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## InTransition 131: Catherine Payne

Voiceover: Welcome to InTransition, a programme dedicated to the practice of content communication in the public sector. Here's your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentlemen and welcome to this week's edition of InTransition, the podcast that examines the practice of content communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke and I'm thrilled that you have decided to give us just a small part of your week this week as we continue to explore what is a most fascinating part of public administration. Before we get into our interview this week, I do want to just draw your attention to the fact that this week or actually next week we, as in contentgroup, are heading to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations PR Summit in Bali to present our research paper that we've been working on with the Australian National University around this process of content communication.

We've been selected from lots of submissions, and we will be presenting that to the governments of the Southeast Asian nations, and we are particularly thrilled about that. Stay tuned for more information because I will be taking my podcasting kit with me to Bali and as I'm sitting by the pool, I'm sure I'll be able to find lots of people to speak to about this issue of communicating effectively in government as we continue to be disrupted by the massive change that's taking place with technology.

Today we speak to someone who is right in the middle of it and indeed somebody who has experience in both the private and public sector and that's Catherine Payne who's the executive director of digital and customer communications at the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in the great Australian state of Victoria. Now Catherine, her career started in politics as an advisor, but then she worked with Telstra, which is the major telecommunications company here in Australia, in both internal and external communications. A short stint for Caltex Australia.

She was the head of corporate affairs at Sydney Water between 2013 and 2016, but now she is working in Victoria as the executive director as I said in that very important area of the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in the Victorian government. She joins me now. Catherine, thank you very much for joining me InTransition.

Catherine Payne: Thank you, David. It's a pleasure to be with you today.

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David Pembroke: Now that's a great career so far in comms. You had a lot to do working in politics, working in the private sector. As things are working for you at the moment, what are the sort of key things that you bring to your job each day that you draw down from that experience? What are those fundamental success building blocks that you need to have in place to be effective in this day and age?

Catherine Payne: Well, I think people are the key. I go to work with great people, with great capability and I'm a great champion of my staff. I see the value of a function like ours in supporting organisations. I'm a great passionate advocate for communications people with the skills and experiences whether it's through journalism or working in corporations or in government. I see the value of communications in an era where we've got more channels and more opportunities to communicate directly with both the public and with key audiences and stakeholders.

David Pembroke: Do you think the leadership in your organisation and the political leadership who I'm sure you deal with on a daily basis, do you think that they understand the true value that communications can bring to achieving the objectives of their organisations?

Catherine Payne: Look, that's a really great question because I think it's often taken for granted. At times, it's not brought in early enough into the decision-making and it's always at an end point where there's suddenly a panic to communicate what policy they're creating or what governments are wanting to do. I guess I see the opportunity with my experience and one of the things that appeal to me about this role was not actually to put back. In public service you see an opportunity around providing something for the public good and I see an opportunity in my role to bring my experience and use that service to apply that into creating something better.

Because there's a lot of debate about the value the governments in terms of how they're communicating in an age where you've got mobile technology, social media. People and audiences have more opportunity to just communicate directly. Citizens have really got unlimited access to information. What is our role? Our role has changed in the last 20 odd years. We have to do an even better job and show our value even more to government. I think governments around the world are seeing that when they're not communicating well, the impacts that has on their longevity and their ability to have impact.

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David Pembroke: Because I think you put the finger right on the problem around this notion of communications as a consideration early in the process. Indeed, WPP Regular listeners to this podcast will know that I refer to this research all the time done by WPP, the government and public sector people. They identify that as a particular problem that communications was still seen across the world really as the carwash, or the colouring in department on the way out. Just pretty it up for us because we just need to get it out the door. Besides leveraging your experience and your reputation, how can organisations go about perhaps a process to get invited to the table earlier than they are at the moment?

Rather than relying on just the strength of personality and experience, but how can they change the way that we tell the story of communications? As people say well, when these meetings start, when people start to analyse what those problems are, that they look around the table, and they say, "Where are the communications people? We need them right now."

Catherine Payne: Well, I think about this every day in my role and in all my roles. To me it's about our function has to move from reactive to proactive. In government, you are very reactive to the latest news story and governments react to what they hear, the polls, whatever it might be. Often we're very last minute. We ask to brief things very quickly. We can do multiple events. We do something like 400 events a year in this department alone supporting four ministers. We're very busy. That ability to try and find a way to get above the noise and have more forward planning, thinking about the bigger picture I look at the forward cabinet programme.

I look at the different areas of the department whether it's water, planning, environment, climate change, whatever, and look at what their forward plan looks like in terms of government announcing its initiatives legislation. Then look back at my team and go, "How are we going to work better?" One of my jobs in the last year ever since I've been here is to look at the capability of my team, the way we're engaging the community and what they want from us. What do the ministers want? Everybody wants us to be more strategic and more proactive. I go, "That's great, but what is that?" Again with my team I've basically had a complete review of my people. Because we don't use a lot of consultancies, we do a lot of our work in house.

Have I got the right skills and capability to support that vision of being more proactive and looking ahead? What are the communication topics where we can engage and educate and be more informative? There's other things that I know whether it's an issue you have to be reactive. I built a team that has a

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partnering model with a business that's about building trust, getting them in at the front end, sitting at the table, being in the discussions and the planning. I have an issues management crisis team that set up a specialist. I have a content newsroom that's about how do we produce content for our channels and get that out through the channels. We think holistically about everything is about content. I've got more journalism skills in that component of the team.

Then I have a media events team, which is the day to day keeping the ministers supported and happy. The policy area is making sure that we're dealing with the inquiries from the journalists, which is really important that we are responsive quickly, timely, giving them the information they need. We spend a lot of time working back into the business to get the answers. Then we have to put a level of trying to put some plain English and unpack sometimes technical information to make it more user-friendly for our audience. There's a lot there. Then I've also been quite fortunate in this department to have a customer centre.

Not many comms functions have that in their portfolio, but I see it as a huge opportunity to actually understand what customers are calling about and understand how we can share that back into the policy areas and then have that inform the way we communicate and the kinds of messages that we package up. Again the customer service centre and the digital capability, which is why I've called our team a digital customer communications team. We're experimenting with something quite different to just providing a basic communications service.

We're saying, "We can do more and we see we have an opportunity in this era of mobile technology and social media to provide better content earlier, educate audiences more than we have." We're three and a half months into the new operating model in our department.

David Pembroke: How's it going?

Catherine Payne: Well, I'm excited. It's a huge change. I have a lot of new staff because we did go through quite a transformation. Some people left us and new people are coming in. It's messy. I have to say the executive of the department have been mutually supportive of the vision that I sold in about providing a different type of government communication. I have been very well supported and given the trust of the executive to have a go and do something slightly different. I'm seeing some real energy and excitement. I spend a lot of my time as a tutor, supporting and coaching, mentoring and

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what I'm all about is team collaboration and then partnering with both the minister's offices and the business, the policy areas, to show that we can add even more value.

I'm watching our social presence. We've redone our websites. We have 17 websites. We have a big and how do we manage the volume and the content here is quite significant and not unique. There are some very big departments in Victoria. We're not one of the biggest, but we certainly are big.

David Pembroke: What is working well for you at the moment?

Catherine Payne: Well, I'm excited. I'm seeing much more team collaboration rather than siloed communications activity. That means we're leveraging whether it's multimedia skills. I brought some skills in today because we know that video is a very important part of our storytelling. Pictures and stories have to go together. I'm encouraging us to think about creative content and seeking English writing journalism. Bringing journalism back into the corporate communications function and thinking about how I leverage expertise. I'm seeing my team standing at whiteboards working together, not sitting at a computer and just writing messaging. Sharing. Talking to one another. At Sydney Water, my last role, we had a lot of success in moving from reactive to proactive.

When you start to move the team to think more ahead and to form a plan, you start to see their creativity and their ideas and their connection to ... They're all citizens. They go home every day. They listen to their families and friends. They get a sense of what people want to know about. Sometimes you come to work and you get caught up in the day and you actually don't bring all those best ideas and thinking to the table. I'm saying I want my team to think about how they communicate and the audiences we're communicating with and do a better job of that. I'm seeing some great example in Victoria. We had recently some metropolitan assemblies, which is a new initiative of the government.

We had someone out with a camera being and backing to our social channels live some of the commentary from the citizens working with the minister and some of the policy people to come up with how to make the city, some of the suburbs really be participating in the development of their suburbs as part of the livability agenda. It was great to see my people both being more active, getting out and supporting the business and communicating live and real time back into the channels. We're getting

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great response and participation through that activity. There's some really interesting new things going on that I think we can do even more of.

David Pembroke: Okay. What's not working or what has surprised you in this transition from the traditional model to the new model? Because what you've described is ultimately the capability that every government agency whether it's in Australia ... Every country in the world really needs to make these transition, hence the name of the podcast, InTransition. What are the things so far that are the really naughty problems that are going to take a while for you to manage that transition?

Catherine Payne: Well, change is hard. When you're asking people to operate slightly differently and it is a reactive culture and a reactive organisation dealing with today's needs, how do you help your team to find a space in that pressure to think forward plan. I've built a structure and a model that is trying to put that ability in by having forward planners and having specialists capability. Every day I think about the change programme that I'm implementing because this will take a couple of years to embed. I have to manage my stakeholders, communicate transparently and regularly with them to help them understand how it's going. I've done road shows, talked to a lot of people.

With my directors we're out selling it within the organisation because they're going, "It sounds good, but will it work? Am I going to get the service I need?" At a perception level, some are saying, "Well, I used to have three people. Now I only have one." I say to them, "You have one direct contact, but you have the whole team. We are all here to support you, but you have an interface with one individual to my team, so you know who to go to, but they then leverage the expertise and capability." When we go back and we sit at the table and talk strategy, they might bring me in. They might bring in one of the social team or they may bring in an issues crisis person.

Energy is a huge conversation in Australia at the moment and I have a team that I think every day when I read the papers, energy is going to be a big issue with fire through the summer. How are we preparing in advance to ensure we are set up for success to support both the ministers and the policy areas in the government. I think ahead and I then look at how I mobilise my team. They are going, "Okay. We have to trust Catherine. She has a clear vision. We're going to give it a go." I meet. We have workshops. We celebrate success. I have the team come in and share every fortnight what they're doing that celebrates virtual teaming, working, how we're working with policy and leveraging the capability across the team.

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I'm seeing things that it's a day in, day out investment of time, energy and enthusiasm. You have to be positive, positive, positive, reinforce the good and then deal with as quickly as you can things you see that aren't working.

David Pembroke: Because it's interesting, isn't it, that issue of you are taking something away from me. You are taking a resource away from me. Traditionally, for example, in a line area or in a branch. If they feel that something has been taken away from them, that they may not be as enthusiastic and I've seen that so often. Is it just a pure matter of continuing to communicate, to engage, but then to obviously demonstrate the success of the new model that brings people along?

Catherine Payne: Well, I think success is the best advocate and experience. If people experience us differently ... Like I always say to my team, "No one ever wants to hear no. They want you to say yes and how I can help you." I think we have to be a culture and a mindset of we are going to be responsive "can do" people. We're here to help. We're here to add value. That's what I'm about. I say to my team every day, "That's why I can plan is I sit it with my people." We are one. We sit together. We eat together. We do a lot of things that is about building a collaborative connected team. I have a call centre at Ballarat. Now I have a video ability. We're going to be able to talk and see each other. I go up to Ballarat on the train. My team have all got to get to know that centre and see its value.

Because sometimes if you're a communicator and you work, you can work in the metro part of Sydney or Melbourne or wherever you are and you just sit at your desk and you get to take phone calls and you do your job. Well, I'm trying to say to my team, "We've got to be thinking more like journalists. Information is what informs how you do your job. Are you connected to the right people? Are they knowing who you are? Do they understand what we're about?" We've implemented things like service level agreements where we're saying to the business, "What do you need from us and this is what we can do." Then we're building dashboards to report on our delivery and also what we learned. We might be involved in a project and say, "Well, that didn't go quite the way we thought it should.

We could have done better. "We want to have those conversations and provide that insight. There's a lot here in terms of new effort and new activity, not just producing content. It's about a way of working I think. I've seen this work. My last job at Sydney Water, I moved it to a point where they've been winning awards for their wet wipes in pipes campaign, which was about moving a team from reactive to proactive and identifying

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opportunities to get on the front foot, linking to customer interests because customers became advocates for that programme. It was all done through social. What I saw is my team grew in expertise and confidence through the experience of that programme, and so I say to the team here is, "Trust me.

We can do this. It might seem hard, but the benefits and outside of working as a team to deliver on something bigger is just so exciting." When you see it work, it is just understand it works. It's so exciting to be part of something where you can add that value both to an organisation and back into customers and their experience in an organisation.

David Pembroke: Now interestingly you mentioned that notion of change, which obviously is ever present and again I think change is with us now or probably has always been with us, but it's now identified as our companion from now into the future. In terms of your change programme, are you working with the HR department as well or the change management people within the department to change other things other than just the work practices and the things that you can control on a day to day basis?

Catherine Payne: Yes, definitely. We're probably out changed capability and I think most executives here would agree isn't well developed. We're conscious of how important this is and it was down to things from looking at both the job roles. I personally with one of my directors wrote every job role again for the team and there was about 40 of them. We then did the financials. We looked at the performance plans, the clarity. Because one of the issues when mostly people who can often be in roles for a long time is that there's a lack of role clarity, there's a lack of certainty about what it is I'm here to do. Are you clear about what people are required to do and do they have a sense of what good looks like? What are the performance standards?

What are they? We've done a lot of work to really be clear about the expectations in roles. We've put them up on walls so everyone could go and look. We did things called thumbnails, which was to be even more specific about the level of accountability across teams and they ought to work together. We've done a lot of tutorials and coaching sessions and they're ongoing. Then I do team lunches where I sit down and I hear the questions that people are asking. They'll say, "Well, we don't quite understand how to do this differently." Some people were just expecting us to give them a road map of A to Z of how to do everything. There's an element of "we've done a lot to prepare for the launch of the model in July" but also I'm saying, "I want you to help solve some of these things."



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As we learn, and we keep moving through the change, we're learning too about things we didn't maybe anticipate. How do we adapt and how do we fix and grow? Next week I'm having the team come together. The managers meet quarterly, and they're having to uplift their capability as managers, as people managers. If you're a people manager, you have to think about your people. You have to have an operating rhythm around your people. You can't just do work. You have to have a strategic component. You have to plan and then we have a shared calendar where everything is planned out, and we then have the opportunity to think ahead. The change programme has many components. I've really spent a lot of time with my leadership trying to work through the elements of that.

The accountabilities are shared. Some people are leading on different components of the change. Then you have things like the importance of a social committee. The team having fun. The team celebrating success, the reward and recognition. It is those things that motivate people and understanding the motivations. Some people are motivated by getting a thank you. Some people need to be given something meaningful. I have coffees with individuals. I encourage that kind of connection between the leader. My title might sound fancy, executive director, but I see my role as being the champion and advocate of the team every day that I'm at work. I'm excited by that. I invite leaders.

My deputy secretary, Catherine Anderson, comes in and speaks to the team at our brainstorm on a Monday. I invite other executives in, so that my team are feeling supported not just by me, but by the leaders of the organisation.

David Pembroke:

That sounds good advice and really to understand that any transition needs to be managed comprehensively. When it's all said and done, it's motivating people and people get motivated when they're clear, and they understand the structure, the value, the culture, and their role in it and what they are expected to do on a daily basis. It sounds like you've got all of that sorted out. I'm interested. I just picked up a couple of quick things just before we finish, a couple of questions. I suppose the first one goes to this notion of reactive versus proactive. The famous saying from Mike Tyson, "Everyone's got a plan until they get punched in the face." What happens when all of a sudden something's gone wrong. It's reactive, reactive, reactive.

Is that why you've put that issues and crisis sort of function in there because rather than disturbing everybody, they just disturb those people who are dealing with that particular crisis as it may come. Because in government as we know, there are crisis every day of the week.

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Catherine Payne: Definitely. I've built this out over many years of learning in the roles I've had. To me there's three components in the way I think. One is around promote, one is about protect and one is about engaged. I always come back to that model, and I think I've shared it on LinkedIn, but it's a very simple model. It's saying there's a component our work that is about promote. You can define what that is, but that to me is the forward planning and getting ahead in conversations and having more of a marketing campaign kind of mindset. Protect is about what protecting the reputation of the organisation and we have a huge role and responsibility to support organisations and government in that. What does that mean?

What are the skills and capabilities and the preparedness? I have a risk reputation register where we list all the identified issues we see and we know of. Yes, you get surprised. Things come out of nowhere, but your level of preparedness allows you to do a better job knowing that you've got the skills, capability and the mode of operating to deal with protect. Engage, very important. That's about staff. Staff in communications in organisations is really important, that internal communications. Have you linked in your staff? Do your staff know what's happening early enough? Are they connected? I would say engage with staff, number one. Engage with your stakeholders. Have you thought about your stakeholders?

What do they need to know? I always think if we always stay true to this principle and criteria of promote, protect, engage, which I see is my reputation model of which I'm driven by every day in the way I operate with my team, we are going to be able to handle whatever is thrown at us as best we can.

David Pembroke: Excellent. A final question perhaps around then this notion of going right back to the beginning where we discussed this sense of comms not quite being at that point of origination, that point of policy development where problems are being discussed and solutions are being created perhaps without the input at an early enough point in time. Just maybe some insights then about how this model and again just going back to that point really not just about reputation, but how can we embed that? How can we make sure that those people think that comms is a far more strategic function as opposed to a tactical function?

Catherine Payne: Well, I think you've got to show that your communication team has the skills and expertise to operate in a way that's effective for them in a rapidly changing environment at times. For me it's about showing that we have the capability and the "can do" responsive advisory to be the trusted advisor.

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Once you establish yourself as a team that is reliable, dependent, service oriented and delivers, you build trust and engagement. What I see is that if you are consistent in the experience you offer, the more they bring you to the table. One of the things that I see is pretty cool is I'll be delivering my first scorecard of performance at the end of the quarter, so the end of September, early October.

I will go around and talk to every area that we service and say, "This is what we've delivered at the beginning. We obviously want to do better, but here's some examples of the things we're doing that you may not even necessarily know. Reporting on what we do and giving feedback and receiving feedback is absolutely critical to building trust and engagement and that seat at the table."

David Pembroke: Excellent. Well Catherine, sounds like you've got it pretty well under control at the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. It sounds like really that mode of operation is the foundations that are in place. As you say, you're getting around there to get your first report card I suppose. How do you think you're going to go across all of those areas that you've outlined? Where are the work ons? Where are the things that you think you're going to have to improve?

Catherine Payne: Well, I think it's about giving confidence. I think we've got a way to go in terms of showing more than examples of projects better consistency because we've been hiring people. The team have gone through transition of where people have left, people coming in. We're building up the capability to deliver. The first report card will be we're in, we're having a go. These are the early signs of success. The businesses are going to say, "Yes, but what about me? You do lots of services, lots of things going on. How do you give me what I need at the right level?" Some will say they want more strategic advice. Some want more delivery and doing. Again it's about their understanding of the function.

Some of them just want us to do things that need to be done on a daily basis rather than a strategic work where we're saying we want to be very much delivering, but to a strategic work area. I think we're going to get a mix response I would expect from the first report card, but a sense of we trust you. We're going to give you a go. We'll see how this goes. We just have to keep persevering and be consistent in the experience we offer.

David Pembroke: Just before I do let you go, sorry, one more question, it's really around I have this theory that the function of communications will increasingly devolve

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from the centre to the edges because citizens will require information much faster than a centralised model will be able to deliver that. There will always be that role for the trusted advisor, the expert, the guy that sits at the centre, but perhaps that capability and skill will need to be at the edges. What's your view on that?

Catherine Payne: I agree. I think we are a capability that supports people at the call face. I know in our department we have a huge regional network of staff. More than half the department are in the regions and we have a regional communications team that sits in another part of the business. We're connecting regularly, daily with them. They are the call face dealing with the citizens. Our job is to ensure that we are connected forward plan together, so that's about that strong collaboration and enabling staff to be good communicators and to be able to use the channels. We train our people in digital channels. They have communications in their roles, but they are there whether it's community engagement roles or regional delivery roles.

They all are out there communicating with stakeholders and customers every day. Our job is to support them and enable them to the right messaging, the thinking, the ability to use the channels. We've been doing a big social media training programme across our department to support people to be able to share the photos and the stories. You don't have to be in communications to communicate, but the value of our function whether it sits centrally or decentralised and sometimes it's a mix for good reason and should be, but we have a role to enable the people in the departments and organisations to communicate better and more effectively with their audiences.

David Pembroke: Excellent. All right. Well, thank you, Catherine. I will let you get back to your extremely busy job and thank you very much for sharing the insights of your particular story because I know our audience will be fascinated with that experience and drawing on your experience and knowledge and the skills that you have and indeed the attitude. I think that emphasis that you placed on people is often lost when we start to get too tactical rather than remembering that really the business that we're in is motivating people to give their best effort every day. Thank you very much for joining us in this week's edition of InTransition and to you the audience, thank you very much for coming back once again.

I look forward to joining you again at the same time next week, but for now, it's bye for now.

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Voiceover:

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