On internal communities and quiet revolution with Tony Stewart

[00:00:00] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Welcome to the IABC EMENA Podcast, where we explore the future of communication. I'm your host, Chared Verschuur, current board director of the IABC EMENA and Communication Consultant working in the intersection of inclusive leadership, employee experience, and social and behavior change communication.

[00:00:19] Today, I'm joined by Tony Stewart, an expert in community management and internal communication. In this episode, we're diving into a critical but often overlooked aspect of organizational culture, internal community management. Tony, welcome to the podcast.

[00:00:39] **Tony Stewart:** Thank you. Very happy to be here.

[00:00:42] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Tony, you've been shaping internal communities for years now. Can you tell us a bit about your background and what drew you to this space?

[00:00:51] **Tony Stewart:** Of course, certainly. Back in the day I worked for the Greater London Authority in their public liaison unit, supporting the Mayor of London in reaching out and speaking to his people in London. But I soon found myself overwhelmed by the sheer volume of communication and moved into internal communication because there I felt like I had some kind of impact or connection with the community that I was communicating with.

[00:01:15] Suddenly I went from the population of London to the people that worked in City Hall and that was a real joy to me because it felt like a contained community that I could have real impact on. And that was in the days back in 2007 when Facebook, Twitter were new and exciting. And before I knew it, I was attracted to the tech of these social media platforms, but also the idea of creating micro communities within the organization.

[00:01:42] Social media gave us kind of two-way crowd conversations. They gave us a way to speak up and a way to respond to the news. And I found that very exciting at the time. Despite where we found ourselves with social media platforms right now, back in 2007 it felt a bit more rosy.

[00:01:58] Fast forward and I've been working with different brands to support their communities of purpose. Always coming back to that kind of principle of "what if we moved away from broadcast and this old school nineties BBC way of telling news and instead adopted a more social, interactive conversational and discussion based news and understanding of the businesses that we work for and work in?".

[00:02:21] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** For the benefit of our listeners, can you tell them what is internal community management?

[00:02:27] **Tony Stewart:** It's about using your understanding of the business and what the business is trying to do, and then nurturing and helping communities to focus on those things to create meaningful change, growth and success in your organization as well.

[00:02:40] I use the story of a garden a lot to describe what good internal community management looks like. I have this garden and before I even pick up a shovel I have to know what I want to do with this piece of land that I have, right?

[00:02:53] Do I want to create a beautiful flower garden that will help with my peace of mind? My wellbeing. Maybe I create a little nook for reading. Maybe I install a pool to keep me fit and active. Maybe I create vegetable patches to feed myself. Maybe I install swings or a sand pit for my kids to play. These are all, there's so many different things that you can do with a garden, right?

[00:03:13] But it's what you want to do, what you want to get out of it that's important. And so if you bring this back to the context of business, internal community management is about understanding what your business goals and objectives are, and defining what that community looks like to support those business goals and objectives.

[00:03:31] And then we can break it down even further. So if I choose. For my garden to have vegetables. What vegetables do I want in that garden? What fulfills my need? What are the vegetables that I like to eat? What keeps me healthy? What do my family enjoy? And again, it's the same with business. If in your business, retention is a big topic and you want to attract and keep the best people, what communities of purpose do you need to have in your garden to realize those ambitions and make it happen?

[00:03:58] But the rub is, and this is the tricky one. This is where people often get it, often chip up. Whether or not you wanna pull a flower, garden or a potato patch, you have to go into the garden with intention. You have to define what you want to do before you pick up that shovel and before you build that garden.

[00:04:15] If you're lucky, you'll have other folks who can help you with the gardening, but you have to intend to change because what community management isn't, is creating a list of important subjects that you think should have communities, creating the groups, and then just walking away.

[00:04:29] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** I love that metaphor about the garden. I love that you used the garden to describe internal community management. If we think about internal community management, how is it different from, or where can we place it within the field of internal communication? Because I would think that tending a garden or looking at a business as a garden and tending to it is internal communication, right?

[00:04:52] **Tony Stewart:** Sometimes the definitions of internal comms and employee engagement kind of vary from business to business. For some businesses, internal communications really is to inform the organization and to leave it there. Whereas the more impactful and powerful internal communications teams actually go in there, and like you say, like they nurture the garden, they pull up the weeds, they define the the potato field, the pool. Or even better, they partner with various parts of the organization. So if an organization has a communications need or opportunity or challenge, that's where internal comms can step in and support that need and challenge and everyone can benefit from their communications experience.

[00:05:33] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Internal community management is obviously a part of internal communication, But not every internal communication function has internal community management in its role. Correct?

[00:05:45] **Tony Stewart:** Correct. And I think that's one of the saddest things of our industry right now. There's, that's my quote, right? Because how can your internal communications function if you are not in the business of creating communities of purpose, understanding your business communities. We sometimes call them audiences in internal communications, and we do persona mapping and stuff like that.

[00:06:08] But I would argue audience mapping, persona mapping tells you who your audience is, but community management is becoming friends with that audience, understanding the needs of that audience, understanding the real obstacles that our audience is trying to overcome from a communications point of view, and partner partnering with them fully rather than miss what can often be a very superficial audience mapping exercise.

[00:06:31] So I think community management is when if you've got community management in your internal communications team, then you are already at a next level. I feel like that is a supercharged in internal communications team because they're talking and believing and in the business of communities of purpose and that's where the really magical stuff happens.

[00:06:49] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** When you form internal communities, they're more fluid, they're more authentic. Can you talk more about that? About bringing authenticity in an organization?

[00:07:00] **Tony Stewart:** It's not until you invite discussion two-way conversation backwards and forwards where things get really real, where things people can talk about, people can critique. People can pick holes in your plan. People can build and develop ideas around your plan. That's real chat. That's real conversation. And I would argue that a lot of organizations still aren't there. They're still a little bit afraid of opening that box, and ah, let's be honest, I talk about the BBC model from the nineties and social media.

[00:07:30] Social media also, can be very rough and very raw and very political. And so I think there's somewhere in the middle I think curated conversation or curated content can start a conversation. But a healthy, flourishing community of purpose can then continue that conversation, that discussion in a very critical but wholesome and authentic way.

[00:07:53] And I think a community manager's job, part of a community manager's job is to balance those two things. Create stories. Create moments of interest and moments of joy and conversation starters, and then curate and nurture those conversations in a way that benefits not just the employees, but the business as well.

[00:08:12] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** You touched on an important topic there because if it's the internal community manager's job to curate that and start with the conversation starters. Where does the the boundary lie then with internal community manager and internal communication manager?

[00:08:30] **Tony Stewart:** It's a good question, and I think generally what I've experienced as being a community manager myself, but also looking at some of my recent clients is that internal comms are the news producer, they're hearing stuff from the organization. They have a mouthpiece to the CEO and creating very important conversation like the annual results, right?

[00:08:51] Or there's a change plan coming in, or there's a new product that we've developed and we want our employees to be a part of it. Where that kind of handoff happens is that's published on an intranet. Or a enterprise social network or your digital signage, wherever that is. And then the community manager takes the baton says how can we create conversation? Where's the call to action?

[00:09:12] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** If we're just sending out comms to inform and to tell people about it, but we're not really interested how it lands, we're not really interested in the behavioral change or the understanding change as an effect, as a result of that communications, then we're not doing good internal communications.

[00:09:26] You talked about being critical about what we put out there, and it's a job of the internal community manager to balance that out. We also see that there's polarization that happens in those internal communities. Have you seen internal community management or internal communities bridge differences within organizations?

[00:09:46] **Tony Stewart:** Yeah, absolutely. So there's a couple of things there in terms of, when things can get a little bit heated or a little bit frosty. And I'll start with that, which is, making sure that you've got governance in place. And the rules sound a little bit strict, but when you create this garden, you also create this tone of voice for the community. So we're going to be critical and we're gonna be honest, but we're also gonna be respectful, and we're going to keep it nice and clean. We're gonna go high with these conversations, right? That of course can come from some rule setting.

[00:10:16] In this platform, we talk like this. We talk like that. If you wouldn't say it in front of your boss or your mom, then you wouldn't say it here. So there's some kind of broad rules, but it's also what's more successful about setting that tone is just seeing it in the community. So if your leaders are on the platform and they're talking.

[00:10:34] Positively and in, in critical but respectful ways, and your peers are also doing the same and internal comms and your community managers are posting that way, then you set a standard through showing, you set a standard through showcasing, and that by far is much more powerful than some social media policy that's buried on your SharePoint intranet in the background somewhere.

[00:10:53] So we need to set that tone very early on. And that often comes from having a conversation again, as soon as we start our garden. How do we want people to talk to each other in this community? Are we gonna allow swearing? Because let's be honest, it's a very vulnerable and very honest way of speaking, but where do we draw the line? When we're being critical, when we're just name calling? So that's a conversation that every organization should be having when they embark on a new community platform or when they start their garden, or even if their garden has already started and has gone off and has grown lots of weeds and is very rough and very untamed. There's always a good time to have conversations about the rules and the governments in that in that community as well.

[00:11:34] In terms of what you said about org communities, bridging differences within organizations I've talked about how so often communities of purpose. They don't stick to existing silos. They blend and they goop and they stretch around your organization as well. An employee resource group, like the LGBTQIA plus network, that doesn't stick to any existing business silo, geographical or departmental. It doesn't matter where you are geographically in that organization or what department you're working. If you are a member of that community or an ally, you can join this network the employee resource group and be a part of those conversations. It's the same with the Gamers Network. If you're into Super Mario, it's the same in the Cooking Network.

[00:12:16] And what's lovely about these network is they don't have any business definition. So you do get a wonderful mix of people that don't stick to those business borders. Then you have this opportunity where you know somebody from marketing and somebody from IT are talking to each other about Super Mario in the gamers network and bang, you have a connection. And when that marketing person needs it, insight or support in a new campaign that they're looking to launch, they already have someone in mind.

[00:12:41] So those communities often goop and flow across these silos and create really healthy networks, create really healthy connections across those businesses. And I think that can really help bridge the difference as well, if you are, if you have these topics in common, and certainly if you have soft, vulnerable topics like cooking or computer games or pets. They really quickly erode any kind of friction or any kind of ego because we're all just here cooking or we're all just here playing Super Mario. And that's a really, I think that's a really wonderful way to bridge communities and organizations.

[00:13:16] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** When we create employee resource groups that creates a sense of belonging. But when we create a sense of belonging, sometimes we also create this othering so how do we encourage participation from different voices, especially those who feel unheard or marginalized in our organization?

[00:13:34] **Tony Stewart:** A lot of that comes down to psychological safety and setting what your community or garden is there to do. So some organizations will embrace that and be like, we're an organization where we want everyone to bring their full selves. And even if that means they have opposing views, for example, I talk about LGBTQIA plus community members.

[00:13:57] They could also be religious. Communities in your community as well. And that's not to say that all religious communities are anti LGBTQIA plus, but there is often sometimes fiction between those two communities in the real world. And that fiction can also be replicated in organizations as well.

[00:14:12] And as an organization, before you start your garden, you have to ask yourself. Is this something that I want to avoid completely? So we just don't have those ERGs? Is it that in within those ERGs we are gonna have a little governance to say that, Hey, we are aware that there are different views on these different topics.

[00:14:29] And even, I worked for a multinational before that had. And LGBTQIA plus ERG, they also had offices in Russia and they also had offices in Singapore where the law was changing right then. So we also have to be aware that for some of those community members in other places, they might not be able to participate or open themselves up in this community and network, right?

[00:14:50] So what we have to do is appreciate those, understand those things, which I think is core part of your DE and I efforts. But then also understand how you can facilitate conversations and vulnerability. How involved do you wanna get as an organization? Some organizations wanna get really involved.

[00:15:06] They wanna change the world, and they want there to be better rights for this community in all parts of the world. And they will create that community and they will support that community. What do I would ask? Either ask everyone listening to this podcast today, what is your business's stance on that and how safely can you create those communities? Because once you answer that question, then you can get onto the work of governance. Okay, so what do we tell our community members that is and isn't okay to share here? For example, in the LGBTQIA plus network, ERG. Don't at mention or talk to your Russian employees in this group that is a fail safe, or it's okay to do that because we've all agreed that's okay to do that and we want to create change in that department, you have to be really clear because you want to create psychological safety in those spaces so that people know what they can post, what they can share, so they're not gonna upset anyone.

[00:16:00] It's important to create those rules and that how are we gonna, what's the candor, how are we going to talk to each other in these networks? As a community manager, as the owner of that community, you are the boss here. You have to set the tone and set the standard.

[00:16:11] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** And so we, we touched on quiet revolution as well. So how do we, as internal community managers or in, in the context of internal communities, how do we nurture this quiet revolution?

[00:16:22] **Tony Stewart:** Revolution in business has always been important. It's always existed in business. Even if it's down to the critique of the cleaning uniform and what people wear, what's served in the canteen right up to the policies that the business does or doesn't stand by.

[00:16:35] There's always been voices, there's always been revolution. And we're seeing that a lot right now. Of course, as I've touched on with in the US when it comes to DE and I, but growth and success always requires change, and change in itself is a revolutionary act. I. And I think within these focus communities, there will always be like rumblings of change.

[00:16:53] There'll be discontent voices. There'll be powerful ideas. There could be constructive critiques. But that's a goldmine for your business because if businesses truly understand change and they understand that change is necessary and genuinely good for the growth of their business and their people, then they have to lean into it.

[00:17:12] They have to accept that there's always gonna be a little quiet revolution. But those quiet revolts, those quiet voices should be heard because they're telling you something about your business. They're telling you something about the culture. They're telling you something about the wider world that we are operating.

[00:17:29] And an opportunity then emerges for positive change if you are brave enough to listen to it. And I think what we don't want to do in order to encourage and nurture that organic kind of revolution is folks don't like things to be done to them. They often naturally push back.

[00:17:45] If there's lots of change that I don't understand, I might feel overwhelmed. I might feel like I've lost control, I might feel unsafe, unheard. I don't like what's happening because I don't understand it. And I think if we can be very clear and very honest about what we are doing in organizations and say, we're changing in this way.

[00:18:04] And that has an impact here. And we're gonna give you an opportunity to quietly or to revolt against this. We, or essentially, we're gonna listen to you, we're just gonna listen to you for a bit. we want to understand what's going on in your world, and I think these communities of purpose are a fantastic platform or a fantastic catalyst for those voices to be heard.

[00:18:25] So long as your organization. And often your CEO is brave enough to listen to those voices and to make meaningful change. So I think psychological safety and building communities where people can be themselves and feel like they're being heard, that they're naturally, I. If you're gonna listen to people, you then have to put those changes into place.

[00:18:45] Otherwise it's just lip service. Oh, I feel really heard, but you're not gonna do about anything about it anyway. If you've got communities that are living and breathing every single day, you bet they're gonna say something after a while if they feel ignored.

[00:18:56] We often experience this also when we like share strategies, three to five year strategies, and then we hear critical voices. So what do we do with these critical voices? Do we just allow them? What's your take on that?

[00:19:11] It's an interesting and nuanced one because. Let's be honest. Some people will just moan for the sake of moaning. Once you look at those comments, it's quite easy to understand what's the barking and the woo woof wf and what's actually constructive criticism and something you can do with, and you are always gonna get the barking.

[00:19:30] **Tony Stewart:** You need to know when to filter it out. If the barking gets too loud and overwhelms the rest of the conversation, you definitely need to do something about it. And that will come under governance and what you've planned for that scenario. When it happens, it probably will just FYI but then also understanding where the good stuff is.

[00:19:48] Part of the community manager's role is identifying where there's constructive critique. Where is there and is there a voice around this? You could even be brave to say if some, somebody's critiqued the business strategy in this way there might be something in there.

[00:20:01] Let's dig deeper. Let's create a focus group. Let's really listen to that community. Let's really understand what that community, how that community feels about it. Go from there. Let's actually do some research. And again if you go a bit deeper, often people aren't barking often there is a valid reason behind it.

[00:20:19] And it might be something that fundamentally changes your strategy over the next few years or something that you just need to be aware of and that you can just move on as you did. But I would much rather acknowledge that comment or that potential bump in the road now, thanks to your community that's raised it than just ignore it and hope it goes away.

[00:20:35] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** So do we say thank you to every bark? Is that what you mean?

[00:20:39] **Tony Stewart:** Barks can highlight a bigger issue. I wouldn't say thank you to all the barks because what you then do is say, barking is okay here on this community. What you want to do is maybe take one or two of those barks and say, Hey, how can we turn this into constructive criticism? How can we turn this into something positive? Because that's what we wanna see here.

[00:20:58] When people are barking, they're there, it's pain, right? You hear a bark who actually is probably a cry for help or a bit of a scream. There's something going on under there. That person is not happy. And I'm no therapist, right? I'm not there to fix it, but I am here to understand it, and I'm here to protect my community and make sure that my community is a safe, warm place for constructive criticism.

[00:21:20] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Can you share an example of an internal community that has successfully turned a quiet revolution into something impactful?

[00:21:27] **Tony Stewart:** Yeah, I think so. As I mentioned I've worked for a few clients and companies. And one multinational guy I worked for had an office in Japan. And the office in Japan was actually pretty small. It wasn't well populated in comparison to the size of the rest of the organization, right?

[00:21:42] I was in the internal communications function and we would communicate in English because English was our business language. But it also, I. Some companies will say English is our business language, but really it just hides the fact that they're a bit too lazy to communicate and transcribe and converse with people of other languages.

[00:22:01] And that was what was going on here. We were sharing internal communications to a global organization, but in our Japanese office, there wasn't a lot of people that spoke English and certainly not to a business degree. That would mean that they could understand the internal communications we were sharing.

[00:22:15] We created a enterprise social network in that organization. And as the community manager, what I spotted is that somebody from the marketing team in the Japanese office was taking our internal communications and translating it in Japanese, taking the bits that they felt was relevant to that part of the organization and being an unofficial internal comms mouthpiece for that part of the organization, you could argue that was something of a revolution against our English only broadcast nature of communications. But because we were broadcasting in English, but then this person was sharing this content in an enterprise social network people were having conversations about it 'cause it was in a conversational space.

[00:22:55] I noticed this and had a conversation with the central internal comms team and said, guys, like I know that our business language is in English, but I've spoken to this person and actually could we find some resource or could we support this person in disseminating that information and making it easily accessible for the Japanese audience. And we did. We created like specific Japanese comms for that part of the world as a result of this quiet revolution that took place on this enterprise social network. And again, that was one of those things where there was a clear need in the organization that manifested in this community, that person felt safe enough to use that community to translate and share that content with their local audience.

[00:23:39] And then the bigger organization, IE, internal comms could see that behavior and partner with that organization or partner with that part of the organization to make sure that we were fulfilling our commitment to good communication in that part of the business.

[00:23:52] I actually visited the office not long after that and just to see like the feedback there, just from talking to people was like, yeah, we actually feel a bit more seen now. Like we understand that English is the business language, but I don't talk, I don't speak English. But now that, because you made that change, I feel important. I feel like validated. And it was great that our local marketing person was doing it for us, but now I see that business is doing it for us and that creates so much more clout and so much more weight.

[00:24:20] And so I thought that was a really powerful example of where just a small revolution or a change that was facilitated by a community like this could actually impact the business and do, and we did something better as a result.

[00:24:34] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** That's great that you listened and then you really saw the need for that.

[00:24:39] **Tony Stewart:** As their community manager, I was always making it my business to understand what was going on in, in the organization where there were bottlenecks, where there was communications blockers and that wasn't something that was happening in the rest of internal comms.

[00:24:54] I was out there in the virtual field. Asking people, talking to people and I think that's a really powerful role for these community managers, internal communications as well, and not to blow our own trumpet, but I mentioned at the beginning of the call that really good internal communications teams have a community manager within them.

[00:25:11] And I think this is a really good example of where that community manager superpower can lift internal communications because they're out there. They're basically business partnered with the entire organization, which I think is really powerful.

[00:25:23] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** And how important is leadership visibility in internal communities?

[00:25:28] **Tony Stewart:** It's honestly so important. When you are creating an internal community or a digital community like this, there is also gonna be a lot of kind of suspicion, or why would I even bother with that? I already have email. But if you've got your leaders regularly posting and contributing and showcasing the kind of behaviors that you want to see on that platform.

[00:25:52] And so having leaders there right from the beginning, having them engaged having them bought in is really important because of course, these communities also don't exist just as silos. What we need to do is make sure that leaders are active within those communities, within those digital communities, but outside of those communities they're name dropping the community at town halls when they're talking to senior leaders at their monthly meeting, they're referencing your community and how powerful it is and some of the good things that it's doing. They need to be out there as number one advocates of your platform. Not all of your leaders will be, they will absolutely be skeptical leaders out there.

[00:26:27] They'll come around like it's a long game. Find the leaders that get it. Find the leaders that understand that their visibility counts, that their honest candor, or question and answer sessions count. We work in a hybrid world, but also even when you're physically in an office, how often do you really get to see the CEO? Not very regularly, but on a digital platform, you are much more likely to visibly see the CEO in a video. Or a photograph or in a q and a session. So let's get them on those platforms, let's get 'em leading from the top. Let's get them showcasing the kind of behaviors we wanna see because that's gonna have a huge impact in getting the rest of your community, on those platforms.

[00:27:06] And I would also argue that it's not always about those leaders posting or being the first voice. It's also about them contributing, liking, listening, and empowering that change from a kind of backseat point of view. So it's the leader doesn't have to be posting every single week. What I would like to see them do is go in and if somebody has praised someone else also contribute to that praise, just a like.

[00:27:31] Imagine if Chared, if I was in an organization and you did something really awesome and I praised you publicly on that network, and then a couple of days later, the CEO liked that comment and I would get a notification. Not only am I humbled because the CEO liked my post, you are also in on it because the CEO has seen that was something that you did that's money can't buy recognition. That's being really seen and rewarded for awesome behaviors. So I would argue that those likes and those comments within and underneath those posts are really powerful and really important to encourage as well.

[00:28:06] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** And what if a leader posted something and then he gets a negative comment? What would he do? He or

[00:28:12] **Tony Stewart:** Ooh. This is always a thing that terrifies leaders. Whenever I've gone in to do what I call a handholding session with a leader who gets the platform but doesn't really know what to contribute, one of the first questions they ask is like, how do I delete comments? How do I delete stuff so that I, it's scares the bejesus out of me.

[00:28:33] And of course that's when I have to talk about vulnerability and openness and constructive critique. Not all leaders are into it. It's we're still on that journey, I think culturally. But then. I come back to trust, right? So we've seen in, in, in Gartner and in various reports how trust is being eroded in organizations, right?

[00:28:51] People don't trust their leaders. People don't trust their politicians. People don't trust big businesses. The only way to get that trust back is to see a leader. Take difficult questions, respond to them honestly, and do what they say. Behavior ties into what they say. So if they say that we're an organization and they've got all these like fancy values on their wall, and transparency and openness and honesty and innovation, all the key words on that value proposition.

[00:29:19] Then you bet that if the CEO posts something and I come back with a critique, or if I come back with an honest opinion or an idea, if you don't respond to that, if you don't reply to that, then what does that say for your values? You're not doing what you said you would do. And if you don't do what you said you'd do, guess what happens?

[00:29:36] Trust is eroded. However, if you do what you say that you're gonna do, then that's where you gain trust, that's where you are. You can refill your trust meter. And I think that we're in a place now where we definitely need to refill our trust meters in organizations for sure. So that, and that's a coaching thing.

[00:29:55] How do you coach that leader to ensure that they get, that they understand that, and then they behave in that way in your platforms and your organizations?

[00:30:03] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** You also suggest that they respond themselves when they post something and something posted back?

[00:30:10] **Tony Stewart:** I, absolutely. And That's not to say that if Steve from finance posts something negative or critical about what the ceo EO said that c reply straight away or has all the answers. And it, it can even be that the post, the first post is Steve, I hear you. I don't have the answers right yet. Let me talk to the marketing team or wherever, whoever's really responsible for Steve's problem, and we are gonna get back to you. And then two days later, the head of marketing comes in and says, okay, Steve, I've looked at this and these are my thoughts or feelings about it, and we're having this very open conversation.

[00:30:43] I would try to respond quite quickly, even if it's holding respond. But the CEO doesn't have to respond by themselves if they need to go and have a talk with someone, or if they have to gather even a few people in a room and say. What the hell do I do with this comment? That's okay.

[00:30:57] You don't have to fight all your battles on your own, but what you do have to do is acknowledge the message and ideally reply to it as well. Otherwise, why the hell do you have these communities for purpose if the conversation is literally gonna stop as soon as things get a little bit tricky and they don't get that tricky that often, yes, it's gonna happen, but every one of those tricky conversations is an opportunity to grow, trust, see it as a gift.

[00:31:21] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** That's really beautiful that it's an opportunity to grow, trust and not to be afraid. How do you see internal community management evolving in the next few years?

[00:31:32] **Tony Stewart:** That's an interesting one. Internal communications can evolve by simply adopting these tools. It sounds like there's no big future state. There's no kind of grandiose evolution of internal comms. We have all these platforms already at its disposal. A lot of organizations already have them installed in their organizations and they're simply not using it. They're simply not stepping in or stepping up to the challenge of creating communities of purpose within their organization.

[00:32:01] All the ingredients to evolve are there. The evolution is overcoming the fear or the blockage and just giving it a go and just trying it. There's really nothing stopping many of the people listening to this podcast, giving this a go. You've almost all of you have got gardens in the back of your businesses.

[00:32:20] What are you doing with it? If you look out the window and it's overgrown, it's full of weeds. Alright? That's not a pleasant place to be, but if you roll up your sleeves, pull out the weeds and start sowing a few seeds of potatoes and flowers, you are gonna see something good happen soon. So have a think about it.

[00:32:35] Consider it because. And also selfishly, internal communities, I think are absolutely where the industry and where the future of internal comms and employee engagement is. So if you are internal communications practitioner and you are not managing, creating or playing in the communities of purpose field.

[00:32:55] A lot of times internal comms folks would struggle to, to justify the value that they brought into organizations. Sure. They sent out the newsletter every week. Sure. They hosted a couple of town halls, but what was the behavior change? What was the impact? How did you measure, how did you leave that business in a better state than you found it? And I would argue that community management and communities of purpose are glowing examples of where you can say, we make changes. Because in that community they did this, and in this community they did that because we had a clear idea and a clear strategy for those communities.

[00:33:28] And we really changed that business. We changed it culturally. We changed the idea, the innovations. We produce products as a result of those communities. We made changes to policy as a result of those communities. Those are all things as an internal communications practitioner that I can point to, to say, Yeah. I facilitated that.

[00:33:46] And I think that's where the real evolution sits.

[00:33:49] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** So Tony, if they're looking into starting their own garden, as we say. What's one piece of advice would you have?

[00:33:59] **Tony Stewart:** I would absolutely say know what you want to do with your garden. If you don't know what you want to do with it, then how the hell are you going to convince the leaders to support and resource it? How are you gonna convince your advocates to join the cause? How are you gonna get people to go out of their way to visit your garden and spend time there?

[00:34:19] So be really clear about your garden's purpose and go from there and to be clear on your garden's purpose. You'll have a strategy. I really hope that your business has a strategy, that it's working towards, and if it does, fantastic because you've already got most of the roots and the purpose for your garden.

[00:34:37] If it's retention, if it's growth, if it's innovation, if it's cost cutting, if it's customer service, there's a long list of things that a business is trying to do right now. Understand what your business is trying to do and what your garden can do to support it.

[00:34:51] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Thank you for that, tony. Thank you for sharing with us your expertise. We've come to the end of this podcast episode. So where can people find you if they'd like to learn more about your work?

[00:35:01] **Tony Stewart:** Thank you, Chared. I'm all over LinkedIn these days, so if you are liking what you are hearing, then I actually share thought leadership videos on these topics every few weeks. I also upload these videos to YouTube. If you look for Tony Stewart Digital, that's usually my handle online. And I also facilitate a lot of training, support and digital workshops. So if you are looking to understand what the purpose is for your garden. Or looking to train up people in your team to help nurture and grow that garden. Then do give me a shout.

[00:35:32] **Chared Verschuur (she/her):** Thank you, Tony. So that's Tony Stewart for you internal communication and community management expert. And if today's conversation resonated with you, I'd love to hear your thoughts, connect with me on LinkedIn, or subscribe to the podcast for more conversations that shape the future of communication.

[00:35:54] Until next time, this is Chared Verschuur, podcasting for IABC Emena.