On regenerative leadership with Chaya Mistry

IABC EMENA podcast

[00:00:00] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Hello, and welcome to the IABC EMENA Podcast. I'm your host, Chared Verschuur, current Board Director of the IABC EMENA and a communication consultant working in the intersection of inclusive leadership, employee experience, and social and behavior change communication. In this podcast, we highlight the diverse voices of professionals across the EMENA region who are shaping the future of communication.

[00:00:40] And today I have the pleasure of welcoming Chaya Mistry to the podcast. Chaya is a human leadership and communication coach specializing in human-centered change. She has a background in psychology and internal communication, and her work focuses on creating environments where individuals can thrive.

[00:01:00] I'm excited to dive into this conversation about how we can move beyond sustainability to truly transformative leadership. Chaya, welcome to the podcast. Is there anything you'd like to add to your introduction?

[00:01:14] **Chaya Mistry (she/her):** My story is I'm a failed psychologist, so Plan A was to be a psychiatrist. I worked for a year in a psychiatric hospital after I graduated and then I had three accidents in the same year, very close to each other. The last one, I was on crutches for six weeks. So I thought, oh, this is maybe not the route for me.

[00:01:35] I finished my year went back home to my parents' house and thought about what do I wanna do? I came across a public relations course and I loved it and it didn't feel like learning. I started to switch to a communications career. Moved to the Netherlands for my husband's job originally and spent 13 years here in the Netherlands in a communications job for an oil and gas company. It started out really interesting communicating some technical engineering innovation research which I found fascinating, but being able to translate it into like language that people could understand or helping to share the stories. So I love that. And one of the things I started to look at is that the brilliant minds who are in this field of engineering, of tech, of the STEM world essentially, what they have in IQ, they also need then to think about the EQ. So being able to take care of the leadership roles that they move into and being able to take care of people.

[00:02:36] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Would you say that this is what led you to human leadership, this part of your story?

[00:02:41] **Chaya Mistry (she/her):** Yeah, absolutely. It brought me back to my psychology. Because it really was about understanding behavioral change, being able to understand motivations how language plays a part, how storytelling plays a part. And so in came my psychology, but also in came some of my grounding of who I am, my culture, my background, what's important, like community and connection and belonging.

[00:03:05] I inherited a training program, for communication skills for leaders, and I made it into a coaching program. We started to change the relationship that they had with their stakeholders, but also that the leaders were changing and they were also developing these skills.

[00:03:18] I loved the difference it was making in the way that communication professionals could strategically partner. That's what led me to start Humanly. When I was looking at what to name my company, 'human' had to be in there. That was for sure.

[00:03:31] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** And is human leadership different from regenerative leadership?

[00:03:35] **Chaya Mistry (she/her):** I see them as connected. What we need is a type of leadership that can see beyond me, see beyond our system, but see others and start to see the natural systems and unnatural systems around us. So unnatural also being technology and AI and being able to be life affirming.

[00:03:54] So the opposite of regenerative is degenerative. What is it that depletes the system, that exploits it and so what is sustainability? Are we just trying to stabilize? Is it like getting to a place to just be good enough so we are not depleting the world resources, but we're just going to a place where we can sustain it? That's not enough. So we actually need to be able to rebuild, restore, revert, revitalize.

[00:04:18] Don't we need people in organizations to feel enriched, revitalized, thrive? And so regenerative is about more than just a baseline. It's more than a sustainable level, it's about a regeneration and actually making it better.

[00:04:33] In the case of agriculture, it starts with soil health. The soil health of our organizations is our cultures. So what is it in our cultures that we need to nourish. What's depleted, what's toxic even? And then let's work towards revitalizing it to a place for us to have a life affirming organization.

[00:04:53] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** What we're seeing right now, and that was also with my research on a sense of belonging, is that we still have more exploitative work cultures than regenerative work cultures. So what shifts do we need to happen for organizations to move from one place to another?

[00:05:10] **Chaya Mistry (she/her):** What we're trying to move away from is the over-reliance on profit and growth at the expense of people and planet. It's much more about noticing the entire ecosystems that exist. So one of the shifts we need is to move from this duality that we are different from, or separate from nature, but also different from, separate from each other.

[00:05:31] If we see our workforce on the factory floor, as different from us, then can we have the same compassion? Can we have the same care for them. Can we see that there are interconnectivities, there are ecosystems. We have a logical, linear ways of thinking about things. If I think of ESG, for example, there are lots of legislations coming that are here now and that are coming in the future about holding companies to account, and the way we are doing it right now is very also analytical, logical, linear. We have a tick box exercise. We do what we need to because we are regulated, however, the shift is about doing so because we emotionally connect and we care.

[00:06:13] What we see right now in the space of change communications and change in organizations is that we go from incremental changes. So we do one change, we then do the next change and the next change, and it's a continuous stream of changes. What we need that is different in regenerative is transformational. And that's transformational because you're looking at entire ecosystems. So within an ecosystem, we need to see how changing one thing changes everything.

[00:06:36] **Chaya Mistry (she/her):** Nature tells us and shows us how that's done. And this nature as in big nature, as in earth nature. But there's also the nature of human beings. So we know a lot about how human beings work. In the last few decades there's been so much in terms of neuroscience to understand what is actually happening in our brains and very social brains that we have and how interconnected we are with others.

[00:06:58] Particularly when we want organizations that are innovative, we need innovative solutions to problems. So how are we actually creating those environments for innovation? Because that takes psychological safety, that takes diversity. But then being able for that diversity to thrive. The monoculture, needs a disruption. And for the organizations to become more regenerative, we need to be committed to creating that positive environment for that to happen.

[00:07:25] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** So you mentioned a few things here, like one is 'citizenship thinking', as in that book, the *Future we Choose*, the authors were referring to thinking as a citizen in this planet. So when you think about that as your role that you are a citizen, then you don't deplete resources because they're part of you here.

[00:07:43] You also mentioned, I was just watching the video of *donut economics*, and we like going to that direction of endless growth, but nature doesn't do that. Nature will grow and then stabilize.

[00:07:55] You also mentioned the role of systems thinking in the practice of regenerative leadership. Is that correct?

[00:08:03] **Chaya Mistry (she/her):** Absolutely. Looking at the planetary boundaries. Are we actually living in the planetary boundaries? Let's not just deal with the symptoms. Let's try and find out the cause, the actual illness that's there and try and deal with that. The inner work creates the outer change. So when we create space for leaders to do that inner work for organizations, then we can start to make the outer change.

[00:08:25] The outer change doesn't come from just pruning and from trying to kill off pieces that are not working. Actually comes from the root level, from the deeper level of the inner work.

[00:08:35] As communication professionals, what's the role I play? In what way do I want to make that difference? And that means, yes, building upon knowledge, but there might be need to build up our skills. There is AI that takes over some of the tactical things. So when the tactical things are taken care of, what are we spending our energy on and think using the spaces to partner strategically to help organizations move in this direction.

[00:09:00] So what role do we play as communicators in supporting regenerative leadership?

[00:09:06] Let's just look at the ecosystem. So let's do this in a more regenerative way. Let's look at all the different elements of people. But also, what else do we impact? What societies, what communities, what else are we impacting and what impacts us?

[00:09:21] **Chaya Mistry (she/her):** One of the most helpful tools that we have as communication professional is the stakeholder map. This is like the key. And there's an inner landscape. So we need to first work on that and then be able to do the stakeholder map. So do we create the space for that? Do we create the space to then think about things in a different way, in a creative way. And from that, what we build, if we build our comm strategies, then from a place of partnering at that level and understanding the full stakeholder map. Then we can have much more empowering communications.

[00:09:54] And that's how we start to partner in a more strategic way to influence I don't even think it's the table. There's always this " we need a seat at the table" piece, but actually let's get thinking spaces. Let's create thinking spaces where leaders can stop and think and be outcome focused rather than output and tactical focus.

[00:10:15] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** As you mentioned earlier, and I love that quote, "the inner work is what creates the outer change". Do you also advocate for communication professionals to be doing their inner work as well before they, for example, work with leaders?

[00:10:30] **Chaya Mistry (she/her):** Absolutely. Something that I use in coaching quite a lot is the drama triangle. In this triangle, there's often somebody who needs help. It's a victim. There might be a perpetrator, someone who's the baddy. The victim also then needs a hero, someone to rescue them out of it. What often happens in organizations is that there's a challenge, there's a problem. The leader that we work for, or the team we are working for, they have a problem. We see them as the victim and we can wanna go in and we rescue them.

[00:10:58] They look to us to rescue them. Oh, I need a slide pack, I need a this, and I needed that. So we go rescue. So we stay in that role, they stay victim and we stay rescuer. There's a switch then from this drama triangle to being empowering. And one of the things that is different in the Empowerment Triangle is that the victim is no longer the victim.

[00:11:17] The victim can take a step outside and have a reflective space. What they look for is not a rescuer, but a coach. Someone to ask them really good questions, someone to help them to see and reflect and that the problem is not the perpetrator, not a problem that has to be defeated, but a challenge, something different.

[00:11:37] Ask questions, ask really good questions that help to create a thinking space and a pause. Sometimes we might not realize the things that are triggering us, the things that move us into our automatic habits. And particularly when we are trying to change something.

[00:11:53] Like I go back to the seat at the table thing. What do we do when we are there? If we go in there with all our negative self-talk, if we go in there with a, oh my God, what am I doing here? Oh, they're gonna ask me a question that I can't answer. We absolutely need to have done our inner work. We have to do our leadership work. We need to become leaders of our space, our profession. Stand by your expertise. Stand by what you bring to the organization, to the relationships and stand by that in how you go into organizations.

[00:12:24] And that does mean self work. That means recognizing my patterns, recognizing my habits and getting help to work through that as well. This is where this seat at the table becomes an open space for us, because we're already demonstrating that we understand what to do with that.

[00:12:41] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** That's beautiful. And we've been talking about regenerative leadership. It seems that it's closely connected to indigenous wisdom. How do you see this influencing how we view leadership today, and how do we ensure that these original sources of knowledge are acknowledged?

[00:13:00] **Chaya Mistry (she/her):** The most sustainable communities are the indigenous ones, and that's because they have a really close relationship with nature. They don't see themselves as separate from nature. In the industrial world, we have distanced ourselves from that.

[00:13:12] So yes, there is a lot of kind of indigenous wisdom. It's not just the Indian, the African, the Native American. Here in the Netherlands it's understanding water and how to work with water and work with nature. And work with others.

[00:13:25] In the Netherlands there's this like polder system which was built on being able to collaborate and work with each other and be able to understand interconnectivity. This is still indigenous wisdom. It's really about looking at other knowledge and other wisdoms that exist that help us to answer the questions because we may not have the answers to all the questions that we have right now, just from looking at our, limited pool.

[00:13:46] So look further, look beyond. I'm reading a really good book about Judaism called the *Amen Effect*. And it's understanding just how connection to people is part of a wisdom. It doesn't have to be religious to help me work out what to do next and help to give us language, we use things like *Ikigai*, which is like the Venn diagram around finding your purpose. And then there's more in, in a, in the Japanese philosophical frameworks and spiritual framework that help us to understand the whole approach to life.

[00:14:19] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** What you were telling me earlier is that regenerative goes beyond sustainability. So for example, for communication professionals working with a leader, thinking about sustainable practices, how do we help them towards regenerative than just sustainable practice?

[00:14:37] **Chaya Mistry (she/her):** I'll go back to my foundational piece, which is the inner work creates the outer change. Let's have a conversation about what really bothers them. What really is interesting to them. Have they got family, how old are their children and what's the world that they're going into? How about grandchildren? What do they notice happening around them besides what we're doing in a work context? What's the inner work in ourselves? What are their dreams and wishes?

[00:15:03] From there helping them to have a connection with, what is the sustainability journey for you then in the context of who you are and what's important to you? What are the values you hold? And they come from our experiences, from our deeper beliefs. What are the non-negotiable values that you hold?

[00:15:23] For me, like one of those is authenticity. I need to be able to be myself. There are times when I'm not being myself and then it, I notice it. And helping a leader to work out what are those values to them, when do they find themselves in that value, and that's the place at which they can do the best work. They can make the outer change when you are living inside your values. So do the inner work.

[00:15:45] Help to get the noise out of the way? That noise could be the learned behaviors, the learned things that, you know. Hierarchy is important, or you shouldn't speak unless you've got everything fully organized in your mind before you open your mouth. The boss is always right. All of these things are learnt rules and helping to see them and test them and just seeing the human in them.

[00:16:05] In the work we do, we have to be able to really deeply connect be able to help them in a compassionate way to really see them where they already are. It's when you see people where they are right now that we can help them to change. Let's just pause and try and understand who they are and see them where they are now. Help them to do that inner work and slowly build up the confidence to go further.

[00:16:28] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** There's really power in the pause, right? But what if you're working with a leader whose values do not match regenerative leadership or sustainable practices? How do you work with that leader then as a communication professional?

[00:16:42] **Chaya Mistry (she/her):** I'm not sure we always can. I've done trainings where it's been a mandated training, right? So in comes a bunch of leaders in the room and there'll be some person who will go to the back of the room and they'll fold their arms and they're not taking part, this is not for me. I don't need this.

[00:16:56] The best training in the world can't change that person. They need to first want to change and want to change for their own motivations. People don't change because they've been told to. People change because they want to. And even more so when they need to. Maybe part of it isn't, is picking your battle and knowing when it's not your battle to fight, right?

[00:17:14] When actually you do have a leader who's interested and wants to move more into sustainability, what is the next step in their journey and what does that look like? Because we need to see the world in which they exist and the challenges.

[00:17:27] What are the things that worry them? What are the costs and the benefits of moving? And it's a coaching space essentially to be able to really hold that space for leaders. And this is again, I go back to is it your job? Because some may say that's HR's job. That's a coach's job.

[00:17:45] In the end, I think as communication professionals, we have a job to do. We have a strategy to deliver. In the same way as we'd want one channel to be working really well to deliver the message. Your leaders are also probably the best channel that you have and the most important channel that you have.

[00:18:01] So how are you helping it to perform? How are you helping the ecosystem of leaders to really perform well and be not just okay, but really thriving because then they can help their organization to be thriving.

[00:18:14] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Is there anything else you'd like to add for communication professionals working in this space or who want to work in this space?

[00:18:22] **Chaya Mistry (she/her):** Just start to look at ways in which you can use coaching skills and use them in every interaction that you have. And that can be just listening a little bit differently, listening in a way to really understand what the person is saying, but what they're not saying. Ask really good questions.

[00:18:37] I made a big commitment to actually become a coach, right? And that doesn't come cheap, it doesn't come easy. But we can use coaching skills to be able to do our jobs better and partner better and influence better. And that's all in service of the job we need to be able to do. And so what are the things that impact you being able to do your job well and go upstream of the problem. So keep exploring that little bit further upstream of the problem that you are experiencing and yeah, stay curious with it.

[00:19:05] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Thank you Chaya, and to everyone for tuning into this episode of the IABC EMENA region podcast. Remember, inner work is what drives outer change.

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[00:19:33] Reach out to me if you'd like to be a guest on the podcast and contribute to shaping the future of communication. Connect with me on LinkedIn or visit our website, iabcemena.com for more insights and upcoming episodes.

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