

I had a fascinating chat with Kari Fluegel about:

- How the onset of hybrid/remote work has impacted internal communications
- Eliminating distractions in the workplace by keeping people informed
- Helping employees understand what they need to do to contribute
- Fostering a sense of belonging in the workplace
- How employees are your best brand ambassadors
- Community building in internal communications
- Why employee communication is so important

JL: Happy New Year and happy holidays! I have a really fantastic guest today. Say welcome to Kari Fluegel. Kari works for Kaiser Aluminum Warrick, which is formerly Alcoa Aluminum Warrick, where she serves as Communications and External Affairs Manager. She's a senior public relations professional and a trusted advisor to the executive suite, developing and executing strategic communications programs which enhance business and brand value. Kari is an expert at corporate positioning, messaging, and advocacy, aligned with corporate goals. Her forte is in employee communication and engagement. Kari it is so great to have you here today and have a conversation about internal communications' goals in business success.

KF: I'm so glad to be here Julie. It's fun when you can catch up and do that, especially when it's also about something you're really passionate about.

JL: You've had such a fascinating career. I know earlier in your career you worked in the aerospace industry for the United Space Alliance, and I would imagine that that experience really underscored the importance of employee and internal communication, especially under stress and crisis. Tell us a little bit about that.

KF: That's actually where I developed my love and passion for employee communications because I saw it make real substantial changes. My journey really started in the wake of the Columbia accident in 2001. While we were down, and not flying from that, President Bush announced we would be ending the shuttle program after we completed certain flights. I have always said that I worked the longest layoff in history, because we got notified in 2003, and the final shuttle flight was in 2012. We basically knew that we were going to have massive layoffs for nine years. One of the things in the aerospace industry is when the Titan Program, which is an unmanned rocket program, they were plagued with multiple accidents in their last flights. You know, blowing up rockets on the launch pad, and we knew, especially coming so close behind the Columbia accident, we couldn't let that happen. Doing research and reading a lot, one of the things that became very clear to me is that the way you keep people focused is you eliminate the distractions. One of the ways you eliminate the distractions is you keep them informed. That's kind of when I became a proponent and a major warrior for employee communication. It took some time to get some traction but we finally got a CEO who came in and I gave him my spiel, and he said "okay, let's do it." I said, "What do you want to do first?" and he said, "all of it."

JL: That's the power of a great idea. Great strategy.

KF: One of the things we did initially was we put together some talking points for managers to send to their employees. A manager in Florida called our CEO and said, "I can't tell our employees this, it's the truth."

JL: I was just going to ask you about that all important topic in communications: transparency.

KF: I consider that our starting spot. Over the next several years we did lots of things and really focused on it, we made managers communicate, we stressed it, we had buy-in from the highest levels, we communicated a lot. People knew six months before they were going to lose their job when they were going to lose their job. So there was none of that unknowing that distracts you so much. My measure, on the other end of that scale, is that when we had our first layoff after one of the shuttle missions... We were laying off several hundred people in Florida. People had nothing to lose, they were out of a job, they were leaving, they were going through the door, turning in their keys and badges, and outside the media was waiting to get a good story. The sound bytes were... "You know, this is not a great situation, I'm sorry to lose my job. But the United Space Alliance kept us informed all along."

JL: So what did that do for United Space Alliance in the long term?

KF: In the long term, what I consider is not what it did for United Space Alliance, but what it did for the astronauts on the final flights, because that's really what was most important, is making sure that those astronauts on the final flights... Our last few flights on the shuttle program were some of the cleanest flights we've ever flown, from what they called IFMs (in-flight maintenance issues), I mean, they were clean vehicles. The vehicles were flying almost perfectly on those final missions and that was due to the attention that employees put on processing those vehicles for those final missions.

JL: That's an amazing story Kari.

KF: When you see that, and you see those things coming together, that's what ignites and what sold me on employee communications. It was a really amazing thing to be a part of.

JL: This is a very large organization, or a relatively large organization, how do you think solid employee communication strategy can play out in a midsize or smaller organization? Same approach?

KF: It's a lot of the same. Maybe your tools are a little different, maybe your messages are a little different, but it's the same thing. You have to have transparency. You have to have trust. I think that is probably one of the biggest things you have to have in your communication is trust. You have to give trust before you get trust. You have to provide employees with the information that they have to do their jobs. I saw a statistic recently, I would have to go look it up but I think it was around 40% of employees don't really have good clarity on what they need to do to contribute to the business, and that's huge.

JL: That really is huge.

KF: The difference that employee communication makes by helping employees understand what they need to do to contribute. One of the sad things that we see in business, in the workplace and everything, is that people that want to contribute but don't know how.

JL: Everybody wants to contribute. You know, everybody works for the economic reasons, but also to feel like they're a part of something, a sense of belonging about the organization that they're working for. They want to contribute in some way, whether it's a small way or a subtle way or a bigger way, they want to be a part of it because that makes people take ownership and feel pride in what they do and want to give more.

KF: Exactly. You know, right now there's been a lot of talk about diversity, inclusion, and belonging. Belonging, when you talk about diversity and inclusion but also when you talk about engagement, I don't think we can underscore the importance of that. I mean, if you feel like if you belong and if you contribute you're gonna want to contribute more. If you look at the kids at the baseball games, the ones sitting on the bench are zoned out especially if they only get to play one inning. The ones that are on the field, they are in the game, except the occasional kid who is picking dandelions in right field. You are always going to have someone who isn't engaged and there isn't anything you can do.

JL: That leads me to the great resignation, the great refresh. How is the onset... We're in such a changing workplace right now. How has the onset of hybrid or fully remote work affected internal employee communication?

KF: I think it just underscored the importance of it. It goes back to belonging and contributing. You want to make sure people are being engaged. They know what they can do to help and how they contribute to success. And the way you do that is communicate. We have such tremendous tools at our disposal right now. Even in manufacturing environments like the one I currently work with, everyone has got a phone in their pocket. There are so many employee communications apps that you can employ to reach those folks that aren't sitting at a computer all day. There are other things you can do, for example— during Covid, we had a lot of people out but still operating... We serve the food and beverage industry so we never closed down production. But we still had a lot of engineers and support staff that were separated from the online workers. And those online workers aren't on computers all day. So every single message we sent out we included a PDF of the same information with instructions that needed to be printed out and put in break rooms and stuff like that so employees could get the same information and be informed as well. We also would do things like provide talking points to managers that they would cover in meetings and go through and say, you need to say this, this, this, and this. We don't have an app, I would love an app, but you have to do extra steps in this environment we're working in. A lot of people, I will say, have some concerns about apps, because it's like, oh, what if someone says something bad. What if they share information? Things like that. You know, those apps can do a lot of things. They don't have to enable comments. It kind of goes back to trust. I think it was... I was looking back at some old notes

this morning and I believe it was financial guru Dave Ramsey who I heard say: “If you don’t trust your employees with information, why are you trusting them with your product?”

JL: Oh my god, that is so true. And an app actually gives you that direct pipeline to those employees. Again, it fosters that sense of belonging. They have a special portal for them to communicate through.

KF: Yeah. And depending how you set it up, think about the impact it would have. You could start doing recognition to employees on an app. They always say public recognition is the strongest. Saying, “hey, thanks to the hot mill team for fixing that issue in record time.” I mean, that builds that engagement. That builds that sense of belonging. And here we’re saying it to everyone in the company.

JL: It is, it’s really powerful. Talk a little about ambassadorship. What does all this do?

KF: You mean within the workplace?

JL: Within the workplace but also outside of the workplace. What does it do when you have a strong internal communications initiative— what does it do for morale and even for recruiting and retaining talent?

KF: Well, first of all your employees are your best ambassadors. They’re the ones who are going to be out in the community answering questions especially when there’s controversy. Like, “Hey, Joe, what’s going on with this thing I heard on the news?” If your employees can respond and feel comfortable responding to those issues, they’re right there. They’re telling the message and giving folks the words you want them to have. Especially in times of crisis or difficulty or when your reputation is on the line you really need to make sure your employees know what’s going on so you can relay that information. You want to make them proud to be wearing their logos and sweatshirts in public.

JL: What are some of the best ways to find out what employees need and want? Because that’s trickier.

KF: That is, that’s a tough one. Part of the trick goes back to trust. Because your employees need to trust you enough to tell you what they need. Everybody has probably seen an occasion where a CEO or a big wig comes to town and everybody’s got on their company shirts and they’re on their best behavior, stuff like that. We’ve all seen that happen. We’ve all been in a position where we’re sitting there biting our fingernails while that’s going on hoping an employee doesn’t say or do something we don’t want them to. Having the trust to be able to communicate and actually tell you rather than just put on a happy face— when you think you want to hear a happy answer, that’s part of the whole trust that has to go back and forth. I didn’t explain that very elegantly there.

JL: I think you got your point across.

KF: You know, sometimes I'm not that elegant.

JL: I don't know about that. You know, I think that's the hard part for a lot of companies, employers, and leaders is actually hearing the real stuff, and not taking it personally but really being able to translate and respond appropriately to what employees are telling them.

KF: Employees have to be comfortable in doing that and not feeling like there's going to be any retribution. That's a really scary thing, and I think that's probably why a lot of employees won't tell you because they're afraid about how it's going to come back to bite me.

JL: There has to be a sense of psychological safety in the workplace. That really all comes down to individual leaders... Well, it comes down from the top. But also leaders of teams. I currently do LinkedIn content strategy for a Chief Customer Officer who oversees a huge national field team. She has to come across as authentic and real and even share some of her frustrations and what she's experiencing so her team in turn will feel comfortable about sharing things they are experiencing. It's a win-win. And it actually, research has shown that it actually leads to more creative problem solving and innovation.

KF: You're precisely correct. Someone has to be real. I mean, if your organization isn't doing well, you know your bosses are worried about it. Stuff like that trickles down whether you want it to or not. So if you go out and put on a happy face when times are hard, then they're going to know you're blowing smoke in various places. People are smart. Their experience is broader than just that experience in the workplace. Most of them have teenagers, and if there is a communication challenge in the world that's universal, that's communicating with teenagers. You have to be authentic. You have to be transparent. You have to be real. It's okay if they see you as a person rather than a corporation. Rather than a job.

JL: I think that's almost the most important thing about leadership, is really coming across human. When I started in my career, I was always afraid of my managers, because there was that separation. But I think today we learned a lot about how effective leaders actually work and operate and one of the most important skills leaders can have today is to be human and authentic and real and really support employees because when they do that they establish a sense of psychological safety. And they get so much more in return.

KF: Exactly. There's another part of it that I like to touch on. It's okay to laugh in the workplace. A lot of people are afraid to occasionally use humor. I can tell you based on my experiences, occasional humor in the appropriate context, all it does is strengthen your other communications because it's like, okay, the last note made me laugh, I wonder what this one has. An improved readership. Example from this from my real world is, every year we have a Halloween blood drive. Julie, you may know me well enough to know I'm a Halloween freak. Our messages for that blood drive... I mean, people are excited about our annual blood drive because I have so much fun with the puns and the jokes.

JL: But that's an amazing community builder!

KF: Oh, it's hysterical. We have a digital message board when you drive in to the plant and I'll occasionally throw up a really dumb dad joke. I think our last one was— those of you who are grammar folks out there will appreciate this— what did Adam say the day before Christmas? It's Christmas, Eve!

JL: Ba dum!

KF: But things like that, just to have fun, let people know that it's okay to laugh in the workplace. Quite frankly, I think my sense of humor is one of the things that humanizes me for employees. When I go out on the shop floor and talk to folks they're comfortable talking to me.

JL: They wanna share stories. Maybe they wanna share jokes, or things that they've read that you can share.

KF: They want to talk about their jobs. They'll tell me their concerns. So, it's okay. So definitely encourage people to be human in the workplace— especially managers. One of the things you have in the technical workplace, and I've experienced this in the aerospace program too, I've experienced this in manufacturing, is that a lot of times people are promoted not because of their people skills but because of their technical skills.

JL: Or their tenure, quite frankly.

KF: But that means that they need help to become communicators. That also means, in some cases, for folks out here that work with a lot of engineers, you guys will probably understand this— engineers who work with data, they are just not as comfortable with the human aspect. Their brain just doesn't work that way. So you have to do some education of skills, and some education as to why employee communication is important. There are so many things. It helps with retaining, recruiting, engagement, and decreasing sick leave. The number of things that communication can help you overcome, the list is so long it's amazing. That's why I think communications really should be a core business practice for every business.

JL: Well, Kari, this has gone so quickly but I want to leave it on that note because I think that, and we've discussed this, Kari and I met in graduate school and discussed this in graduate school at Syracuse, how important it is to have public relations or communications at the executive suite meeting table, because the input that we can have is really vital to developing the strength and positioning of the business.

KF: I agree, 100%.

JL: Thank you so much for joining me today, I hope you'll come back again some time. It's great to see you.

KF: We'll have to do crisis communications.

JL: You got it, we got a date! See you next week on another installment of Julie's PR Patter.