what happens after you've filed the document and got funding for it. At that point is really the stage of engagement where departments engage with public on behalf of the government. So I think there's an incredible appetite to get it right. And there are very few barriers there those that exist are normally surmountable by offering proof of concept? So generally my strategy is to say, look, I understand that you can't suddenly, you know, open up a social media page and start engaging with millions of people, but you might be able to open up a media social media page on a particular campaign and show how you might manage risk and engagement with the community there.

Stephanie Speck (27:47):

So I think often it's about giving confidence by starting small and thinking of the mitigation strategies. And this is where comms people have to be always at least a step ahead. We are the people who have an eye for what happens if, and not just what happens if, but what do I do next? And what do I other people around me to do? And that's part of being an excellent comms practitioner. Not thinking, oh my goodness, we've just launched a

programme. Thank goodness that's done. It's what happens next. And I think if there's anything that comes out of my background, working in post conflict, fragile situations is that you never know what's coming next. There will always be a bigger next coming. So I think so those two points starting understanding exactly where the fear is and addressing it through proof of concept in a small stage and proving that it works. And three, demonstrating that you are the person with an eye on what happens next, and we've got it. We understand how we're going to respond.

David Pembroke (28:41):

And if I can return you then to an earlier observation that you made, which it's a, you know... I've been doing this podcast for probably six and a half, almost seven years... and this notion of, you know, government communications being the colouring in department, you know, the end of the line not valued, you know, the behavioural economists came in and took all the valuable work because they were the ones who had their frameworks to understand audiences. And in fact, you know, the comms people were sitting there going, hang on, well.. We've been doing that for ages. How come we don't have a seat at the table? What do you think has led to this sort of accelerated acceptance recognition that communicators do have a place, at the beginning of the conversation and not just at the end.

Stephanie Speck (29:34):

I'm gonna comment on why I think behavioural economists have sometimes stolen space from communicators. And I think that's because they're really good at putting numbers behind things. And I think that that's one of the areas of improvement for comms. And I think this has had really radically improved over the last 10 years. You know, people always say it's really difficult to measure the impact of comms. It is, in some ways, but I think it's also become a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy for us. We, we expect to be let off the hook there for, and we rely a lot on qualitative or gut feel or observation rather than marrying observation with quantitative, okay, well, how many people and where are those people and what are their other interests? How does that interact with what we've got to change from policy?

Stephanie Speck (30:17):

I think that's, you know, and if I could do anything again, I would go back and study economics because I think economics and coms together is an unbeatable proposition. You've got numbers and understanding combined with observation, leverage and persuasion. So I think getting the metrics right is a really, really critical part of what we we do. And I think the stronger we are at doing that, not just telling a story, but showing why that story is gonna change things and make it better for people and therefore, and easier for governments. That's where we start to see more interest in investment in communications. We should never expect that we are going to have something funded that we can't prove. That would be a wrong spend of public money. So I think we have to invest in that as government communicators. Can we prove as far as possible, that what we invested in there that TVC that social media campaign, the stakeholder engagement, the community group engagement, what shifted, what changed, what was our baseline, where the proof points, and who needs to hear that? We have to be prepared as any other area in government does, to prove that what we do works, we shouldn't be shy of it.

David Pembroke (31:25):

Now, listen, we could talk for hours because there is a lot that we could talk about, but give me the top three things that, you know, probably you've just given me one around data and, you know, taking on the challenge to make sure that you measure and measure accurately, both qualitative and quantitatively to you know, demonstrate value, demonstrate impact. So that's perhaps one of the big changes, but what are the other big sort of red flags or big opportunities that you see for comms at the moment that really needs to be addressed in order for the profession to continue this, you know, credible journey to, you know, solving large problems or helping government to solve large problems in society?

Stephanie Speck (32:18):

I think another important area is you can't have strategy without content anymore. So when I was starting, certainly my consultancy career overseas, you know, I'd be, I'd be sent in with, well, basically just myself and my, my brain and my skillset, and get asked to write a strategy. And strategies great. But strategies tend to sit on the shelf unless you've got budget to bring them alive. And I think that's the other area where we can improve things. So you can write all the strategies you like, but in this day and age, if you also can't produce your own content to activate that strategy on the ground, you've got a great idea and no legs. So I think we have to start looking at government communication departments as an entirety. Now that doesn't mean that necessarily everything has to be in house and you've got all your own production teams.

Stephanie Speck (33:12):

It might mean sensible partnerships with agencies who can do it, you know, better, cheaper, and at a scale you can't do with, with two people in the production department. So I think strategy and content, every department now has to be a content producer because that's what people are accessing to make decisions. They are looking at you constantly online, constantly in your surroundings, they are absorbing content. That's what they're using to decide if they trust you, if they believe you, therefore, if they do what you say. So content production is a really critical thing and that's expensive. So there has to be a good model for governments... No...There has to be...I know there's a good model. I know what that model is. And I'm not here to speak to that model, but you can watch this space. I hope at the department of education to say, you've gotta produce content.

Stephanie Speck (34:00):

Here's how you do it and here's how you grow audience reach and therefore engagement and reform adherence. So I think that's the second lesson. No point having strategy without content. And the third lesson I think, is in talent development. Comms is not a field for generalists. It needs to be seen as a technical specialist area. And you want people who... I feel a little hypocritical here because I didn't study comms and I wish I had. And so I really invest then in learning opportunities now. So looking at comms as a specialist ability, how do you find those people? They're quite a rare commodity, particularly those with crossover experience between strategy digital and engagement, community engagement and behavioural change communications. So I think it's talent identification, retention and keeping, keeping on learning, given the incredibly rapid advantages that we have in technology.

Stephanie Speck (34:59):

There's a programme in Afghanistan recently that was using Twitter. Afghan Twitter feed. This was before of course, the fall of Kabul, to look at how you could deploy police to high traffic situations, where there could be the risk of a bomb using Twitter data. Now that's not just about data analysts and people crunching numbers. That's about comms experts, reading the comments and judging the level of threat from the numbers of people and the tenor of the comments. These are not, these are not, you know, find by the road skills. These are highly sophisticated thinkers, interpreters, and then and persuaders, cause they need to be able to take it to the next step and tell somebody you've got to get people there now. So I think that talent identification and retention and continuing to move with the pace of change is another critical area. And particularly for government coms where it can be really attractive it into the public sector, not just if you have a moral obligation, which I think I have, it's a great sector to be in because you're doing things on behalf of your community, but it can be a tendency you're in a safe job. So you stay there and maybe you don't have to learn...

David Pembroke (36:15):

How do you learn? How do you stay on top of it?

Stephanie Speck (36:17):

I read voraciously. I make... I deliberately set aside time to read and, and keep myself up to date. And I really seek out people who know more than I do. I think that's one of the aspects about being a leader in a comms field. You don't need to know everybody, everything, but you need to know other people who do so, you know, I grew up, as I said, when we dialled up the internet once a day, my, I learned to type on a typewriter. So I know that digital is really important and10 years ago, I didn't understand it. So I really went to people who could tell me about it, what the shape of it would look like in the future. So reading, talking to industry experts and then trialling again, little proof of concepts, is there an opportunity in a department where I'm working to give something a go and see if it works, and if it does to scale and replicate.

David Pembroke (37:15):

So in terms then just in summary and probably yeah. To wrap it up in terms of optimism, enthusiasm on the scale of... I'm despairing, because it's so hard to keep up with all of these changes, driven by technology, driven by transformation, driven by demand, as you alluded to before... content is now everyone's solution. You know, everyone wants a webinar, everyone wants a podcast, and everyone wants it, you know, yesterday. From that overwhelmed sort of feeling to, okay, no, we've got this. Where you sit yourself on that scale at the moment? Um, as you sort of head into the rest of this year, 2022?

Stephanie Speck (38:06):

I'm off the scale in turn up, up near the optimism in David.

David Pembroke (38:11):

Great. Good to hear.

Stephanie Speck (38:12):

I mean, what other areas...

David Pembroke (38:13):

Your not overwhelmed?

Stephanie Speck (38:14):

No, no, not at all, because I think in comms, you know, you always have something important to learn something important to say and some important change to observe. So there's no better area to be, to be working in and nothing is changing as fast as the way we communicate with each other. Um, and I think it's an incredibly exciting space to be in.

David Pembroke (38:43):

I see, I just see a lot of exhausted people at the moment in government comms. I think COVID yeah. Has really ripped it to people. Yeah. And they're already busy and then of it's really taken a toll out of them. And, and I think physically and mentally in, in the profession itself, I see a lot of people who, you know, are exhausted really. And look, I feel a bit like you, because I happily haven't had to deal with the burden of working in a government department trying to deal with what they've had deal with. So I haven't had that. I'm more with you up on the optimism end, but I just see a lot of people who, you know, need a hug.

Stephanie Speck (39:23):

Yep. Yeah. I have, I have a team of incredible people who have worked almost 24/7 for the last two years. And, you know, we were joking amongst each other cynically at the beginning of the year. We are rolling into season three of the pandemic. Will there be a season four? So yeah, I have an incredibly dedicated, committed group of people who have given their lives and the lives of their families in many instances to keep, to get a million kids back into school this year, into safe learning spaces, at the same time. And I think that's the job of a leader, isn't it to keep, to build emotional resilient, to keep energy higher. You can't do that if, if you've got a black view of the, of the world. Yeah, so I think it's really important as a leader in the government's comms space to see the future positively. I think we need to move away from BAU plus COVID, BAU is COVID now. There is no going back to normal. We are in the next normal, and systemic complex risk that we have to deal with. You know, across silos, across sectors is gonna be a part of our lives. We've done an extraordinary job of adapting and being flexible. And I think we should take great pride and therefore great energy that we have kept going. And more than that, we've delivered incredible community services to deserving people.

David Pembroke (40:40):

Well, on that optimistic, happy note, I am going to bid you farewell for this conversation, but I'm sure, as we continue to talk about government communications and have done, as I say for seven years, plus, you know, there's hundreds of episodes now where we've spoken to great smart people, such as yourself Steph, who have really shared their wisdom. And thanks to you, for coming on the programme today, I've taken a lot from it. I knew I was gonna learn a lot. I've got pages full of notes here, that I'm going to take away and think about tonight as, what can I take, what can I learn? What can I bring in to my, you know, my behaviour, my knowledge, um, my attitude tomorrow to, you know, to enable, you know, the team here at contentgroup to be more effective, but in, but perhaps more importantly, to ensure that our clients and the contribution we make to their work is, effective as well. So thanks so much for giving up some of your valuable time for us today,

Stephanie Speck (41:42):

Anytime David, delighted, and I hope that some of what I've said today is useful for people.

David Pembroke (41:47):

It certainly will be Steph Speck from the Department of Education and Training in the great state of Victoria here in Australia. And what a story, what a career, what a record. And what wonderful insights. And I love that optimism to round it out there at the end.

David Pembroke (42:04):

We have some great news about the gov comms Institute. The Digital social media community of practice is up and running led by the propel group and Roger Christie and his team there and everyone who's contributing to that. There are people from all around Australia at a local government state government, and federal government level. And in the GovComms Institute, they're going to be sharing their knowledge. They're gonna be sharing their wisdom with you. So is it, you can be more effective. And as Steph pointed out during our conversation that use of social media government has to be there.

David Pembroke (42:39):

It's not a risk, that's done, that's finished, that's all over. Just get better. So anyway, lots to talk about. So, jump onto the gov comms Institute, make sure you get yourself registered there so you can be ready for some other stuff. That's coming as well as we look to, research and we look to communities of practise and we look to education to start to solve some of these really, big challenges that we do have great to hear from Steph Speck. Thank you for coming back once again, to listen to the GovComms podcast, if you'd like to give a us a rating or review, that's always nice. Always take those. It helps the programme to be found a big thanks to

Olivia Casamento, who is the show runner, who makes sure that this all happens and does it so well. And to Ben Curry, our technical producer. So once again, thanks for coming back. My name's David Pembroke. I'll be back at the same time in two weeks, but for the moment it's bye, for now,

Closing (43:42):

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