

World Changers - The Podcast

Ep.4 Stigma in the shadows



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.

Do you remember when talking about your mental health at work was off limits and considered a massive overshare? I do.

Unwritten social rules dictated that certain topics were off the table. But the COVID catalyst meant we had a collective short hand to point to. We were all in the same boat. It was okay not to be okay. It always should have been, but the stigmas associated with taboos made them impossible to explore openly and as a consequence society, and therefore workplaces, became risky spaces to share your experience.

But now the floodgates are open. Organisations are restructuring their benefits, examining their policies and putting mental health center stage. For some, the gesture is still more performative than productive, but the conversation has well and truly started. So, what's next? From periods to politics menopause to money? What are the taboo topics lurking in the shadows? And how can we in internal comms help bring them into the light?

Lead behavioural scientist Lindsay Kohler chose this theme as her world changer for our 2021 report. Later in this episode, I chat with internal comms consultant, Alastair Atkinson to get his views. But before that, I joined Lindsay and Russ Norton, head of client experience and diversity and inclusion champion at scarlettabbott, to talk about bringing stigmas out of the shadows.

Lindsay, Russ, thank you so much for joining me. Welcome.

Lindsay Kohler

Thank you, Elle.

Elle Bradley-Cox

So, Lindsay, let's chat about your report. What made you want to explore stigma? Did anything provoke your interest personally, through your own experience? Or did you hear more about this from clients?

Lindsay Kohler

That's a great question. And I think that this topic really stemmed from the light that COVID shone on mental health. I felt like we were finally talking about a topic that was, sort of, off limits at work. And so, then I just started thinking about what else really impacts us in our day-to-day and why aren't we talking about it? And so that's why I wanted to focus on it and explore and open up the floodgates a bit.

Elle Bradley-Cox

Well, after this past year, it does feel like we've put everything on the table, right? From Black Lives Matter to politics and mental health, finance and job losses, everything sounds like a whole lot to tackle. So how do we decide where to focus our energy? And how do we find that energy to persist? Russ?

Russ Norton

I think the big change that's happened over the last 12 months certainly is that we've all got more comfortable with the idea of vulnerability, because none of us have been immune from either Coronavirus as a disease, or Coronavirus, as a lockdown, as a pandemic, as a flipped way of working.

We've all been impacted somehow. Of course, it goes without saying that some people, those with privilege, have had it easier than others. But we've all got a bit more comfortable with this idea of vulnerability. And I think at the same time, we've had a bit more time and we've been a bit more plugged in to social media. And we've seen that that kind of diversity and inclusion topic was talked about. And we sort of felt comfortable that there was a team over there, doing some stuff that probably benefited some people. It went from being 'over there' to being front and center, on the news, at the top of our timelines.

And we didn't just hear stories about it, we saw the footage of it, we saw the evidence, we saw the impact on people. So, all of a sudden there was vulnerability all around us. And I think that drove people to do two things. Either they accepted their own vulnerability and were more open about talking about it and more open about managing it, or they channeled their energy and trying to fix it and trying to make things better for the people who are most vulnerable.

Lindsay Kohler

You know, the point that you make there Russ about channeling energy made me think about sort of the second part of Elle's question, which was 'how do we find the energy to persist?' And so, you know, when I think about it that way, it's such an interesting question. It's this mixture of self-care that you hear everyone banging on about all the time (and yes, we don't have the energy if we don't eat well, if we don't sleep) I think that there's this digging a bit deeper into self-reflection, about what really motivates and drives us.

So, as you were saying, Russ, kind of channeling your energy towards something that all of a sudden was vulnerable, it was out there. And I think that people find a lot of purpose from that. And that is one of those things that gives us the energy to persist when we feel like we've hit a wall. And so, I always say 'how do we tap

into motivation?', right? it's that motivation that's going to give you that little extra boost to make that effort, to have that conversation, to check in and just make it through the day. Because it's exhausting right now.

Elle Bradley-Cox

Everything feels like so much. So, is there a good place to start?

Lindsay Kohler

Yeah, I think so. I think focus on what you can control. And if you're talking about it in the workplace, ask your people what they want to be talking about, right? Is it? Is it Black Lives Matter? Is it politics? Is it gun control? Is it this? Is it that? You know, we survey our folks on all sorts of employee engagement things like 'do you get your communications?' and 'how do you feel at work?' Why don't we survey them and say, 'what are we not talking enough about that we need to what do you want to hear?'

Russ Norton

I also think it comes from the top. Culture of any organisation comes from the top. And the most impactful change that we've seen in diversity demographics is when there is a leader championing a cause at board level, at C-suite level. And I do think that personal passion matters. We want to see our leaders care more about what matters to them, than the success of the organisation and be human, be vulnerable, be passionate, three dimensional humans because that's inspiring. We are inspired by the passion of others. And so, I think that energy comes from individual role modelling and even more importantly, individual role modelling at the topmost level of the organisation.

Elle Bradley-Cox

I couldn't agree more. There's nothing more refreshing than somebody who explores their personal passion in a way that's meaningful for their employees as well. Look at James Timpson, I must talk about him all the time, but he's just such an interesting character. And that this stuff with ex-cons is just incredible. Really powerful, really meaningful, and actually changing the world as well, doing good at the same time.

Russ Norton

The thing I love about that is that it's small, but mighty. The policies and the things that they do; having your birthday off is standard, but then having a day to meet your grandkids, when your grandkids are born is such a tiny little benefit, you know, in the grand scheme of costs in an organisation like Timpson's, it's miniscule, but the people that work for that organisation, don't just hear that people matter, they feel it. And they can point to specific examples of a time that that organisation helped them be everything that they possibly want to be in their personal lives. And that's super special.

Elle Bradley-Cox

In some ways the pandemic was a door opener for the conversation about mental health. So, what's the next thing? Where do we go from here?

Lindsay Kohler

Yeah, I mean, we don't stop talking. Continue to normalise the conversation. I think we've heard lots of people talk about how IC finally got their seat at the table and isn't going to give it up? Well, I think the same about mental health and other stigmas that we can get around, because the only way that it changes is everyone

keeps it front of mind. We have to, like Russ said, have leaders role model that behaviour. And it's not enough to talk about it as 'one and done'. I think it's why we often say, 'ongoing storytelling'. This is what works, this is what inspires, this is what keeps it front of mind. Russ, I'd love your builds on that with all the work that you've done in the space.

Russ Norton

I mean, I agree with you that it's about ongoing storytelling and keeping the conversation. And the other really interesting shift that I think has happened is that diversity, wellbeing, culture, performance, engagement, communication, all used to be separate things run by separate teams.

And I think over the course of the pandemic, if they were six or seven spotlights with kind of slightly faded light, they are now seven overlapping circles that are incredibly bright. And really all we are talking about is helping people be at their absolute best. So, I think where we go from here is about no longer exploring culture in a silo, diversity in a silo, wellbeing in a silo. We recognise that we are all three dimensional humans, we all have needs we're all privileged from some stuff, and we are all disadvantaged by some stuff. That's a fact.

So, I think for me, what is next is about kind of this human centric human first approach to communication, to organisational design, that starts with the humans who are delivering the output and making incredible things happen. What are the systems? What are the needs? What are the topics? What are the support mechanisms that are required to help them be at their best, you start there and you can't go wrong.

Elle Bradley-Cox

Thinking about some of the taboos that people might not have on their radar yet, because we know so many people are right at the start of this journey, even after a year of pandemic working, what are some of the taboos? Why do they matter and will anything be off topic in the future?

Lindsay Kohler

I guess I'll go first although I cannot wait to hear what Russ may or may not think. It's a horrible stereotype as we talk about stigmas, but maybe there's stuff that men don't like to talk about, like, you know, prostate cancer and colon cancer screenings, but they're so critical. I know, I'm hoping that this opening up on mental health is letting people and to raise this point about vulnerability, letting people talk about these things that, you know, maybe felt squishy before. I also think people transitioning. So, I think we don't talk enough about what medical benefits there should be, what support, how they're feeling. I feel like transitioning while in the workplace still isn't really talked about. And that sucks.

Elle Bradley-Cox

And it's funny, because I've actually heard from some clients who offer amazing benefits and packages to people transitioning, but they don't talk about it. They have this wonderful service and the humans who go through this feel so supported, so loved, so cared for. Nobody talks about that as a perk.

Russ Norton

So talking of perks, I think the big taboo is salary, and money and compensation. And certainly in Britain, we do not like talking about that stuff. But it's fascinating that as I work from home and work anywhere and hybrid work has been introduced, people have sort of recalibrated their perception of what's the deal. What's the give-

get contract that they're getting out of work? And does it really work for them? I joined a webinar yesterday that was talking about what's the future of unions, because when you are all individual humans in your own homes, it's even harder to organise and collectively bargain.

So, the future of kind of pay parity and salaries and negotiations around that become entirely one to one. That's human versus employer. And that's a balance of power that we know is not always 100% equitable. So that for me I'm really fascinated to see what the deal will be over the next year. How will the unions show up? How will people start to organise and question and challenge? Am I getting a fair deal? Is that man getting paid more than that woman for doing the same job? Is that person of colour getting paid less for doing the same job? What's going on? And how do we facilitate those conversations, when it's such a taboo topic for us in the general population.

Lindsay Kohler

I feel like that's such a nuanced and politically correct way to say, 'for the love of God, start paying your people more', because we know that every organisation no matter what your size, is, you can probably afford it. And the C-suite is making out better than the normal guy. And we don't we don't feel like we have power. We don't feel like we can talk and no one trades pay information, which I think hurts women a bit more than men.

Men seem to feel more confident asking for what they're worth, and asking for 50,000 above what they're worth, just to see how it lands. And but when you're armed with that pay data, then you can go in feeling much more confident and say, you know, I've done my market research and the comparable role, and comparable city, this is what we're worth.

Russ Norton

And, also, the value of essential workers. You know, I mean, please for the love of God, can we pay nurses a bit more? Please for the love of God, can we pay teachers a bit more? Please can we recognise how important care staff are? Please can we recognise how important shop workers are, getting food out to people? The balance of power between what we pay those frontline workers, who we all claimed are essential and who we clapped on our front doorsteps for, are still not seeing the benefits in terms of what goes in their pockets. And that has to be fixed somehow.

Lindsay Kohler

Yeah, and appreciation's great, but it doesn't pay the mortgage.

Elle Bradley-Cox

What about those cheeky companies who are now saying, 'well, you've not got your commuting costs anymore, so I can pay you less?' I mean ...

Lindsay Kohler

Stingy bastards. I'm sorry, can I use that word on our podcast? I don't even know what I can and can't say on these things anymore. Where's the line between like, which like swear words are acceptable and which ones aren't is always a dance.

Russ Norton

There's a taboo topic for you.

Lindsay Kohler

There's a taboo topic! When can I swear and when can I not? Actually, real quick, at my first company, very corporate very buttoned up. Swearing was not allowed and a consultant came in. They were presenting and they said the 'S' word. And everyone in the room we all go (gasp)... And we look at each other. And, you know, here at SA, you know, we commonly drop words worse than that in casual conversation and nobody bats an eye. Yeah, it is a good taboo, isn't it?

Elle Bradley-Cox

It makes me laugh so much. I love it when somebody does it who is really corporate, and you don't expect it.

Thinking about what's coming up then. Are there other stigmas that you think could be tackled, or even exacerbated, by a hybrid world of work?

Lindsay Kohler

Yeah. So sorry to just jump in again. But I'm excited about this one, because I just recently came across some research out of Harvard, about 'the old boys club'. And basically, it was saying that men are promoted much faster than anyone else under a male manager. So not under a female manager, not females under men, not females under females, but men reporting to men get promoted at an astonishing rate, which really then contributes to that gender pay gap.

And the idea is, they socialise more. And they do one thing in particular - they take smoke breaks together, because they're more likely to smoke. And I think there was a friend's episode where Rachel decides to take up smoking because she feels like all the decisions are happening on smoke breaks. And so, I guess the creatives at Friends would be very happy to know that Harvard Business School has done the research and has validated the premise of that episode. But I think with remote work, we're seeing different types of leaders emerge, as we talked about in our last podcast. Will the old boys club kind of go away when people aren't like together like that all the time? Or will they just find a new way to keep everyone down? Who knows?

Russ Norton

I'm really interested about proximity bias. And the idea that as we go back to normal, in inverted commas, as we return to offices, what is the purpose of those offices? What happens in those offices? And is what's happening in those offices, is it inclusive of people who aren't in the room? And what are the benefits and privileges? Will the people that are visible and near to the decision makers, near to the bosses, what privileges and benefits will they end up getting? The people who are not visible, but still busy beaver away at home - what will they get? And how will all that be managed?

I think now is the time to think about this stuff. As people are planning their future of work, they return to the office. Is it about putting everyone in a building and shaking them up and hoping for the best? Or is it now thinking about what are the mechanisms by which we guarantee that if we had a person with a disability, who was never able to come into the office in the first place, how do they keep all the access to the knowledge sharing, to the opportunities, to the brainstorm, to the client conversations, customer conversations that they

enjoyed during lockdown? How do we keep that and not throw the baby out with the bathwater in this effort to return to normal? Because 'normal' didn't work for everyone before. So that's what I'm hoping will happen.

Elle Bradley-Cox

Have you seen any clients already thinking about this?

Russ Norton

Yeah, lots. And it's showing up in really different ways. So Nationwide is the obvious one. They announced some office closures, they've announced a 'work wherever works for you' idea. What I love is that the stance that they are taking is classically Nationwide, and that inclusion is baked into absolutely everything. And so, they recognise that some people thrive in the office environment and need to be in an office environment to get their jobs done. And their aim is to make work and managing work and managing space, as seamless for those people as it is for the people who are now working at home or working wherever they want. Everyone to just be able to seamlessly get stuff done. And I think that that's such a smart way of approaching this, that it's not about what are we doing with our offices? What are we doing with our home workers? It's how do we just enable people to be their absolute best selves wherever they are, and whoever they're working with you, for example?

Elle Bradley-Cox

Thank you, Russ. Final question then. So, what are our audiences telling us about workplace taboos? And I'm really thinking about those folks who think that D&I just isn't their responsibility? How do we make it more relevant to them?

Russ Norton

There is a tidal wave of a new generation, joining the workforce, who are not tolerant of misogyny, not tolerant of racism, not tolerant of those kind of innocent, unconsciously biased slip-ups. They demand diversity. They've grown up almost in a post-diverse world, where being different is being normal. And I think it's incumbent on our generation to learn and listen to them and listen to what is normal to them. And it is incumbent on our generation to teach the generation above us, who are the decision makers, who are the ones leading our organisations, to step up, to listen and be that kind of go-between that says 'yeah, that generation will probably not get everything that they would love, but actually why couldn't we do this? Or why wouldn't we try doing this? Or let's listen to this perspective and celebrate that incredible experience and background that is coming up into our organisations and is not going away anytime soon.'

Elle Bradley-Cox

Thank you both Lindsey, Russ for your time, for your expertise. And your insight.

Elle Bradley-Cox

For senior consultant Alistair Atkinson, mental health is a topic that's close to home. Battling anxiety and depression while trying to keep the wheels turning at work, Al remembers the pressures and the stigmas that surrounded conversations about mental health.

When his depression returned later in his career, honest and open dialogue and the support of colleagues helped to turn the situation around. For this episode of World Changers, with male suicide rates still as high as they are, I knew I wanted to find a man so open up about this topic. But even now, it's still surprisingly difficult

to find men with the courage to talk openly about this. So, I asked my colleague and friend, Al, if he'd be willing to talk about his experiences, and whether he feels the stigma of mental health has truly come out of the shadows. Al, thank you for joining me.

Alistair Atkinson

No problem Elle.

Elle Bradley-Cox

And so, let's talk a little bit about your first experience of mental health and how you first realised you were really struggling at work. Did it creep up on you? Or was it a shock? And how did those symptoms show up for you?

Alistair Atkinson

Yeah, it's a strange one, in that I now realise that I've had issues with anxiety and depression all my life. I've only realised that in the last few years. And the first time that I had a diagnosed episode, it was so strange, I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know what was going wrong. And it started by me just kind of feeling more nervous than I ordinarily would, find it hard to take any pleasure in things that I would normally enjoy. And it just kind of went into a downward spiral from there.

It got to the point where I honestly thought that I was becoming more stupid, because I would sit at my desk at work, and I'd be looking at something that I should be able to just do, and then move on to the next thing. And I found myself almost paralysed mentally. And so, I thought I was stupid. And it's only now, having been through it, and read a lot about it, and spoken to a lot of people about it, that I know that kind of paralysis, that mental process, is just a really common symptom of anxiety and depression. You're not becoming more stupid at all. It's just one of those things. But I didn't know that at the time.

Elle Bradley-Cox

Absolutely. And actually, it's really uncomfortable, because your brain plays tricks on you. And if you're not careful, it just becomes your master and it completely constricts any ability, any confidence that you might have had, or wanted to have. It's such a struggle. Thank you for being so honest about that.

I want to talk a little bit further about unhelpful emotions, just that your brain forces upon you. So shame and guilt. Do you think they play their part? And do you think it's different for different genders?

Alistair Atkinson

I honestly don't know if it's different for different genders. My gut says, it probably isn't. I think those feelings definitely play their part. I remember feeling like I wasn't making a valid contribution, particularly at work. But then, as the depression gets worse, you start to be like that in your wider life as well. Or certainly I did. What, again, I realise now is that it's quite a common thing. What I didn't realise at the time was I found myself constantly comparing 'current me' to a perception of a 'me that used to exist'. So, I would look back on this person, this version of me that was successful at work and good in social situations and compare that with the current me who could barely hold a conversation. That's not true. I *could* hold a conversation, but it took so much effort. Small talk became really difficult for me. And I didn't feel like it was productive at work. I didn't feel like I was worthy of my partner in my personal life. I felt like she deserved better than me. And that I was

dragging her down. I found it hard to be around my friends. And the kicker is that the more you feel like that, the more guilty you feel about it. And the more shame you feel, because you think 'I should be able to cope with life'. The old me used to be able to cope with life, the imagined me that I want to be can cope with life. But here I am. And I'm not coping, I'm dragging the people around me down. And so, you do you feel horribly, horribly guilty. And again, it's only once you've been through that and talk to people, you talk to professionals about it, that you realise, again, that's a common feeling and people that are suffering with anxiety and depression. It's just a symptom.

Elle Bradley-Cox

Yeah. And I guess the reason I asked the gender question is, I have a lot of empathy for men going through this situation, because I think there's some early conditioning in our society that that men have to be strong, and get through this. I just wondered if that feeling maybe played out in your own experience? Because you described 'I could definitely do it before, why is it not happening now?' I wonder, did you feel a little bit more pressure to find that strength?

Alistair Atkinson

I grew up in a family where my dad was quite an older dad, actually. So, he had me when he was 48. So, he was a child of the Second World War. And a lot of the men that he knew when he was a boy, went away to fight in the war, and went through some horrific experiences. I guess, in his mind, he came back with a stiff upper lip, and just didn't talk about it.

I realise now that I had these issues and these episodes of, what I now know are anxiety, depression, at various points in my life, including when I was a kid. And it wasn't well understood by mum and dad. And that's not a criticism of them. It's just the world we lived in at that time. And particularly with an older Dad, you know, he was it was a military man. And he would say things like 'this behaviour shows a lack of moral fibre', and that hurt at the time, and didn't help with that kind of guilt thing. But again, I don't blame him for that, that was just a product of the way he lived. And he was he was a man's man of a certain generation. So, there is an element of 'boys don't cry'. But I also think that that's changing a lot. And even in the last five years, I've noticed a shift in thinking around that.

Elle Bradley-Cox

That's really interesting. And particularly, because I want to find out if you felt that you could open up about it at the time. So, if you if you say that the attitudes have changed in the last five years, did you feel in it in a safe space to open up about it, and whether people that you could trust outside of maybe a therapist,

Alistair Atkinson

I think that the big step for me was the first time I went to a GP. This was probably six years ago. Now I had that initial episode at work, before I joined scarlettabbott. And it got to the point where something really wrong, and I couldn't carry on. There was a bit of a kind of intervention from my other half, my mum, and we decided, between the three of us, I needed to go see a doctor. And as soon as I did that, for as low as I was, there was that starting point of improvement, because a professional sits there and says, 'yeah, I know what's wrong with you. It's anxiety, depression, it's really common, there's a route out of it. You might not believe it now, but stick with it'. And so suddenly, you feel like what you're experiencing is validated, it isn't some aberration that only you experience.

And so, then the second time I took a downward dive in the last few years, was after I joined scarlettabbott. I wasn't unhappy at work or anything like that. These things sometimes just come out of nowhere. There had been quite a few different things going on in my life generally. So, I recognised that was reaching that low ebb, and I was struggling. The good thing is, I did recognise it this time around, and I started to talk particularly to one colleague, and one evening, at the end of the day, just pulled them to one side and said, 'I'm struggling, I know what it is, I know what my problem is, I can't fix it on my own right now. I'm probably gonna need some help.' She was really good about it, very understanding. And then I went back to the doctor again, put myself back on that path, that that process of trying to come back from it. And I spoke to the leaders of the business, and they were very understanding.

I think it's amazing. Once you open it up, most of the time, people are pretty good about it. And I made something good about it. I've got pals that I've been friends with since school days. In my lowest times one of them in particular, he lives near me, he'll say 'want to go for a walk?' And we'll take the dog out for a walk and he gets it. You know, it's not something he particularly experiences, but he gets it and he accepts that just part of who I am.

Elle Bradley-Cox

Was there any difference between the support you received both times have times changed in between episodes for you?

Alistair Atkinson

Certainly the second time, when I was at scarlettabbott, there was much more understanding. That's not a criticism of my employer previously. They did everything that you would expect them to do from a business point of view, you know. I had time away from work, they were supportive of that and they helped me with their phased return when I came back. So, from that side of things I have no criticism of them. What I would say is that in scarlettabbott, when it happened to me, there was probably more empathy, I think, that's the key thing. People that I spoke to said, 'yeah, I understand'. Some of them said, 'this has happened to me as well'. So, there was a degree of mutual sharing, which always helps. And leadership were really good. We were pretty honest with each other. And they gave me the time and the help that I needed to start making my way back. And Rachel, our boss, said to me: 'imagine the guilt like a bag of stones that you carry around with you. Just drop that bag, it's not helping anybody'. I was feeling guilty about the fact that I wasn't pulling my weight at work properly. But saying drop that bag, drop that guilt – it's not as easy as that, but at least you know that you're supported.

Elle Bradley-Cox

That is wonderful. So, after this last year, it's really evident that mental health support is actually more important than ever. And because you're so personally touched by this issue, and probably therefore, more observant of its risks. How did it feel to watch everyone face into the mental health challenge, and know what could happen?

Alistair Atkinson

It's been hard to see people struggle, because particularly when you've been through a period, or several periods of being pretty down yourself, when you recognise other people, it can be quite emotional, because you know what they're going through. And you wouldn't wish it on anybody.

In that sense, it's kind of difficult to see all the people struggle from it from a human point of view. But I do think it's created an opportunity to have the conversations more. We've all recognised that it's been a tough year. And we've been forced into situations that are less than ideal, some more than others. And I think that has been a catalyst for even more conversations about the importance of mental wellbeing, as well as physical wellbeing.

And this is something that I think is massively important. For so long, we've thought about physical health as something that everybody has, everybody gets a cold, everybody will get the flu from time to time, you know, if you play sport, you're going to pull a hamstring at some point. But we've not thought about mental health in that way. But actually, it's the same. Everybody has mental health. Regardless of whether you ever suffer that diagnosed episode of depression, or anxiety, or bulimia, or anorexia or whatever it is, you still have mental health, some days, you can feel better than others, in the same ways as you feel good, sometimes physically and not so good at other times, I think there's an increasing recognition of that, and a recognition that the two are linked. We're talking much more as a result of lockdown about looking after your overall wellbeing, which means your physical health and your mental health, and one could have an impact on the other.

Don't sit at your chair all day, in an office, on your own, without talking to anybody, without moving, because guess what, at the end of the day, you're gonna feel pretty rubbish. I think if there has been one good thing coming out of the COVID crisis, among all the bad things, one of those good things is this increased willingness to talk about wellbeing.

Elle Bradley-Cox

I agree and the transparency around it as well. I know if I'm having a bad day, my performance is just going dip totally. And being able to say to my boss, 'do you know what? This isn't working, and you're not getting the best from me, you're not going to get the best story that I can write today. And I can write it tomorrow in half the time. I need a couple of hours. Is that okay?' And really, it's not even ever asking, 'is that? okay?' I'm doing this for myself, and she totally gets it. And I guess having that kind of leadership is been really important. In the pandemic, do you think that organisations are doing enough to support colleagues around this? And actually, what is the best kind of support they can offer?

Alistair Atkinson

I think it varies from organisation to organisation. You know, we're in a fortunate position in scarlettabbott, in that we see a lot of different businesses. And I think the overall picture is one of massive improvement. Certainly a lot of the clients that I work with, are having these conversations about wellbeing, mental and physical health, they're taking it more seriously. They're putting leaders in positions where they are the figureheads of this as an issue. They are trying to role model the kind of behaviours that you would want to see in terms of looking after oneself and supporting other people.

So I think there's a picture of improvement overall, I think there's some organisations that have been doing this for a while I'm ahead of the curve and have got quite advanced processes and policies and attitudes in place that

help people, so they're very open about talking about mental health. They have Employee Assistance Programmes that people can turn to, they have a kind of attitude flexibility that lends itself to greater wellbeing.

Other organisations are at the beginning of that path, and I think what's important is the willingness to address it now, not just because the right thing to do, but from a business point of view organisations should be looking at this and thinking, 'how do we help our people to be their best and feel their best, and therefore do their best work?' I think if you start from that point, there are very few leaders, I would hope, that wouldn't want to engage in that conversation, because that's just good for everybody.

I think there's a long way to go for some businesses but start having the conversation. And particularly if you're in internal comms person, talk to your colleagues and HR, figure out ;what is our standpoint on this at the moment, and lead that conversation.

Elle Bradley-Cox

You recently shared your thoughts on this for the IOIC Voice magazine, speaking about what internal comms pros can do. So, if you're unsure about tackling this tough topic, what would you suggest? And are there any absolute nos, that we shouldn't be talking about in internal comms?

Alistair Atkinson

I don't think there's anything that should be completely off the table. I think the important thing is a degree of consistency. What I would say is don't, as an IC professional, go off on a crusade of your own and do it unilaterally, because you're probably going to come unstuck. And in the long term, no matter how well intentioned, you're probably going to create more confusion for people in the business.

It needs to be a consistent, concerted effort in collaboration with colleagues and HR, in collaboration with leaders in the business. What I think IC professionals can do is start that conversation, if it isn't happening already. And think about and present the business benefits, and the people benefits, of addressing these issues of wellbeing and mental health.

You don't have to wait for somebody else to do that. You can lead that. But also collaborate and bring all the major stakeholders with you on that trip, I would say also, invite colleagues to tell their stories. We talk about storytelling a lot in our line of work. But I think it's so powerful because what people need is to understand 'I wasn't on my own'. Like I said earlier, it wasn't an aberration. It wasn't something that was purely wrong with me and that nobody else had ever felt. As soon as you realise that actually, this is really common. And plenty of the people who will have gone through the same thing may be going through it right now, actually, you start to feel better by sharing. So get those stories out there, as long as people are comfortable to tell them.

Elle Bradley-Cox

Final question then. And we do ask this to all of our guests. Thinking about people making the biggest impact in the world of work right now. Who would you nominate as your 2021? World Changer?

Alistair Atkinson

Yeah, this is an interesting one, because we're talking about mental health. It's not somebody necessarily in the world of work, as we would normally think about, but it's Andrew Flintoff who used to be a cricketer.

He's now a TV presenter. And he made a programme earlier this year about his battle with bulimia. I think anxiety and depression are the two conditions which are very often linked, and that are increasingly getting airtime in terms of the conversation. And that's great for somebody like me who has been through those conditions. And, you know, I'm still living with it.

I think we're having fewer conversations about things like eating disorders. And when Andrew Flintoff made that programme, I was absolutely shocked because a I just didn't think that he was 'the type' that would be going through that. More fool me, you know, how stupid am I? And knowing all that I do about my own mental health, why am I still thinking of 'types of people'? Ridiculous!

Well, there you go. I didn't think he was the type. I had no awareness that he'd gone through that I didn't know a lot about bulimia. I learned so much from that programme. I think it was very brave of him to open up because again, he's a guy that's lived in this kind of man's man world, most of his life. I think it was brave. It was honest. It also was very clear from that, that he wasn't out the other side of his issues. You know, he was right in the middle of them, for all I know, still is. When you're in that place, it's tough to talk about so credit to him.

So, I think, as a World Changer, you've got to be up there because the more men, particularly men like him in the spotlight, that have got that old fashioned, 'masculine' persona on the surface of things, the more men like him that can talk about all different kinds of mental health the better.

Elle Bradley-Cox

You talk about his bravery, Al, but you've just shared your story and honestly, that is a really hard thing to relive and go back through. So, thank you. Thank you for being so brave.

Elle Bradley-Cox

Our huge thanks to our contributors. If this episode got you fired up to tackle taboo topics, 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 Changers is a podcast by employee engagement consultancy scarlettabbott, hosted by Elle Bradley-Cox. Find out more at scarlettabbott.co.uk