David Pembroke: *Well hello, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome once again to In Transition, the podcast that examines the practice of content communication in government and the public sector. This is part 2 of an extended interview that I've conducted with Sean Larkins, who was the director of Consulting and Capability with WPP's government and public sector practice. Sean formally worked with the UK government and has all sorts of experience with government around the world. Indeed, he leads WPP's Executive Education faculty at the Lee Kuan Yew school of public policy at the National University of Singapore and he's also a board member of Kanti Public and the author of the leader's report, which is this research programme that we are talking about at the moment.*

But certainly really interesting, I think, part 1. If you haven't listened to part 1, go back to last week's episode and listen to that and then you can come back to part 2 because it probably doesn't make much sense if you haven't listened to part 1. Really interesting stuff, this leader's report is really giving us this snapshot that we need to know to understand, is the ... the position where we're starting from, understanding those challenges, understanding the opportunities. But also looking at the attributes of high performing government and public sector organisation. So there is a wealth of information and knowledge in this report so I'd encourage you to go and Google that and understand that. Go back to episode 1, if in fact you haven't done so already. But this is part 2, so thanks again for joining me this week and here is part 2 of my interview with Sean Larkins.

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I think you actually left a bit of a bread crumb earlier. I think this is a real opportunity is around where communication fits into project and programme management, particularly in big government organisation and looking at methodology such as MSP, managing successful programmes, because within that it mandates that communication, strategic communication, needs to be completed in terms of understanding audiences and other things, and I think that's a big opportunity. Would you agree with me that that is potentially a very big opportunity?

Sean Larkins: I would absolutely agree and what we have seen in a number of countries around the world is that because the amount of money that we have to run on public service or on public projects or on governments is reducing. We're still in the hangover from the global financial crisis, most of us are still living in countries where the term austerities is used in the media and by politicians on a daily basis. Because of that financial pressure we are seeing more and more public organisations working towards a more fluid approach of work, and breaking down those side windows and working on a task based process.

Stripping away existing standing teams and looking at how we work more around programme and project management. And I think, as you've said, that gives us a great opportunity as government communicators to be in at the ground floor of project and project and policy development process, so I think the changes that are happening within government because of the restrictions on budgets, the need to work more fluidly, the need to work on a more project basis is actually very helpful for us. I'm very optimistic about the fact that that change will help communicators be far more visible and influential in policy development.

David Pembroke: Yeah, I think that's a great tip for people who are listening. If you know where your programme management or project area is within your agency or department, go and have a conversation with them because within their models it sits there. It says strategic communication and one of the things is ... and they don't do it particularly well. It's a ... in my experience of it anyways, that its just cursory, tick box, so I think that's where government communicators can really insert themselves and really play that influential role. So that's fantastic.

Sean Larkins: In many organisations that have adopted this approach, it's been really important that government communicators have kind of inveigled there way into those tea. Because all too often, the thing about communication is interpreted as okay, so we need to do a press release at some point.

David Pembroke: Yeah. Precisely.

Sean Larkins: Sometimes, with the best will in the world and being as polite as we possibly can, we just need to force our way in.

David Pembroke: Very good. Now, okay so let's move on. We've still got some problems to get across here. And you sort of alluded to this one before, and this one is around capability. You were saying, you know, traditionally, it's the medium management capability, the advertising capability but we're moving to a different way ... a different way of operating. The gift of technology now means that we can create and curate content. We can go direct to our audiences but they're different skill sets aren't they? So what did ... what did the research tell us about the capability of government communicators to operate in this fragmented world?

Sean Larkins: Well only half the respondents to the research said that they have the right tools and resources to do their job. And over forty percent ... I think it was forty-three percent of people that took part in the research, said that they have been in-post for more than ten years. But in that time, few have been able to build up modern communication skills. So, forty-three percent have been in their post for more than ten years, but they acknowledge in that time they have not been able to build up modern communication skills.

Now if you look at Facebook and you look at Twitter and you look at Snapchat and you look at Pinterest, were they around ten years ago? Some of them weren't ... yeah, some of them were only in their infancy. So the jobs that we do have, have changed fundamentally in the last decade. The people are not getting the training and the skills to do their job. And one of the things we were able to do in this research is to identify high performing communicating functions and low performing communicating functions and we were able depending on the research, to put a figure or percentage that demonstrated the degree to which certain issues related to those. I'll explain that a bit more clearly now.

So we found that maintaining sufficient investment in talent, skills and professional development was a core indicator of success. And for those organisations we were able to judge as high performing, seventy percent said they sustained investment in talent and skills. As oppose to only twenty percent in the lowest performing communication functions. So for me this is absolutely clear cut. The world that we operate in, communicate in, has changed fundamentally over the last decade; our skills have not. We still have brilliant people with medium management skills, of course, that's necessary. But where are the people that really have fundamental digital skills that can create and curate that content that you've talked about. That understand how to commission research in the modern age and interrupt it and develop those insides. We are lagging behind in that.

David Pembroke: So what is the best way that you've seen, in terms of those high performing organisations? How do they deliver that education and training?

Sean Larkins: Well firstly, I think it's about having ... it's about having a competency framework. Let's sit back, let's define what we need government communications to do. And if we need government communications to do certain tasks, what are the competencies that we need from people to do those roles? So let's be very clear about the fact that this is not about a hobby horse. Government communication should be regarded as a profession and operate as such. That means we need people with government communication skills. We found in the research, that somewhere like forty percent of people, that work in government communication, have no communication background at all. Now they may have absolute ability, but we need to train and make sure they have the skills to communicate in the modern age. So having that competency framework I think is very key.

We've seen many organisations that have set up basically their own internal training academy so that they have a continual programme of training and development. Bearing in mind in the modern age, that training is not just about going on a classroom ... going to a classroom and listening to the kind of chalk-and-talk that perhaps we did twenty years ago. Where are you investing in mentoring? Where are you investing in experimental new product ... projects? We found a real sense of frustration among respondents that the organisations

they work at are risk-adverse. They don't like trying new things out, so we found having that competency framework absolutely key. Having sustained investment and looking at how to fund that so the United Kingdom, for example, the U.K. government has a very, very good way of funding training and development for government communicators.

Every time a government agency or department or ministry has to use a private-sector organisation to deliver public communications, whether that's media buying, or that's content design, the people that run the communication training function get one percent of that budget. Now I've never seen a communication project that can't be run a ninety-nine percent of its' budget. But if you take all of those one percents together and add them up, that sustained year on year investment in development skills and developing expertise in trialling out, innovating, trying new things. So I think the U.K. example is a really great example. We see that in some other countries, but by large, that doesn't exist. People are crying out for training and development.

David Pembroke: Yeah, and so by large it doesn't exist, we know as you say. That in the U.K. it does but of all of the countries that you looked at, how many others are really gripping it up?

Sean Larkins: Well I think that there are a number of countries that do really well. I mean, there are challenges across all countries. I think the Dutch do some really good stuff, their Ministry of General Affairs takes responsibility for communications. They have a team that's focused on developing skills and government communicators. I think the Dutch do it well, I think the Canadian's do it well. The Canadian's have a government communication's community that is about sharing best practice. I think the Singaporeans do it well. So there are a number of countries that do it well and I would be encouraging your listeners to go and look at them and see what you can learn and see what tools and techniques you can steal and take back to your own country.

David Pembroke: And this notion of a profession as well and there's quite a worrying statistic that so many people working in communications don't have the appropriate qualifications, as you point out. They may have the ability but certainly not the actual direct skills. How far are we from communications being recognised generally as a profession with it's own competencies and behaviours and structures and other things, where it is valued and where it is seen as an important lever of government?

Sean Larkins: I think in many parts of the world, we're still a long way from that. And I think that's probably one of the saddest and most frustrating things. I think it's intrinsically linked to that last challenge which is around influence. The government communications isn't being seen as influential enough within government. And when we started this conversation, we talked about the fact that legislation, regulation, taxation, communication are the four leaders of government. And so I think we need to work really hard at improving our

influence within ... with organisations and making people really, really aware of the fact that we are a profession.

We need to be treated as a profession. We should be challenging ourselves to develop new skills each year, every year. We should be setting a base line for the skills and abilities we expect from the people who come into our profession. And as I mentioned, the research showed that there is a large minority of people working in government communications that don't have a background in government communications. Now if they had access to ongoing learning ... learning and development, that wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing. Of course we want to bring in people who have an interest and an aptitude in government communications.

But if you are relying on generalist that don't have a special background in government communications, or in communications at all, and then they are struggling to get access to training and developing. With the best will in the world, we're working with many, many colleagues who in fact, amateurs. They maybe well meaning but if they don't have the skills, we need to develop those skills. And increasingly, I would like us to set a bench mark or a base line for the people that we bring in to the profession or we recruit into the profession. I have no idea why this is the case, but in a number of countries that we looked at, we found a large number of people who don't have communication skills but are working in communication departments; have come in from HR. Now I have no idea why that is, I suppose that in some organisations they kind of that "Well HR, you're about dealing with people and you talk to people. Great, that will make you a good government communicator".

Sometimes that's the case, in many instances that's not the case. So we need to be very, very clear. We need to be seen as a disciplined profession. We need to set boundaries for our profession. We need to identify the capabilities and skills that we expect of everybody within our profession. And we need to kick back, when we are seeing other parts of government trying to foist generalists into government communications. In certain European countries, for example, you can go through four years of the elite schools of public administration and no one talked once to you about the role of communication. That's a short-coming.

David Pembroke: Yeah. Well, you're doing a great job in certainly explaining the importance. And before I let you go, I do want to, sort of finish on this notion of high performance. And because the research also did identify those key attributes of high performing government communication areas, if we could just quickly run through those so people can understand and really check against themselves, across these things whether or not they are addressing these particular issues and if they're not, they can probably note them down and think about how they might go away and strengthen the function within their organisation. So if you might ... if we run through those ... the key attributes, what's the first and most, sort of compelling attribute that high performing government communication areas have to have?

Sean Larkins: Okay. So we identified ten, that's a lot to take in over the radio. So if anybody wants to look at the full report, they can just Google the leaders report and it's all online. And in some respects I have the easiest role of all which is just to, kind of identify what good teams are doing. You know, the challenge there is to ... is for your leaders to implement that or to look at whether that reflects their own circumstances. But the ten things that we identified as key attributes for high performing government communications functions.

The first was unsurprisingly, having a clearly defined role for government communication. What do you want to achieve? In many parts of Europe, we see communication being used as a form of demand management because we are still in the age of austerity, had we encouraged those people that can fend for themselves to do so. In other parts of the world, it's being used to increase confidence in trusting government. In other areas, it's about increasing access to government services. So the first key indicator is, "Do you have a clearly defined role for government communication?".

The second is, "Do you understand the wide socio, economic, and cultural environment that your citizens are living and working and behaving in?". And again, we talked about the challenges of getting sufficient insight on citizens behaviours. But the second attribute of high performing government communications was an ability to understand their communities.

The third is about working within a collaborative team environment. How do we break down those silos? How do we ensure that we're working together? How do ensure that we are working as an integrated team rather than separate feifdoms of media, marketing, public relations?

The fourth, as we mentioned at length is about sustained investment in talent, skills and professional development.

The fifth is around maintaining consistency of messages across government and across channels. And this is possibly one of the most hardest things to get right. How do we sit down with our political leaders and get them to verbalise what they want their legacy to be? Not their key policies but their legacy. And if we understand what our political leaders want to achieve and be known for, then we can start at how we can support those messages and those themes right the way across government.

The sixth one was around understanding and being able to prioritise government communication. And I think as I mentioned before, we looked at one government that very proudly had 247 government communication priorities. Now, with the best will in the world, that's just a list. It's not a list of priorities. So how do we ... and I think those two points are linked. Maintaining consistency is about understanding what the government wants to be known to be achieving. That helps us to prioritise communication.

The seventh is about how do we maintain sufficient access to senior stakeholders. How do we force our way into those policy conversations if we're not invited around the table?

The eighth is around the responsibility of government communication functions to drive the focus on the citizen, not just throughout communications but throughout the entire organisation. How confident are we that we act as the conscious of the citizen throughout our entire organisation?

And the final two, is the ability to access a wide range of data sources that help us inform our decisions, that help us tailor our messages, that help us segment our audiences. And then the final attribute of high performing government communication functions that the research identified, is the willingness to just bypass bureaucracy, embrace technology and trial and innovate and not be afraid to fail.

David Pembroke: Okay. Well that's as you say, a very comprehensive list and I think that's a lot that people can take away I think though, and really work through that and see whether or not their taking on those challenges and how effective they are in influencing their organisations to take on a number of those attributes. Sean, just a final question. Are you ... at the end of this vast exercise, and it really has been a monumental piece of research conducted, as you say all over the world, are you optimistic about government communication? How did you ... a part from being very tired, how did you feel at the end of it? Did you feel upbeat? Or a bit downcast? What's the mood? What's your mood?

Sean Larkins: Certainly not downcast. I mean, I think in any conversation like this, of course we focus on the challenges. And we've just gone through the ten key attributes of high performing government communication functions. In most countries, you know, two-three-four-five, even six of those are being done very well. The challenge is getting it right across the entire board. You know, we saw many examples of brilliant, world-class, very inspirational best practice that we've place on ... I think we put ten examples on the website. So I'm not down-hearted at all because what we do is incredibly important and we are doing it in extremely challenging times. We see that disconnect between citizens and government. We see that fracturing of the medial landscape. We see that desire for more two-way communication amongst citizens. We see the fact that citizen expectations of public services are probably unrealistic. You know, they're going through the roof at a time when many governments are having to cut back.

So, we work in extremely difficult and challenging environments. And yet, at the same time, we see thousands and thousands of dedicated and motivated and frequently skilled people, sometimes the skills they have are perhaps too narrow for the challenges that they face. But these are people that want to change the world. These are people that want to have ... that want to make a difference in society. And some of the challenges that governments are facing, like the need to be smaller, the need to be leaner and more integrated. The

move towards programme and project management, absolutely plays ... I think, in our favour. So I'm incredibly optimistic.

And as I've said, there are challenges there, but there are no challenges there that I think are beyond our ability to grasp and to then use for the benefit of the countries that we seek to serve.

David Pembroke: Well certainly, on behalf on that community, could I thank you and WPP for your leadership really, in taking on this task of giving us a clear understand of what those challenges are, but also identifying that pathway where we can seek to improve in the work that we do because I think the thing that does drive and does motivate and does unifies exactly that. What you've identified just then is this notion of mission and purpose, and I think that's why people do what they do. They can go and work anywhere but they choose to work in government communication because it is ultimately about strengthening communities and improving the well-being of citizens. So, it's why they do what they do. As I say, thanks very much for really making the effort to take this on. It's a vast task, and it really has created some clarity and I think ... a real pathway that people can start to sift through and start to make some improvements in their day-to-day work. Because I think that's the point, isn't it?

It's really ... we're not gonna solve this in one ... you know, there's no magic wand. It really is about trying to find some of these guidance's that you provided in this report and start to apply those consistently, usefully, relevantly over time, that we'll start to make those changes. So, thanks a lot for doing that!

Sean Larkins: You can bet your bottom dollar that if you're struggling with an issue somewhere in a government around the world, there's a government communicator that has gone through it and has hopefully got a solution to that. And the challenge for all of us is to just, kind of open up our networks, look for best practice, look for those people that we can learn from. And to try not to let the tyranny of pace kind of stop this from moving forward in way that I think we all want to.

David Pembroke: Now, where ... I know you mentioned that during the podcast, but could you again just give us the website address where people can go and consume in more detail perhaps, the research.

Sean Larkins: So the easiest thing to do I think is just to go into any search engine and type in "The leaders report". But the full website address is WPP.com/govtpractice/leaders-report. It's a little bit chunky ... funky, but if you just go into a search engine and type in WPP leaders report, you'll get straight to the full research.

David Pembroke: Now, and people who may be listening to this thinking, "I actually want to have a conversation with this Sean Larkins guy, cause he knows what he's talking about.", how do they get in contact with you?

Sean Larkins:	Again, go onto the website, go and look at the research. Our contact details are all there.
David Pembroke:	Fantastic. Well, Sean Larkins, thank you once again for this interview today because as I say, it's been very, very valuable. And in the hundred plus episodes of In Transition, I think this double episode has really shone the light in some areas and I think it's inspiring and challenging at the same time but I think we take a lot of good news from this report. We understand the challenges a little bit more clearly but we go back and see what we can do to improve the lives of people around the world. So, Sean Larkins, thank you very much.
Sean Larkins:	Thank you.
David Pembroke:	And to you, the listener, thank you very much for joining us again for this very special interview on In Transition, and I really appreciate you sticking with us to the end. So we'll be back again with another show next week but for the moment, bye for now.