On owning and telling your story with Lucy Eckley

Chared Verschuur (she/her): [00:00:00] 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 Region and Communication Consultant, working in the intersection of inclusive leadership, employee experience, and social and behavior change communication. In this episode, I'm joined by Lucy Eckley, internal and change communication consultant, narrative and storytelling expert, and the founder of The Leading Story. I met Lucy in the heat of the pandemic when her business turned 10 years old, and she was one of those who inspired me to take the leap from in-house to consulting. Lucy helps professionals and [00:01:00] business leaders craft their personal brand stories with confidence and clarity. With her we'll explore what it means to own your story, how to embrace the unique experiences that make us who we are and how to tell it. Lucy, welcome to the podcast.

Lucy Eckley: Thank you, Chared. I'm excited to be here.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): I'm also excited to have you here. Can you tell us a bit about your background and what drew you to this space?

Lucy Eckley: Yeah, sure. So I started off in the traditional marketing communication space in financial services in the UK where I'm based. And then I ended up taking this step into internal comms, into a role that wasn't even advertised as internal communication. At the time I had an in-house career then in internal comms and various different roles.

And then 10 years previously to when we met back in 2010, I decided to go independent to have some more variety in [00:02:00] my work. And that, yeah, was 15 years ago, which is pretty hard to understand now. So nowadays I run a consulting company called The Leading Story. There I help leaders to use narrative and story inside their organizations to build visibility and to drive change. And as you said, I also help leaders and professionals to build their personal brand stories. Whether that's to support them advancing in their career or to support them in terms of standing out and being hired by their ideal clients as consultants.

So it's me today. But if we go back a little bit, 'cause we're talking about story today and we're talking maybe about a few twists and turns. If I look back at school I was a linguist. I loved languages, I was fascinated by people. Originally, I wanted to be a journalist, actually I wanted to be a TV news reader. Then I discovered business. I ended up in communication. And so now I think what I do now, working in [00:03:00] change communications and storytelling, actually it totally makes sense. So that's a little bit about my story.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): So what is it about stories that you like or storytelling?

Lucy Eckley: Yeah, and what drew me to that so is the journey that I was on and my own story, if you like, 'cause I started setting up that independent business. I realized that I was constantly inspired by the stories of other people. They were often other women who were carving out their own paths in business and life, often away from the corporate world.

And I remember going to a literary festival near Oxford where I'm based here and hearing a woman successful business woman here, just in conversation, a fireside chat, telling her story, and it was after that was driving home with my friend and I said to her, do you know, I think I've cracked what it is that I do. I'm a business storyteller.

Now, that doesn't sound very remarkable now, but this is about [00:04:00] 10 years ago. It sounds a bit naive. I didn't really know that's what I was all about. But going back 10 years, people weren't really talking about story in the same way that, that we are all constantly talking about it now.

As my business planning progressed and I started networking, and I started meeting so many talented professionals who were amazing at what they did, but they just needed help to articulate that immense value that they could bring to their work. And it's funny because when I realized that, that's where I really wanted to help people in my elevator pitch, I explained this is what I did, but I actively said I helped those without a marketing and communications background.

But what surprised me over the years I've been involved in this work, that at least half of the people that I've worked with in this space are communication professionals. And I'm sure we'll dive into a little bit around why that is, but it seems that we know what to do as [00:05:00] comms professionals to build a story.

We're spending our lives building and sharing those stories about other people and other organizations. But, we don't always do it for ourselves. Yet, building that compelling story can really help you stand out and advance your career.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): And we often hear that stories connect us. Why do you think storytelling is such a powerful tool for communication, especially in leadership and business?

Lucy Eckley: Yeah, great question. Storytelling has been around a long time. Way before the modern enterprises of today, and it's just, it is innate in all of us. We tell stories every day, don't we? We tell stories and we get to our workplace about the drama that we had getting there or something that we saw on the way.

We tell stories when we get home to our families or to our friends that we meet after work about what's happened to us. So it's just, it's a way that we naturally connect as human beings. When we bring it into the workplace, [00:06:00] stories connect with hearts and emotions.

And so much that we have to digest in business, and so much that's presented to us, is about logic and data, and it's all about that rational brain. But some of the science behind it shows that actually as human beings, we first of all make subconscious emotional decisions in the other part of our brain and only afterwards do the facts and the data appeal to us.

And what's so great about stories is that they connect with both sides of the brain. Also, they're more memorable, aren't they? So it's shown that people are more likely to remember facts. If they're contained in a story, they're more shareable, they're more relatable. It's much easier to recognize ourselves in a story than a factual presentation. They're more inspiring.

One of my favorite story experts is a guy called Paul Smith. And I love a quote from one of his books, which frankly could be for many [00:07:00] of us, but he just says, "OMG, you'll never believe the PowerPoint deck I just flipped through". Nobody ever says that, do they? But they might say, "OMG, the amazing story I heard today".

And the final point in business and leadership is coming back to that human connection. And stories really show a face behind a brand. They show the personal side of a leader and they just show real life things happening that we can relate to.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): That's true. It makes the logical more memorable. Instead of sharing some bullet points, when you make a story out of it, then it appeals to your brain. But many people still struggle to see their own stories as valuable. So why do you think that is? And how can we start to recognize the power of our own experiences?

Lucy Eckley: Yeah, almost everybody I speak to whether they're people I've worked with or otherwise say, when they talk about this type of work, oh, my story is not that interesting. Why would [00:08:00] anybody be interested in, you know what I've got to say?

Generally it's because as people, we tend to be quite self-deprecating, quite humble, most of us anyway. When I probably tend to go round too much talking about our achievements and what's got us to where we are today.

The other thing that is a factor is that we've lived out that story gradually day to day over many years, and unless in a conversation like this actually makes you stop and think about it, we don't actually stop and reflect very much on our journeys.

We might stop and reflect perhaps if you were applying for a new role, you might stop and you might, update your cv, your resume, even your LinkedIn profile, but actually those only give you the tip of the iceberg as you know of your story and who you are as an [00:09:00] individual.

So unless you've had something really life changing happen to you, most of us don't ever really give it any thought. So why would we think that what we've done is remarkable? One of the things that make us unique are our natural strengths, and they're some of the things that sometimes come to us so easily that we barely notice the effort. So they might be remarkable to somebody else, but not to us.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): And when it comes to personal branding, many people feel stuck because their story doesn't follow a traditional path. So how do you help people embrace the twists and turns in their journey?

Lucy Eckley: This is what makes stories interesting. Very few people have linear paths. If you do have a linear path that's great and you can still tell a compelling story about it if you are always destined to do the thing that you set out to do. But most of us are not like that. And our twists and turns make the story more interesting.

And if we think about some of the traditional storytelling models which is not actually how I encourage people to [00:10:00] create their brand story. But if you think about some of those kind of Hollywood models of storytelling, there's a hero at the center of the story that has to overcome a challenge and that career change or unexpected life event could be exactly that sort of challenge. So I always encourage people to embrace those twists and turns. When I work with people, I sometimes people are surprised at how far back I get people to think in terms of first jobs. And even before that to go really deep with life experience before you try and go narrow and distill it into that compelling story.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): So you're referring to the hero's journey, and what are some of the biggest challenges you see when people try to articulate their own stories?

Lucy Eckley: Some of it's confidence and a lot of people, don't know where to start with this and perhaps don't have the confidence and light feel like the spotlight is being put on them if they're creating their own story particularly [00:11:00] for us as communication professionals 'cause we're not used to having the spotlight on us. Are we? We're used to having the spotlight on somebody else.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): So, we're used to giving the spotlight, putting the spotlight on someone else. Does this mean that there are a lot of communication professionals who are introverts?

Lucy Eckley: Yes. And this is something that has really surprised me. Maybe one of the reasons it's surprised me is because I am, I'm not. I know I'm a very extroverted personality. Doesn't mean I'm particularly loud, but I know that I'm extroverted in terms of the way that I get my energy and my ideas.

And so I've made a bit of an assumption. I feel like I've worked around the load of those communications professionals over my lifetime. But I've recently come to discover that a lot of people working in comms actually find themselves identifying with being more of an introverted preference, personality wise.

So I think confidence is one thing. The other thing is, what I would call seeing the wood for the trees, which [00:12:00] means basically knowing what's relevant. Because coming back to us having lived our whole life stories we know every single thing in and out about ourselves. So it can be tempting to put your whole life story into a brand story and that can be quite overwhelming.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): So you're referring to our identities and lived experiences, right? So such as culture, background, career shifts. Do they shape the way we tell our stories?

Lucy Eckley: Yeah. Yeah, I think so. I think That's a really great question. Things like culture and background have huge impact on stories. 'cause our stories come from our lived experience and how we see the world. Our culture, our background influence, what goes in our story, the examples that we are gonna use, what's remarkable to us versus what might be an everyday occurrence to somebody else.

Something that's also really important when we come to tell our story is thinking about who we're telling it to. Who would we want it to have an impact on? Because [00:13:00] if their lived experience is different than ours, then we probably have to think about how we actually tailor and explain that story to make sure that it actually resonates with them in the same way.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): Yeah, that's a good one because they also say that when you tell your story, like on LinkedIn, you have to fit it with your target audience, but then you're also not telling the whole story. What do you think of that?

Lucy Eckley: If you only focus on your target audience, you're not telling your entire story. There's a lot of truth in that actually. Because you're not telling your entire story. It doesn't mean that you are leaving out any authenticity or you are leaving out what's unique about yourself.

When you are telling your story for a purpose it comes back to that. What if someone doesn't think their story's interesting enough is actually taking it away from you and thinking about your audience and who you're creating it for

Chared Verschuur (she/her): What advice would you have for someone who feels [00:14:00] like their story isn't interesting enough or doesn't fit into a clear narrative?

Lucy Eckley: I would say stop focusing on yourself and feeling the pressure of needing to be interesting and thinking about what you actually want to achieve with it. So this is where putting some of our comm strategy skills can be so valuable. And, knowing that people are curious.

They're quite nosy. They want to know about you, but make it relevant. You are really creating it for your audience. So think about what does somebody want to know about you? So if they're gonna hire you for a consulting project, or if they're gonna hire you for your next role, what's gonna be relevant?

What's gonna make you memorable, make somebody connect with you.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): It's not always only about the skills, but also about being memorable. Is that what you're saying?

Lucy Eckley: Yeah. Yeah. It's about human connection. And actually, here's an interesting one. So on LinkedIn we tend to think about LinkedIn as being your cv and a lot of us, the easiest thing to [00:15:00] do when you first set up LinkedIn is you almost translate your CV across to LinkedIn.

What about telling stories on LinkedIn? So what about even under your experience, thinking about actually telling many stories, telling where you can confidentially many case studies in the form of a story to really show your experience in terms of what you've actually done.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): That's a good tip, and as someone who works in inclusive leadership and communication, I'm always thinking about who gets to tell their stories and whose stories get heard. How do you see storytelling as a tool for inclusion and creating a sense of belonging?

Lucy Eckley: Yeah. I'm so pleased you asked this, obviously love to get your take on it, but storytelling is a fabulous tool for inclusion and belonging. People can't be it if they can't see it. It's great for people to see people like them in stories, and stories are a great tool if they are used well to really inspire and [00:16:00] encourage people and help them feel that they're not alone and be seen and included.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): Yeah, and it also connects and it gives you another point of view from your own lived experience. I think that's why it creates a sense of belonging.

Lucy Eckley: That's a really good point. Yeah. Not, and not only does it connect people who have things in common with one another and help to perhaps build that community as well. But it opens other people's viewpoints, doesn't it? To perhaps something they have no lived experience of and help put them in someone else's shoes, so great educationally as well.

The more stories that we can tell at the moment, and I know it takes courage if we come back to the confidence thing, it takes courage sometimes to share your story, and maybe this is where allies have a role to play as well. We don't have to be telling our own stories, and in a corporate environment, there's a great opportunity to use allyship to tell other people's stories as well.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): And most of these allies can be the organizational leaders. [00:17:00] So how can they be, how can they create space for diverse voices and experiences in storytelling?

Lucy Eckley: You make the really good point that the leaders can often be those allies. Really good place to start. This is not going to your obvious people for those stories. Again, it's what's easy versus what actually can with a bit more effort can have more impact.

So it can be really easy to go to those obvious people around you when you're looking for case studies for something in your organization, for example. I'd say actively go looking wider for the people who you want to feature in these stories. Yes, it takes a bit more effort, but again, love to get your input on this, but there were people that can help you if you reach out to your networks and your organization if you work or reach out to your employee resource groups for example, and just, ask yourself if the stories you're sharing internally are truly representative of everyone in your [00:18:00] organization.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): That's a good one because just yesterday I was in a communication conference and only one of the 10 plenary speakers was a woman. So I said, "Where are the women speakers?” And then they said, “oh, we tried our best, but we couldn't find them”. Really.

Lucy Eckley: This old one, this. Why have we not cracked this? But interestingly, there are many women in the communications field. There are fewer leaders though, when you get to very senior level, even within communications that I think there are fewer women.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): But what are some ways we can challenge dominant narratives? Because like in the example that I gave you, if there are only male speakers, then we're only hearing their perspective actually. So what are some ways we can ensure that a wider range of stories are being told?

Lucy Eckley: Be bold. Be prepared to be different really. Be open-minded. I'm sure if we think about [00:19:00] that conference, it's about effort sometimes, isn't it? And thinking differently, quite possibly somebody who's putting together a conference has their go-to list of people.

And it's probably been the same once for years. It's shaking things up and it's, you have to make an effort and you have to realize that you need to build in more diversity and how much more of a rich and more interesting experience it's gonna be if you actually do that and seek out representation and stories that reflect people from all walks of life, reflect your entire industry. You just made a really good point there. If the people speaking at that event yesterday were all male, they were telling stories, from their perspective. I'm sure there were a huge proportion of people in the room who were women, so you know that's such a missed opportunity.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): And if someone wants to start owning and sharing their own story today, what's one simple step they can take?

Lucy Eckley: The most important first step that someone can take is [00:20:00] to actually make that commitment to actively own their stories. So marketing expert Seth Godin basically says that, as individuals we have a brand story, whether we like it or not, whether we have actively decided to have one or not, we have one.

It's what we're remembered for. So he says something like if you are in a room, in a conversation, you don't really contribute a lot, you are remembered for that. Whereas, if you actively have something that you want to be remembered for than the natural brand story.

We owe it to ourselves as individuals, as communication professionals that want to, to carve out a unique career for ourselves to actually own our story. Because if we don't, then it just bumbles along or somebody else owns it for us.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): And is there a structured approach to helping people craft their personal brand stories?

Lucy Eckley: So I have one that I use that is really simple. This one works if you're working in-house. It works if you are at [00:21:00] really any stage of your career or a whole host of situations. So it has five steps to it and the first one I call who you are. So this is your professional backstory, and it's really about how you've ended up where you are now.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): Who are you? Okay. That's the first step.

Lucy Eckley: Yes. And that, this whole, the whole thing really is founded on uniqueness. The second step is what do you do now? So this is describing your current role. So what do you do in your current role in-house, in your business? What do you actually do right now?

And then this is the one that I really love because this is all about the passion piece. So why do you actually do what you do now and what do you love about it? There's something really quite energizing about somebody that's really passionate about what they do. And most of us at work in communication [00:22:00] have some things we don't always love, but we have things that we are really passionate about, in what we do.

Step four is really important and that is asking yourself, what do you want to be known for? It could be, you want to be known for, I don't know, crisis management. You want to be known for change communications. You want to be known for a luxury brand, pr, it's what you really want to be the thought leader in and really recognized for. And then as part of that, asking, what unique value do you bring.

So what's really important with that is you may have two people that have their careers have been very parallel, similar experience, but everybody brings something unique to a role. This is where it's really good to have conversations with other people. And we don't always see the uniqueness that we ourselves bring to something. So talking to people that know you really well, people that you've worked with [00:23:00] for a long time can be really good for this.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): So who are you? What's your current role? What's the third one?

Lucy Eckley: The third one is, why do you do it? What do you love about it?

Chared Verschuur (she/her): Why do you do it, what you love about it and what do you bring to the table that's unique? Is that correct?

Lucy Eckley: That's right. And then the fifth one is what do you want to do next? This is important at whatever stage you are at in your career because this can be what you want to do next in your role? This doesn't have to be that you're looking for something else. It can be what do you want to do next in your current job? Because when you have this story, you can use it in so many different situations.

So you can use your story with your line manager in your current role, if you've got a really clear way of articulating what you want to do next, it might not be that you're looking for promotion. It might be something that you want to take on within the team, a project that you want to take on. So it's fascinating. Once you've started to craft this and grasp it, how many [00:24:00] different situations you can really use it to help you.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): I also read somewhere when you're crafting your LinkedIn introduction or headline that you should not look at what you're currently doing, but what you want to do in the future. Does that work?

Lucy Eckley: I think so because there's those last two things of what you want to be known for and then where you want to go in the future. That absolutely makes sense for me because everybody has something that they want to do next. Even if somebody's very late in their career and they're perhaps thinking of finishing full-time employment, there may well be things that they want to go on to do from a voluntary perspective, from a non-exec director perspective, there's, there's often a next step.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): And that balances authenticity with strategy, right? Because see who you are and then where are you going next? Especially for leaders who want to be open, but also professional.

Lucy Eckley: So it's interesting isn't it, about balancing [00:25:00] authenticity and strategy. They feel like trade offs, but they shouldn't be because if you've got a strategy for where you want to go or you are implementing the strategy of your organization, actually, you should be believing in that and hence being able to be authentic about it.

People may be a little hesitant to perhaps have those big, bold ambitions. But if you don't share those to some extent, then you don't know what opportunities you might miss out on that could come your way.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): And where do you see the future of storytelling heading, particularly in the context of leadership, personal branding.

Lucy Eckley: I think we're only just getting started with storytelling at work. I'm really interested to see where AI takes us. It will probably help people polish their stories and hone their storytelling skills, almost do some of that objective view on it.

[00:26:00] Gen Z or Gen Z in the workplace is fascinating. We know gen Z are really interested in purpose, they're really interested in impact on society. That will be really important in terms of using story to bring some of those to life. For those people in the workplace who, wanting to, get those people into your organization.

Leadership I'm really excited about the potential to really advance storytelling for leadership. I'd love to see a shift, away from the death by PowerPoint to more stories. We're seeing it with sort of magazine style, TV style town halls. More of that would be good and will happen. And I'd like to see leaders using stories to embrace vulnerability a little bit more. So we know that, psychological safety, vulnerability, strides are being made in that space. There's a future for leaders to really use stories to embrace that.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): Do you have anything else to share with us, Lucy, that was a very interesting framework [00:27:00] that you shared with us. Do you have anything else?

Lucy Eckley: I'd love to just talk about the personal branding aspect, actually. 'cause you said also future for personal branding. From a personal brand perspective for us as comms professionals, it's probably more important than ever at the moment to be able to stand out and not compete. Be very, very clear on what your strengths and what your uniqueness is and be able to articulate that. In a lot of markets around the world, things are quite difficult from an opportunities perspective in terms of new roles, new consulting projects because of economic uncertainty and, just a lot of people looking for their next step.

And so it's never been more important, but it's also potentially quite a noisy marketplace out there as well. So the more you can get clear on this, the more it's gonna help you. And maybe a parting thought on that I, when I've helped some of my clients with recruiting, I've been always amazed how when you ask [00:28:00] that first question of, can you tell me a little bit about your career? How even quite senior people find it difficult to articulate that. Succinctly. There's a huge opportunity for using your story to be able to do that.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): I agree with that because as freelancers, we apply for many roles more often than regular job seekers, then you always have to put yourself out there and they always ask you, can you tell us about yourself? I find that an easy question, but also a difficult question because in which context do I have to answer that question? So how do you do it?

Lucy Eckley: It has to be in the context of the person that you are going to be telling it to. So if it's in a, an interview situation or if it's in a, a business development conversation from a freelance perspective it's back to that thinking about your audience and thinking about what's relevant and it's thinking about ourselves quite clinically and the way that, we would from a kind of, a comms campaign, [00:29:00] comms strategy perspective.

So it's almost like you need to step out of your brain and your body and see yourself and wherever you can find out as much about that person in advance, that's where LinkedIn is great as well. And that's where it will be helpful if people are, sharing a bit more authentically and bringing a bit more personality to LinkedIn. 'cause you can, you can try and start to gauge something about that person.

This is where you have to be careful about the authentic versus strategy piece, don't you? Because you get a feel for chemistry from somebody, from having a conversation. And you can probably slightly adapt, not perhaps what you say in that story, but a little bit of how you deliver it and how you actually make your connection with that person. So if they seem a little, lighthearted or whether you can perhaps bring in a little bit of appropriate humor. Whereas if they're very formal, then you know, it's a little bit more structured and yeah, less energized, perhaps. Interesting topic.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): where can people find you if they'd like to learn more [00:30:00] about your work and they'd like to connect with you?

Lucy Eckley: Yeah, I'd love to connect with people and talk about this topic. I'm just fascinated by it generally, whether it's about building your own story or how we use story in organizations. So I meet on LinkedIn: Lucy Eckley. My last name is E-C-K-L-E-Y. Feel free to send me a direct message there and I'm really happy to send you some resources. Let me know if you're either a consultant or working in-house and I can send you some slightly different resources to help you get started with your story. Otherwise, you can check out my narrative and storytelling approach in changecomms@theleadingstory.com.

And also a podcast. So I do have a couple of mini series podcasts also called The Leading Story.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): I followed every episode.

Lucy Eckley: There are only two miniseries and they're both quite old now, but they all still hold good. Really. One is around building your brand story as an independent consultant, and the other one is really how we use narrative and [00:31:00] storytelling to drive change. Do come and check those out if those would be helpful to you.

Chared Verschuur (she/her): And we will add that to the show notes so that our listeners can find them easily. So thank you, Lucy. This has been an insightful conversation. Thank you for sharing your wisdom on storytelling and personal branding.

To our listeners, your story matters. 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. Until next time, this is Chared Verschuur podcasting for IABC EMENA.#