

## World Changers – The Podcast Ep.9 Self and safety



### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

Welcome to World Changers, a podcast exploring the trends making an enduring mark on our world of work, and how business leaders, HR teams and internal communicators can stay one step ahead. 18 months of COVID-19 related anxiety, a looming threat of climate devastation, political factions and the rumblings of war. Never have we all felt so vulnerable at the same time. It's an existential crisis on a global scale and a fascinating anthropological study. So what does a chronic feeling of vulnerability do to us? Recognising our response to risk and helping people address it can give us the tools to banish the burnout that comes with chronic and sustained stress. But how can we do that in the face of so many threats and challenges? Who has the responsibility of taking on that task? And where do you start? My colleague, cultural anthropologist, Dr. Alex Gapud chose this theme as his world changer for our 2021 report. Later in the episode, I chat with Janet Lessells, senior internal communications manager at SGN, to get her views on creating an environment where employees feel safe to speak up. But before that, our colleague, Lindsey Kohler, lead behavioural scientist, joined Alex and me to talk Self and Safety. Guys, Welcome to World Changers. Thank you so much for joining me.

### **Alex Gapud**

Thanks for having us.

### **Lindsay Kohler**

Pleasure to be here.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

So Alex, you talk in the report about lots of different types of stress - sudden, short stressors versus really prolonged and chronic stressful situations. I think it's probably safe to say that we found ourselves in the latter since much 2020. Maybe, not so much anymore, hopefully, cross fingers! But what kind of impact does that have on us as humans?

### **Alex Gapud**

Well, it's such a big question. And I think, you know, even as we're talking about this, when when we say March 2020, and I think about when we were writing this last year, I think the prediction would have been that we're in a very different place now than we actually are. And I think it's one of those interesting ones where I wonder, and I fear, actually, to be honest, I think there's going to be a lot of research and insight that follows this, because we still don't really know the long term effects of what COVID is doing to us mentally, socially, you know. Questions of "are we are people going back to offices", "what is hybrid?" All these questions are still kind of on hold. In a sense, it feels. But I think one of the interesting things that I'm seeing is I wonder if we're, I guess this is kind of my spidey sense tingling, I wonder if we're getting numb to some of the vulnerability that we might have felt a year ago, right? When all this was a bit fresh, and we kind of thought the end was around the corner. You know, there's so much excitement, there's a lot of anticipation. But actually, if you think about it, we're just kind of used to more delays, right? Whether that's an organization's hybrid working announcements are their arrangements, or, you know, the latest travel restrictions changing, et cetera, we're just kind of a bit numb I think. And I think it'll be interesting to see the long term kind of effects of mental health and wellbeing that follow on from that.

### **Lindsay Kohler**

I think numbness is a really interesting angle to pick up on, Alex. So I'll just, in a moment of psychological safety which we can define in a moment. And, in the spirit of being vulnerable, I had mentioned that I was feeling something very similar to that to our Managing Director the other day. I was saying I was, kind of, fresh out of ideas. And you know, in the pandemic, when we didn't have anything else to look forward to that wasn't really work related, we had to create things to look forward to, kind of professionally since social was cut off to us. I had the inspiration and the energy and the time, but now that the world has opened back up, but hasn't opened back up, I felt that drain away. And what I thought was burnout, I think Alex, is actually a bit of a numbness. And I think, you know, we've talked about how the great resignation might be just around the corner. I think those organisations that practice the psychological safety, where we can be really vulnerable and have this vulnerable conversation are going to be better placed to keep their people, because if I don't feel like I can be honest about how I'm feeling. That, you know, there'll be repercussions or I'll be let go or something negative will happen as a consequence for me showing up authentically, then I would just leave. So I think a lot of people are going to be wanting to have these conversations, Alex, around this sense of numbness and you can't do that perhaps in every organisation.

### **Alex Gapud**

Yeah, I think it's also important, Lindsey, one thing you're bringing up is that employers are aware of that feeling, right? And I think giving people both the language and the space, as well as the tools. That's a massive part of being vulnerable, having an authentic workplace and all of that obviously folds into psychological safety. I have a feeling that a lot of people are feeling something, but being able to put it into words of what we're feeling, that being numb to danger or just frustrated or feeling fresh out of ideas. I think a lot of it's getting categorically grouped as burnout. But I think there's something more complex going on that we need to tease out nuance and will in the coming months. But also, I think, as we do that, employers are going to have to create that space, and use that language and maybe be

more proactive in that, as opposed to being reactive and saying, "okay, yeah, wellbeing is important. Come to us if there's a problem", as opposed to "how do we start the conversation?"

### **Lindsay Kohler**

Or, to say, "Oh, my gosh, we've just had seven people resign in a month. Do we need to talk about this?"

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

It's so true, I think numbness absolutely hit the nail on the head. For me, I think we were in a place where during the very heightened moments of that chronic stress in the pandemic, we were very, very comfortable with being vulnerable with each other. And I think, for me, I've definitely noticed that shift. And I think that people have started to slightly put back on that brittle veneer of coming back to the office and a little bit of that awful word "polish". And I've noticed a slight shift backness. And I wonder if the numbness is setting in now we're back face-to-face, and you get those amazing interpersonal interactions. But actually, sometimes that can breed in the wrong way, because you've lost the vulnerability that we all had from the shared experience, maybe?

### **Lindsay Kohler**

I think the other part going on there is when we were vulnerable before, we were talking about anxiety and uncertainty. But now, when the vulnerability is something that impacts your commitment to your career, it feels like a psychologically unsafe topic for the workplace. Anxiety felt safe, uncertainty felt safe. Me going to the MD and saying, "I'm fresh out of ideas, because I'm just like, numb, you know, can you accept business as usual?" All of a sudden, that's less safe, because we're talking about our ability to do our work. And, you know, psychological safety is traditionally defined as the ability to show your true self without fear of negative consequences on how others view you, but most importantly, how others view your career. So if I were to go around the company, which I guess I just have, because I'm on this podcast, and say "I'm done. I'm out of ideas. Can you accept a business as usual for me for three months?" Well, that's a different ballgame than me saying, "I'm feeling anxiety due to uncertainty from COVID". I mean, Alex, I don't know what you think. But I think that's what changes the conversation from something that's safe to something that's maybe treading on unsafe waters.

### **Alex Gapud**

I think that's a massive one, Lindsay, and I think maybe we all just need a break, you know, and maybe that's a big part of it. Actually just having that time to reset and recharge. Hopefully, when things are kind of quote unquote, back to whatever the normal is, you know, so that we can actually have that time to socialise and get stimulation from other sources beyond our living rooms, or what we see online. You're on to some massive things there because of that link to performance, that link to our world of work. To me, another aspect of psychological safety and mental wellbeing, this nexus, if you will, is also the boundaries issue. Our own personal boundaries of what's personal to us and what's work related. I think whenever we come into conversations about psychological safety and authenticity and vulnerability, it blurs the line because the lines artificial, right? When we were talking earlier, it had me thinking about these theories about onstage and offstage personalities. So, when we're back in the office, we feel very "onstage". Whereas if we're sitting on our dining room table, or our sofa, doing work in our own living room, in a place that is safe, that is home and personal, actually, those lines get

blurred. So, what roles we perform, kind of get messy there. So I think there's a couple things going on. And Lindsay, I think when it comes to being honest, and being vulnerable, it's one of those ones where we were we're all able to talk about anxiety and feeling depressed or down during the pandemic, partly because we all felt it acutely. I think there's probably a novelty to it as well. If this is all new, we're all feeling something and we can explore it. I think you're right to flag that it's something that is a bit risky. But I mean, when I think about what you're saying, I kind of feel a similar thing. You know, it might be different degrees. But in terms of feeling that way, I feel a little bit worn out. I kind of feel like I need a refresher, need a break? I don't know if I have that creativity that I used to. I wonder if actually a lot of us feel that. And again, maybe that's a sign of something bigger, and whether or not we actually feel safe enough to say that, as you did, Lindsey and as I followed suit. I tend to think that if a few people are feeling something, there's something to it. I'm not one of these people that looks at a statistical anomaly and sees it as a statistical anomaly. As an anthropologist, I see it as a sign of something bigger.

### **Lindsay Kohler**

Well, I think Alex, you and I have a very interesting extra layer of psychological safety, which I think is allowing us to dissect this a bit differently. So for those of you listening, Alex and I are Americans. So our ability to stay in this country is actually tied to a job. So when you feel uncertainty at work, or just uncertainty in general, you know, there's now an extra layer for some of us. And for a lot of people after Brexit too it may be they don't have the resettlement status yet. So, now you've got a whole swath of people who were going through all this anxiety together, this uncertainty, the psychological safety, and then there's a large portion of people that have deportation on their shoulders as well, which just adds a whole other really interesting layer into the mix, where you have to ask yourself, "how much do I trust my employer?" And I feel confident and thankful enough that I can trust our leadership team, that I know I can say how I'm feeling, truthfully. And their reaction isn't going to be "well, get out of the business", you know, "get on the next plane to America". Their reaction is going to be, "How can we help?" "What can we do differently?" But the level of trust that you have to have to have that conversation is totally about psychological safety. And it's its next level. So you know, I don't know how many of you have seen people on your team that are on visas, but if they're not British, chances are there's some sort of visa or some sort of stipulation, you know, on their ability to stay in the country. So think about that, too. I would have never thought about it until I was an immigrant. But now I think about it.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

You did make such an interesting point on boundaries, as well Alex, and I think there is definitely a piece of work to define your own boundaries, at work, at home and personal relationships, that I didn't realise were so important until I got older. When people cross a boundary, sometimes you don't even know it's a boundary until they cross it, right? It's an unusual thing to think of in life. Really, I've definitely been reflecting on that more recently. What do you think the absence of those boundaries can do with psychological safety or chronic stress?

### **Alex Gapud**

I think that's a great question, Elle. I think this for me is actually one of why hybrid working is such a mixed bag. Because I'm a big believer that there's a part of us that needs spatial separation, for

example, right? When I work from home three days a week, I'm working at the same table where I eat my dinner, same seat, actually, you know? And needing that kind of compartmentalization to my day, knowing that between half eight and six, I am not going to respond to an email. I might get the notification and see it but really, unless it's urgent ... It's one of those things where it's hard because you negotiate that with your team, with your employers. And obviously, there are situations where those boundaries have to be flexed or stretched. I know, Lindsay and I are in the middle of doing some focus groups with a client out in California. So we are having to do a lot of late nights and early mornings outside of our normal hours from our own living spaces. And again, I think having that ability to kind of decompress and put things into their own spaces. I think this is kind of a natural human trait. I mean, if you look for example in anthropology, at houses or spaces, different people, different cultures, across the world, there are certain things that you do in a certain room in your house. Your kitchen is for eating, and it's for cooking, it's for gathering, but it's not for sleeping, right? Your bedroom - I refuse to eat in my bedroom, for example, Things like that. It sounds really silly, and really banal. But there's something within us, within how part of our social interactions with each other, and with the world around us, are structured that actually, it works really well if things have their own space. The commute was a blessing, as awful as it is was, because it gave us that spatial time separation, right? If - and I see this actually with a lot of friends and colleagues - if you log off at 5.55, and then you're eating dinner at the same table, same chair in 15 minutes, you don't have that time to decompress. But actually, going for a walk for 15 minutes is that commute. I'm really strict. I always change into house clothes afterwards, as kind of a signifier and an active physical boundary. I know it sounds really silly, but if you think about it, it's kind of this performative thing that says, "Okay, I'm now in home mode", right?

### **Lindsay Kohler**

I'm just so impressed that you take the time to put on work clothes in the first place. I'm just in pyjamas 24-7.

### **Alex Gapud**

I feel like I have to put up something veneer, Lindsay, talking about "on-stage/off-stage" personality. I love that, and I love that comfort level that you have. But I think, again, for me, it's putting on my on-stage work personality when I put on a shirt. And, you know, some work trousers. And then when I take that off, it's kind of performing the off-stage. And again, is it massively helpful? Is it the biggest change in the world? No. But it's something that I signify to myself and kind of say, "okay, unless I get an urgent email from Lindsay or someone else, I'm off", you know,

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

I totally get that. And I wondered if you'd seen any examples that can help us understand a real violation of psychological safety that provokes drastic outcomes, so that I can get my head more around the definition of it?

### **Lindsay Kohler**

There's a range. So, I can give you something on the smaller end of the spectrum that's very insidious, but then I can give you the "Whoa, the CEO is now in jail" version, because there is a range. And it's not always the big violation. It's sort of like the little things that creep up every day. So, a few years ago,

there was a woman named Susan Fowler, who worked for Uber. And she penned this explosive blog post on Medium about one very strange year at Uber, when she talked about all the ways she was just left out or made to feel like women weren't important there, because it was a very male dominated tech culture. I lived in San Francisco at the time. So I saw the culture, it was all my clients, I understood it. But things like: the men always pick the outtings. So it's like, "boy stuff", or they pick the jackets, and there's none that fit women, or they're passed over for roles. So, it's sort of little actions that people take around you that signify that your voice doesn't matter. So there's little examples like that. Or another example I have is there's a D&I practitioner that I was talking to. He's sort of a leader in the field of psychological safety. And he told me, he once worked for a company where nobody would go on the 49th floor. So on the 49th floor was where the CEO sat, the executives. That CEO had created such an atmosphere of fear that nobody wanted to go onto that floor, which is absurd. And of course, he said, 'No, we're going to change the perception, we are going to like change the paint colours, we're going to add chairs, we're gonna make this a collaborative spot and say, 'No, these doors are open''. But that's the very subtle ways that psychological safety filters through an organisation and makes people self-edit, makes people feel like they don't belong. And ultimately, that means people don't speak up, the problems don't get serviced. And then good employees leave.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

That's what happens. And what's interesting, you said about people feeling like they can't speak up or that they don't belong. I think sometimes that can sound like a really soft thing. But we know that people who belong in businesses drive immense innovation, business performance, and are high performing teams ultimately, and it sounds like something so soft, and perhaps that's why it's not talked about so much. But actually, it feeling psychologically unsafe can do an awful lot to our workforce. So, on the flip side of that, when it's done really well, what does that look like?

### **Alex Gapud**

I think before I want to jump into that, you know, it's really a cultural piece, right? Because if you have a culture of fear, or you have a culture where leaders feel inaccessible, then then that's that psychological or lack of psychological safety. People feel unsafe. Also I just want to flag, as well, just as an anthropologist, it's not just about the work itself, but it's also about the relationships, and it's also about those small environmental material things. I know Elle, you and I have been talking a lot just in other conversations about anthropology and work about the embodied angle, right? Our senses. It's everything. It's not just how we speak to each other, or the messages we write on Teams or the work we do. It's the whole experience. I think that's also a really interesting thing to flag. When it's done well, I think people feel safe to speak up. They feel safe to say when something's not right, Lindsey, you mentioned some fantastic examples early on of saying "actually I feel a little numb, I feel a little worn out, I'm feeling I'm not myself." I had another instance of that last week where I just had to tell my boss, "I'm really not feeling like myself today. And I just need some time to get perspective". I think this is something that a lot of people are feeling. But I think good psychological safety creates these environments where we're not afraid to say that we're not afraid to say, especially for you and I Lindsay, the stakes of being visa-tied, the stakes of "I'm not afraid that I'm gonna get the sack tomorrow and sent on the next flight home to America, because actually, I'm exhausted". I think psychological safety when it's done well, people speak up. They don't complain about everything, but they know that they can speak up when something's wrong, and they're also willing to contribute, right? Number one is share

ideas. If creativity isn't flowing, if people don't want to share a new idea in your organisation, it's probably a sign that actually people aren't feeling safe to.

### **Lindsay Kohler**

I think are more likely to self correct and own up to mistakes in a very positive way in a psychological safe environment. Because they don't fear that "oh my god, I pointed out something I did wrong", they're able to say, "oh, guys, whoa, actually, I did this, and I probably shouldn't have because down the line, it's going to be problematic". But instead of feeling like "oh, I need to cover it up", or all the things you do that make the problem worse, they can just stop it at the point. And then I think to your point, Alex, creativity is the driver of innovation, right? So I think psychologically safe environments are places where innovation ultimately flows because teams are harnessing the powers of diverse ideas, because those more diverse voices feel safe to to speak up and are and are listened to, they're not dismissed.

### **Alex Gapud**

And I think as well, Lindsay, that it's a diversity, not just of your background in terms of a lot of the dimensions of diversity about sexuality, or gender, your ethnic background, but also in terms of your skill set. I think firstly disclosure and context for me, I left academia to join scarletabbott right before the pandemic started. And to kind of bring in a different perspective as an academic, but also as an anthropologist in this space. It took me a while to kind of feel like "oh, do you have the space here?" you know, because when you have such a different way of thinking and you haven't fully absorbed the processes of how things are done within an industry or a sector or a company. I think to have that sense of belonging and that inclusion and that psychological safety, to still keep speaking up and still keep contributing ideas, it's such an important thing. We always say that, clients say all the time as well, "our people are our most important resource". And this is, to me, is really where the rubber meets the road. If you don't give people that sense of safety and allow them to speak up, allow them to feel like they belong and have something to contribute so that, as Lindsay was saying, they own their mistakes, they learn from their mistakes as well. If you're gonna have a learning culture, you need psychological safety. I think if people really mean it when they say that they value their people, this is a must. It's not an option. It's not a nice to have, it's a must have.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

I want to pick up on two things that you guys have just said. So first of all, your resilience during the pandemic, Alex, was incredible. You just kept bouncing back with so many different ideas and cool things that we could do and you were a force to be reckoned with, so don't at all feel like you didn't contribute anything because you absolutely did. But secondarily I just picked up on a little kind of British/American divide about being fired. Because for me it's very rare that I've heard of people getting fired in the UK and I know that's very very different ...

### **Lindsay Kohler**

It'd an employment law difference is what I've come to learn. So, in America it's very much at will well you can be fired with no notice. Let's just say I've done my research on visas and employment law and so I think the difference in perspective is in the UK I've learned it is very very, very difficult to let somebody go unless it's for Gross Misconduct, which, again, I don't think Alex and I are in danger of

that! But, I think that's where the mindset comes from, Elle, isn't so much cultural differences but in the differences in our law.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

Yeah. Where it was leading to with that is I feel like getting fired in America, because it happens more, is so much less stigmatised than it is in the UK. And if we're talking about psychological safety and speaking up about all that sort of stuff, I just, it really interests me how we approach these things completely differently. So yeah, I just picked up on that when you both said it and thought "Oh, that's just so interesting."

**Alex Gapud**

I think as well, though Elle, when we think about psychological safety, the consequences don't have to be as extreme as losing your job, right? It could be being passed up for promotion, it could be being excluded from different projects, different activities, some of which are social, some of which are work related, especially progression related. So I think there's a lot to that. Definitely one of the big cultural differences I've noticed, and I've been here for about 11 or 12 years, is that sense of shame. You know, it's a lot more acute here than in the US.

**Lindsay Kohler**

Are you saying us saying us Americans are shameless?

**Alex Gapud**

If it can be relative, Lindsey, then relatively we are shameless, compared to our English friends and colleagues!

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

I was just thinking how much shame I had from childhood - it's Catholic guilt I swear to God! So I guess I do want to ask whose job is psychological safety? Is it health and safety? Is it internal comms? Is it the job of everybody? Who owns it?

**Lindsay Kohler**

So it is the job of everybody. But where it "technically" lands is in a health and safety teams remit. So, in fact, psychological safety is so important that just this summer, the very first global standard for practical workplace guidance on managing psychological health and safety in the workplace was actually developed. So it's called, for those of you taking notes, ISO 45003. It was just launched this summer, the British government had a big hand in it, and it supports the UN Sustainable Development Goals. And so from a "where does it sit?" / "who is technically responsible for policies policing?" all of that it, is a health and safety team that makes the policies but it's everybody that brings it to life, just like culture. Culture is all of us. It's all of our interactions. It's how we choose to interact with one another and be kind to one another.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

That's useful to know, I want to ask one last question, and I think it will be on every member of our audiences' lips right now. Because we're all talking about hybrid or dynamic working, and how that



feels, I guess some people might be feeling left out of that loop compared to those who are physically present in the office, to those who're sort of semi-digital, to those who are totally online only. How can we really encourage psychological safety for this hybrid working world?

### **Alex Gapud**

Actually, revisiting your last question to partly answer this one, I think managers have a crucial role to play. I 100%, agree with Lindsey - just like culture, it's everyone's job. I think leadership has extra responsibilities with it. And I really actually would say that managers, when they manage their teams, have even more responsibility. And I hope organisations are equipping their managers, giving them both the skills as well as the time and the space to do that, because sometimes managers are so busy doing their own work, they don't have time to look after their teams. I think that they have such a key role to play, because they're kind of that point of contact between their employees and themselves and other people around them. And that team, right, they set the dynamic, they set the tone. I actually remember saying to my manager here at scarlettabbott, one thing we do really well on our team is we spend 15 minutes a day doing a daily check in. Partly it's work related, you know, what flags are there, what issues? Do you have there any concerns? But on the one hand, it actually gives us that time to form and continue to reform as a team. It builds those relationships. And I think those relationships are pivotal to building culture, as well as to fostering that sense of psychological safety. But it's also a chance for us to see our manager, share with us and he can use feedback that we've given, questions that we've had, that he's had to take away. I think he's done a really good job with it. I think he does a lot a good job with a lot of things. But I think this is one example where as we work in our in our team, we're working from home three days a week, we're working in the office two days a week. And I think that that sense that people have of being able to say, "Actually, I'm not okay, today is massive". And so, I think managers building in those touch points with their people, whether it's a daily team call, even if that daily call is for no other reason than to say hello and socialise for five minutes. I have this informal theory that when people do things alongside each other, they build trust in relationships over time. It's not just doing something face-to-face. If we were having a conversation all the time, we get to know each other when we form a relationship through that. But we can also form a relationship watching something together, right? You do that long enough with somebody, you start to feel comfortable with them, that you can have more of those face-to-face direct interactions. And I think that's an example of how this works in practice in this context of actually having some of those side-to-side conversations that aren't really about anything with people builds those relationships and, and builds that trust and adds to that sense of safety. I think there has to be an intentional aspect to it. But in terms of building that sense of trust, to speak up to someone about something vulnerable. I think just spending time with those people can be a massive factor in it. And it goes back to one of my mantras, that work is social. It's not just what we do or where we do it. It's also who we do it with

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

Nice. Anything to add, Lindsey?

### **Lindsay Kohler**

Well, not when my colleague ends on that beautiful of a note. So I think that's in the bag.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

It was beautiful. Well done Alex, thank you. Thank you so much, both of you for joining me for World Changes. Fascinating conversation, as always.

**Alex Gapud**

Thanks for having us Elle.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

For senior internal communications manager Janet Lessells, psychological safety at work is essential for each and every member of the team at SGN. For those on the frontline, working to power, the nation, feeling able to report issues is essential. I caught up with Janet to find out how her team is helping to create an open and supportive environment, and how they bring everyone - from engineers to customer service colleagues - together. Janet, welcome to World Changers.

**Janet Lessells**

Thank you very much Elle, lovely to speak to you.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

Oh, it's a joy to have you here. I mean, I do want to get the elephant out in the room. Because I sometimes think that the words "psychological safety" can be psychologically off-putting because it's so clunky. But please, let's start with what you think. What is your interpretation of psychological safety at work? What does it actually mean for you personally?

**Janet Lessells**

So for me, I think it's pretty simple, actually. It's being able to be yourself, really, and to feel comfortable. And in the workspace, bringing your ideas, sharing challenges, not being afraid to challenge others, actually, and to call out behaviours, maybe, that aren't in line with your company values or your personal values. Okay, so I think that's basically it.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

I totally agree with you, and actually, feeling safe enough to shout out what might be a stupid or maybe brilliant idea, depending on the way you look at it. There's nothing quite like it, is there, because the fear of getting pooh-poohed by somebody versus the potential that it could have to be amazing. If you got rid of that fear. I really like your interpretation.

**Janet Lessells**

I think that's interesting. And I actually think the older you get sometimes, you know ... They do say that once you hit 40, I'm not telling anyone what my age is. But okay, it's over 40. I do think there's an element of, you feel a bit more relaxed about saying what you think. So, maybe a younger me in the workspace wouldn't have felt as comfortable challenging, particularly senior people. And so with younger members of my team, or younger people in the workforce, it's like, how do we give them that confidence to speak up and not be afraid and not fear retribution from saying things that might not be too popular?

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

Absolutely, yes. That can also come with things like neurodiversity. For example, you know, with people who have neuro divergent thinking, and perhaps it's an automatic response to say exactly what they're thinking. But sometimes in the workplace, those boundaries can feel a bit icky, can't they with some people, and it's important to just make it cool for everybody to be able to speak up, right?

**Janet Lessells**

I think it is. And what I found so interesting, as you know I think a lot of companies will see for example with COVID-19, where there's a lot of people working from home, and those of us that were able to, it became such a leveller. So I found myself at the very beginning, obviously, as part of internal comms, right at the coalface with changing our working practices, adapting really quickly to this global pandemic. And I find myself in working groups with people from the business, very senior people that I maybe wouldn't have worked with before. And I don't have enough fingers to count the number of times that the decisions you had to make, had to be so quick that you couldn't let anything potentially go down the wrong path. So you had to be able to speak up, you had to say "I actually I don't agree with that. I don't think that's the right decision". It's quite common for me just to say in a meeting "I'm going to ask a really stupid question here", But you do know that the minute you ask it, you hear a sort of sigh of relief. from quite a lot of other people thinking, "I'm so glad she asked that question because I don't know either."

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

And that sigh of relief in the room, that's all part of your culture as well isn't it? So interesting! That's a great example, right? Absolutely at the coalface of COVID-19. But I'm kind of thinking of your colleagues in a daily basis, just even outside the constraints of the pandemic, What are they really spending their time doing? And therefore, why is it so important for there to be psychological safety at SGN?

**Janet Lessells**

So as a gas network company, safety is absolutely our number one priority. We're dealing with dangerous gas, at the end of the day. A lot of our employees like to think of ourselves as being the kind of 4th emergency service. So if you have a gas escape, somebody from SGN, in our patch, will be the person that knocks on your door to help you and turn off the gas and make sure that you're safe. So, it's all about keeping our customers safe, and our communities safe. But also very critically about keeping each other safe and our colleagues safe to do that. We have to be prepared and confident to call out unsafe behaviours and unsafe practices. And sometimes that could mean some of our guys challenging somebody more senior than them. So it's absolutely critical to our business and to the safety of our people that they do feel safe to speak up.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

Would you be able to give me a good example of where that's happened recently, where you've gone? "Oh, that was great and thank God, we made that environment safe enough for people to do that"?

**Janet Lessells**

We've actually just had a safety campaign that ran recently. I think it's been another common factor since the pandemic where a lot of organisations saw their safety performance dip slightly. So, we had

to ask ourselves, what is the reason for that? And we have to go and ask our people, what did they think the reasons were for that, and a lot of that come down to the sort of almost complacency and just just just fatigued. We're fatigued with COVID. And I think that can end up showing through just general fatigue and a bit of complacency. So we're doing a lot of work around that with safety campaigns and conversations with our people. But, for example, if you're on a site, and you've got quite a tricky excavation to do, and it's a very deep hole, there's so many different decisions that have to be made, and so many processes that have to be followed to the letter. And if you see someone taking a shortcut, or not waiting the correct PPE, that's a potentially life threatening situation. So we just have to make sure that somebody is going to say to their colleagues "stop, this is unsafe, and it may take us longer, but that's the way it's got to be done". The procedures are there for a reason, and so we have to follow them.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

Absolutely. It really interesting that point about fatigue. I felt it in myself, definitely. But it's not just me. I think it's everybody. There's something going on for me at the moment where I'm looking outside in the world. And I'm thinking when we were in the pandemic, we were really, really comfortable talking about mental health, the strain and how it felt. And then we sort of come through that. And we're sort of getting to the point where things are almost going back to normal. And actually, people have started talking a bit less about it, and maybe anxiety stepped up. Maybe people are feeling better. But I just wonder if we've sort of been on this curve where we were okay, talking about it - really okay, because everyone's in the shared experience. And now everyone's in a sort of different experience of the hybrid worlds. And where are we now with all of that? Where is the openness and the frankness that we had before? What's it like for you?

### **Janet Lessells**

No, I agree. I think during the peak of the pandemic, when we were working from home, you were all looking out for each other, where you had your sort of team building activities to make sure you're all connected. And so it was really, really important. But no, with a lot of organisations, you have some some parts of your workforce who are able to work as a hybrid model, and then you've got your colleagues out in the field too. For them, nothing's really changed, actually. They've worked out in the field. And we just have to be really careful that no matter what your role is, and where you work from, that you're cared for equally. So it's about making everyone's work environment as comfortable as possible for them. And so for me, I'm very fortunate that I can work in a hybrid model, but I think this is a whole new thing. This is not going to be the same as it was pre-COVID. So we've all got to adjust to and I hate using this phrase, but this "new normal", and it's going to take a bit of getting used to.

### **Elle Bradley-Cox**

I agree, and I think psychological safety comes right into that because it's actually making it okay for people say "I'm just zapped and absolutely zapped it's been a heck of a two years and coming out the other side, but I'm not at my best brain capacity at the moment". It's a nerve wracking thing to open up and say that somebody but I personally feel like honesty is the best policy with your colleagues. They can see right through you anyway, they can certainly see through me if I'm a tough day. I just think it's so important. What do you think will really turn the tide and make it okay for people to open up and feel psychologically safe?

**Janet Lessells**

I think we just have to keep talking. We have to keep caring for each other. Actually, we have to have very honest conversations. We have to have our leaders joining in conversations that are going on. I think we've got lots of different support channels within our organisation, whether that's mental health supporters, there's a safe to speak up and say Action Group, we've got Employee Assistance programmes, we've got lots of brilliant support channels there. And it's just making sure as an internal comms team, as well, that we are promoting those as much as we can, because you might publish an article on your employee app that doesn't immediately show. You need to tag some support lines at the bottom of this. But actually, when you really think about it's making sure that everyone's constantly aware of the help and support that's there. Because as you referred to earlier, when we were in the thick of the pandemic, we spoke about that stuff all the time. But actually, now we're moving people back into offices, COVID is not going away, and some people are still very, very anxious about it and afraid. So it's probably just as important, if not more, to make sure that people are aware of the help that they can get.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

I think so too. And the role of IC can really help line managers with those conversations as well and understand that it's not just over just because we've said that we don't have to wear masks and stuff anymore. Let's not go back on that, because that was really powerful, despite it being a wholly negative and chronically stressful situation. The power of one team during that time was incredible and unlocked amazing things for lots of workforces I'd suggest.

**Janet Lessells**

Yeah, it definitely has. And I think with SGN as well though, we've taken a really cautious approach in the kind of "Return to Work" periods because obviously winter's coming there's a lot of unknowns with that. So actually, we're not operating at full capacity, we're only operating at half capacity and our office buildings, we're still wearing masks, whether that's Scotland or southern as well. So yeah, we have taken a really cautious approach and actually I think that will pay off potentially in the next couple of months, so we'll wait and see what happens.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

So interesting catching with you on this. I do ask all of my guests this question so I'm really, really excited about your answer because every single person has said someone different to me so far. So thinking about the people making the biggest impact in the world of work right now, who would you nominate as your 2021 World Changer?

**Janet Lessells**

I'll tell you somebody I really, really admire right now and have done throughout the pandemic is Marcus Rashford the footballer. I mean, he's so young, he's 23 or something. He's using his position to influence all these social issues, whether it's racism, or child poverty. He's been awarded an MBE. I think what an absolute amazing role model for, well everyone, but particularly younger people who will probably be his most avid followers. I just read, I think it was last week, that how he uses social media channels is going to be become part of the GCSE curriculum, because they want to show school kids

and students that you can use those your social media channels to really positively influence the things that you really believe in. I think that's absolutely fantastic. And I hope that we see a lot more of that. And actually, I think there's a lot more to come from him as well. And yeah, I just really admired him. I think he's brilliant.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

I'm such a fan. And I did not know that about the GCSE thing, but I just genuinely think that, you know, with everything that we've got to go through in the next few years, Gen Z are the generation that will get us out of this. I'm absolutely sure. And there is so much pressure on that generation, particularly at that young age, you know, that teen peer pressure time, we all felt it at the time and in a social media world, never has it be more overwhelming for them! Actually finding out and learning from people who are just such a positive influence for world changing good, I just think that's incredible teaching. Fantastic.

**Janet Lessells**

It really is, it's brilliant.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

Thank you so much for this conversation. I've really enjoyed catching up with you and we'll catch up again soon.

**Janet Lessells**

Thanks so much. It's been lovely talking to you.

**Elle Bradley-Cox**

Our huge thanks to our contributors. If this episode raised a few safety questions for you. Do come and chat to us over on twitter @scarlettabbott or drop us an email at Hello@scarlettabbott.co.uk. We'll see you next time for another dive into World Changes 2021. World Changes is a podcast by employee engagement consultancy scarlettabbott hosted by Elle Bradley-Cox. Find out more at scarlettabbott.co.uk.