



EP#165 APPLYING
BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE TO
FIGHT MISINFORMATION AND
SUSTAIN CHANGE

WITH SHARON ROSENRAUCH

TRANSCRIPT

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Sharon Rosenrauch:

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Some of our recent surveys that we've done, we're seeing an increasingly distrust of information that's found online. I think that it will necessitate a level of educating the public on how they, themselves, can discern factual information and credible messages from those that might have commercial, political, other interests at play.

Voice Over:

Welcome to the GovComms Podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now, here is your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Hello, everyone, and welcome once again to GovComms, a podcast about the function of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me.

As we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people, the traditional custodians of the land from which we are broadcasting today, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and to acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region. And indeed, I'd like to recognise all First Nations people of all the lands on which people listening to this podcast today.

Today, we're joined by one of the world's leading public sector behavioural scientists, Sharon Rosenrauch, the principal behavioural scientist and director of behavioural science at the Australian government's Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and water.

So often its insights gathered as a result of the application of the principles of behavioural science that sit as the foundation of much effective communication. Often, our job as government and public sector communicators is to influence behaviour, to encourage people to start something, or to stop something, or to amend, to act, or to do in pursuit of behaviours that not only benefit the individual but also the community.

Sharon has worked at the Department of Health, Food Standards Australia New Zealand, and the Department of Industry, Science and Resources, where she was the senior behavioural scientist. She also has postgraduate qualifications in organisational and cognitive psychology, behavioural economics and nutrition. And indeed, she graduated valedictorian from all her degrees. Prior to working in government, Sharon worked for Apple and as a consultant for two of the big four. And in academia she worked as an organisational and health psychology senior researcher and lecturer.

She has won several leadership and academic awards. She is the author of two best-selling books and has several publications in reputable academic journals and websites, and has presented at national and international conferences. And importantly, she is now working with the OECD as they continue their work to professionalise and improve the function of communication in government and public sector organisations around the world. Sharon joins me now. Sharon, welcome to GovComms.

Sharon Rosenrauch:

Thanks very much for having me.

David Pembroke:

Sharon, that is an impressive background with both work in academia, in the public sector, in the private sector. During your time in academia, were there any points where you were surprised by things that you were learning? Or, was it as you were rolling through and gathering this knowledge, gathering this experience and reading through the literature and looking at different experiments, that it was unexceptional, in a way, that things were happening as you thought they might?

Sharon Rosenrauch:

No, not at all. I mean, I think that's one of the most fascinating things and kind of the premise of behavioural science to start with is that never make assumptions about how a human being will respond to a particular environment. Because more often than not, your assumptions will be wrong, and more often than not, the ability of human beings to surprise you is something that continues to make my job really, really interesting.

So, you take people with very similar backgrounds, very similar socio-economic status, and you put them in an environment and how you would expect them to behave is often not the case. But also, like the similarity between two people who grew up in relatively similar backgrounds and you would expect them to behave quite similarly, also not the case. So yeah, human beings are very fascinating to study. We're not rats, that's for sure.

David Pembroke:

So, going back to that first experience then in the Department of Health, do you remember when it grabbed you, when there was a moment that it was like, "Oh, okay, I get this. I really like this and I like the application of my knowledge and my skills in this particular setting"?

Sharon Rosenrauch:

Yeah. I mean, for me, it was the horrifying truth that behavioural interventions can lead to sustained behaviour change. I appreciate that's a bit wordy, so let me talk you through what that means. Is we had done an experiment, I joined the team just on the tail end of them completing an experiment looking at ... And it's publicly available, so I'm happy to link it to you after this, in case your readers would be interested in going away and having a look-see. But probably one of the most famous behavioural science applied to public policy, randomised control trials experiments, looked at nudging GPs out of overprescribing antibiotics.

So, as a country, we had a real issue with antimicrobial resistance due to overprescription of antibiotics, and it was starting to build up a bit of an intolerance to the effect of antibiotics. Huge issue. Huge issue internationally as well. Thankfully, Europe's getting on top of it. Here in Australia, we were not on top of it. And so, the behavioural economics team had been brought in to develop an intervention. And what they found through their discovery work was that GPs are very influenced by their peers, very much so, as a profession. And they're very susceptible to something we call descriptive social norms. So, wanting to behave in the way that everyone else does.

Two types of social norms, injunctive, which is, "I want to behave in line with what I think is the right behaviour." So, it's tied up with issues of morality. And then, you've got another one, which is the typical sort of herd behaviour that we think about, which is the descriptive social norms. We want to fit in. We want to mimic the behaviour of others around us. Bandura's social learning theory, blah, blah, blah.

So, they developed some letters that they sent out to GPs comparing their rates of prescription, not dissimilar to what you get on your energy bill, where it kind of shows how much energy you're using in comparison to other households of similar size. And they did that for the prescribing rate of GPs. They did it for the top 20 percentile. And anyway, it proved to be very effective, very effective. There was a dramatic decrease in the

rate of antibiotic prescription in this cohort who had been targeted when compared to the control group, which is the premise of behavioural science. Sorry, the premise of a randomised control trial.

But so, that was less surprising to me, was like we had decent evidence to show that this intervention would work. It's why we did it. What I wasn't expecting was at the six-month mark, there was an evaluation that was done to see how much the behaviour had been sustained, and I was expecting minimal sustained behaviour. To be honest with you, I thought they would default back to 20-odd years of behavioural habits that they'd developed in overprescribing. No, it was almost identical to day one. There was a slight drop-off which you would expect to see. That could be due to a range of factors, moving clinics, et cetera, et cetera. Life happens in that amount of time. But the behaviour change was sustained at a remarkable rate, and that's when I remember thinking, "This is very cool. This is actually having an ongoing impact in what Australia looks like."

And up until that point, to be honest, in academia, we didn't always have the resources to come back 6, 12, 1 year, 2 years later. Whereas in government, it's really important that you do that because you're spending public money. So, you need to be able to justify the use of it. And good, that holds government accountable. So, evaluation is common. Well, at least evaluation is common in the behavioural space. So yeah, I thought that was remarkable.

David Pembroke:

But what was the factor though that made it stick?

Sharon Rosenrauch:

What was the factor that made it stick? I think the fact that they had been made aware that somebody was watching their prescribing behaviours and just awareness that ... We know through so many studies that when you think people are watching you, you behave very differently to when you think you are alone and sort of flying under the radar. So, I think there was an element of that.

I also think it was just the power of social norms. GPs want to not stand out. They want to fall in line with everyone else. I have my own theories behind that, which are that they spend most of their life studying. So, I think there's something in that. They study as a group. They don't really leave school, in a way. Anyway, that's the world according to Sharon. I'm diverging from science now, but yeah. Yeah. Ultimately, as much as we all like to pretend that we want to be individual, et cetera, there's an even bigger part of us that wants to fit in.

David Pembroke:

So, listen, in terms then of the application of the practices of behavioural science and the application of behavioural science in the Australian government, and indeed, if you have a observation about governments around the world, how mature is it at the moment?

Sharon Rosenrauch:

So, I guess, one thing is maturity and the other thing is volume. So, in terms of the number of behavioural teams, the number of behavioural scientists in public policy, I would say Australia is somewhere in the middle, probably a little bit lower than say, your Europe, your Americas, Canada's particularly strong, Singapore. So, I would put us on the OECD scale somewhere in the middle, tending towards the lower end in terms of just volume of the army.

In terms of sophistication though, yeah, right up there. I think what's let us down previously was that it wasn't embedded into our academic institution. So, when I studied there was only two courses at the postgraduate level and even they were capped at how high I could go. If I wanted to go any higher, I had to go to the London School of Economics or MIT or somewhere overseas. But that is slowly changing and if I can give a shout-out, like universities like QUT, UTS, it's just becoming more and more common. And I think it's going to become a

really important skill as technology continues to develop and replace a lot of those jobs, I think it's going to be really hard for technology to replace the job of a behavioural scientist. So, I'm hoping that we start to see more and more academic institutions take it up.

David Pembroke:

We'll come to the future in a moment. But your current role is working in the Department of Climate Change, the Environment, Energy and Water. Issues rich, if I might suggest. And certainly, I'm sure there is an enormous amount of demand for your services and the services of your team.

Sharon Rosenrauch:

Yeah.

David Pembroke:

Can you describe a typical day or week or month for you and your team and how, in fact, you apply that knowledge, that skill, that behaviour and indeed, your attitude, to helping to solve some of these problems, working with policymakers, working with service delivery arms? Just exactly how does it work?

Sharon Rosenrauch:

Yeah, it's a great question. I don't have a typical day. I wish I did. Actually, no, I don't. I think that would be the worst thing in the world. So instead, maybe I'll tell you about the service offering of my team and that might give you an idea to the variety of our work. So, our bread and butter, our big-ticket items are project work. So, we either do projects with line areas or we do it with other behavioural teams. So, we've got a good relationship with the behavioural economics team of Australian government at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

But project work can look like everything from undertaking a discovery project to better understand a behaviour that's not very well understood. "Government developed a rebate and no one's taking it up. Why is that? Do they not know it exists? Is it not relevant? Is it on a website that's hard to access? Are we targeting the wrong people? What's going on here?" All the way through to, "Actually, we're in development mode, we're developing a policy to change X behaviour. How can we shape this policy in a way that's behaviorally informed so that we minimise the likelihood of any policy intention action gap?" And I know the question's going to be, "What's that?"

So, it's essentially when a policy doesn't have its intended outcome. And a nice example that I like to use and kind of the one that I use to outline the value of behavioural science in the energy policy space, as an example, is you're coming to me as a line area and you're saying, "Sharon, my team is looking at nudging people to buying more energy efficient white goods. We want to offer subsidies to make them cheaper and then people will buy them. Problem solved, right?" No, not really.

So, coming back to my whole people aren't rats. People are really complex when they make purchasing decisions of big ticket items. If we're talking about cornflakes, then sure, go home brand, I don't know. No diss to Kellogg's, by the way, I'm not sponsored, but it's a relatively low-cost decision. It's one that you make very frequently. When you're making an infrequent, expensive purchase like a white good, like a fridge. Let's go with that. Most people would research that. Obviously, different socioeconomic statuses might influence that, but most people would have a bit of a research. You'd have a look in your kitchen and say, "It's got to fit." You'd have a look in your kitchen and say, "It's got to go with my other white goods." Maybe it's not white, maybe it's silver. Is there a brand name that you trust, that looks after you? All these strange associations that we make with companies who have never met us.

And then, you go into a store and then you talk to the sales guy. And then you might've had an idea in mind, but he's super convincing and pushes you to another. The important factor is that we tend to associate price with quality. So, you make something cheaper, that might actually raise people's antenna and they might go, "Well, what's wrong with it?" "No, nothing. It's just cheaper. It's a government subsidy." Very few people get their head around government subsidies. They don't necessarily understand what that means. Why is government trying ... Have they over-purchased them? Is there a quality? Are they trying to get rid of them? So, there's a number of variables that go in.

So, actually, what you might find, and indeed what often happens when you make assumptions about human behaviour without testing it first, is that your expected outcome doesn't eventuate and then you've gone and spent a lot of taxpayer dollars on a subsidy that hasn't had its intended behavioural impact. So, a lot of what we do is pre-testing, and we do that through a range of things like what I mentioned earlier, a randomised control trial. You take a group of people, they don't receive the treatment, you take another group, they do receive the treatment. You measure the difference and you make recommendations. So, that's our project work.

Another big part of what we do is advisory and guidance. So, sometimes people already have an almost finished product and they just want to test some ideas with us. And so, we'll have a series of meetings or workshops to get them thinking along the right lines, and then leave the policy expertise to the policy people, stay in your lane kind of thing. And then, probably the third and one of the ones that I enjoy the most, and I think this probably reflects my academic background, is capability uplift. I appreciate some of the stuff I've spoken about just now seems quite technical and like only a behavioural scientist can do that. And indeed, there is a relatively large part our work which is that, but there's an equally large part of our work which actually are really simple tools that any man and his dog can apply. And we work with really smart policy program communications specialists, who we can pass this knowledge on and lift capability so that others are applying principles of behavioural science in their everyday work. And I really enjoy that. So, that's the capability uplift function of the team.

David Pembroke:

So, in terms of some those tools that you mentioned, what are some of those simple tools that people could access to improve their ability to be more effective?

Sharon Rosenrauch:

In a comms setting, as an example?

David Pembroke:

Yeah.

Sharon Rosenrauch:

Yeah. So, there are some great frameworks out there. Probably if I had to point to two of my favourite, just because they're easy to remember, is good old behavioural scientists love a mnemonic. So, we've got the EAST framework, which was developed by the behavioural insights team, which started in the UK, in the UK Cabinet Office of government. And essentially, what it says is if you want to make something, whether it be an intervention or whether it be a piece of communication, have its desired impact, then you want to make it EAST. And EAST stands for easy. So, using plain language, making it accessible, making the perception of doing the thing that you're trying to communicate to people relatively straightforward, make it easy. The A is all about making it accessible and attractive. So, how do you make something attractive? You add salience to it, you use tools like personalisation, so that I can see the relevance for Sharon in it.

The S in the EAST framework stands for social. So, I've already spoken to you at nauseam about those different norms. So, showing that other people are doing it, showing that it's the right thing to do, like, "You shouldn't litter. That's not what society expects of you." And this is one that people often forget, but it's really important one, is making it timely. So, an example of making it timely is prompting people when they're likely to be most receptive. If you are asking a business to do something that's going to require time, don't ask them to do it around tax time. If you are asking people who are very stressed to do another stressful activity, for example, you're asking a doctor to perform an administrative task that will improve the organisation, make sure that you don't do it right in the middle of the day when they're like to be at peak surgery load or on call. Do it before they start their shift or last thing before they finish off.

So, all these things require research to determine what is going to be easy for somebody? What is going to be for somebody? What is the right time? Don't just make assumptions about them, research them. But then when you've got that information, if you can ... That's probably my favourite one because it's four letters, easy to remember. Easy, attractive, social, timely. There are a range of other frameworks that I could point to, INSPIRE framework by Monash, COM-B model. But if you want a really everyday accessible one that you can think about as you are going about your behaviour, then the EAST one is probably my favourite.

David Pembroke:

How do you work alongside your communication colleagues there at the department? Can you describe the interaction and how is it that the communications teams can assist you and then how can you assist them to get better outcomes for citizens?

Sharon Rosenrauch:

Yeah. I mean, a recent example and a very timely one is probably looking at misinformation. So, how misinformation develops and spreads is all very much a psychological phenomenon. It's rooted in behavioural science. But ultimately, we are communication specialists in the same way that they respect our expertise, which is coming in and potentially identifying the source of the misinformation or who's going to be a relevant messenger. How you can evaluate ... Coming back to the whole we want to be respectful of taxpayer dollars. Communication activities are amongst some of the most expensive that you can undertake in government. So, evaluating the effectiveness of any communications activity, for example, targeting misinformation and making tweaks along the way and measuring the data as it's coming in.

Teaching the communication colleagues how to operationalise their outcomes. So, we want to measure engagement. How do we do that? Well, there's a number of behaviours that demonstrate engagement. We want to measure knowledge. How do we do that? There's a number of behaviours that signal knowledge. And vice versa. How they educate us, is there are so many different specifics that come with government communications that you can really tell an experienced communications person in government versus someone without experience. They've got this amazing mindset where they're looking at risk and, "These are the kind of words that the minister often uses, and we want to introduce consistency so that people come to learn his style." Yeah. I mean, our comms colleagues are amongst some of the busiest and most worked staff members. So, I would say it's very much a two-way street in terms of knowledge exchange.

David Pembroke:

Would you see it, looking into the future, that you start to work even more closely together than you do at the moment?

Sharon Rosenrauch:

I mean, I think we work very closely together. I guess, the opportunity cost of something like that would be who are we not working closer with? Right? Just noting that there's only so many hours in the day. And my

view, belief has always been that behavioural science teams can make the most impact embedded in policy line areas. Because if you get the policy right from the start, as in you've accounted for human behaviour and you've outlined metrics of success and you've pre-tested your solutions from the start, then there should be less work at the back end in terms of having to go super hard on communications to sell a good policy or to educate or to uplift or to make people aware. Still very important, but if the policy itself is good, people will want to behave in the way that the policy is nudging them to behave.

And so, evaluation, communications, super important, but they tend to come more at the tail-end of the policy development. Once it's gone through all the government processes to be agreed upon, funded. Okay, now it's time to start communicating it. Once it's been out for a little while, now it's time to start evaluating it. So, you'll find that in government, behavioural teams can live in a range of different areas. They can live in the evaluation units, and they often do. They can live in the communications unit, less common, but they can live there. Or, they can live in policy land, which is where my team lives. And personally, again, noting my biases, I think that's where we can make the most change is at that policy development stage.

David Pembroke:

How difficult is it at the moment when you consider a number of the spaces that you are operating in, around climate, around energy, around the environment, around the water, heavily contested. You mentioned misinformation and disinformation, people assuming their own sets of facts, people arguing, social media giving everybody a microphone to be able to create their own content, to distribute their content, to gather people around them. How hard is it to apply the classic principles of behavioural science in a space that is so contested?

Sharon Rosenrauch:

Yeah. Very difficult, is the answer. I think what we have seen as well with social media is an ability to trick people into a false sense of reality, particularly through things like artificial intelligence. And the amount of information that's at people's fingertips really predisposes us to cognitive overload. And when our brain gets overloaded by excess information, it likes to take shortcuts. A little bit like when you go to the gym and no one's watching you, you're like, "Excellent. I can put the speed up a little bit and go easy on myself." The brain does something similar.

It's really good. So, I've heard that presented really poorly and I just want to, I guess, use whatever microphone I have to say humans aren't fundamentally flawed. It's a really good thing that our brain does, that we wouldn't be able to function if we were being chronically overloaded by information every day. We'd suffer paralysis by analysis. The problem is that those shortcuts can be misapplied and that leads to things like behavioural biases, stereotypes, believing misinformation being one of them as well.

So, I think it is very hard. Having said that though, being honest with you here, David, never underestimate the human's ability to overcome adversity. And at the moment, I think we're in a bit of a paradigm shift where we've confused what is reality with what is pop culture, with what is social media. I think what we're going to see, and we've already sort of started to see it, like some of our recent surveys that we've done, we're seeing an increasingly distrust of information that's found online.

I think that it will necessitate a level of educating the public on how they, themselves, can discern factual information and credible messages from those that might have commercial, political, other interests at play. It's one of the best ways that we can inoculate the public is instead of us putting a whole bunch of money and resources into every single piece of misinformation that comes through, being like, "This is false. This is false. This is false." Firstly, we're never going to be able to keep up. As a government, I said at the start, one of the things about there's trade-offs, it's really good to be part of a large bureaucracy from a decision-making and risk and a whole bunch of other reasons. But the trade-off is that it's hard to be fast and adaptive.

So, we're never going to win a competition against Facebook. So, instead, really our efforts should be and are being placed in educating the public so that they, themselves, have the skills to be able to identify, "Actually, no, that's not right." And it's not just even government. There's some great work coming out of academia as well. John Cook has developed a Cranky Uncle application on the phone that kind of gamifies particularly climate change information, to be able to teach people how to spot what's true and what's not.

The best way though, to inoculate the public from misinformation is providing information about the thing early and providing factual information. And also, recognising when you, i.e., government, isn't the best messenger, and leveraging our partnerships with credible, authoritative messengers like CSIRO being one example. We know that Australians really trust CSIRO and really trust research institutions. So, knowing when it's our time to really lead and when it's actually a better time to partner with somebody else who might be more authoritative.

But it is a big challenge. But like I said, I wouldn't have said back in pandemic days that we would be out of it in two and a bit years and there'd be a vaccine. I wouldn't have thought that. And humans are just amazing and we make strange things happen. So, I think we'll get there, but at the moment we're in a bit of a shift.

David Pembroke:

But interestingly, you say though that in some of your surveys you are seeing this improvement in literacy and you're seeing this ability, that people's ability is improving to be able to spot and to know that that is false information.

Sharon Rosenrauch:

I wouldn't go as far as to say literacy, but I would say increasing suspicion. Actually, it's timely that we're having this conversation, David, because just the other day I met with some academics and there's some recent research using fMRIs, functional magnetic ... So, similar to the MRIs if you break an arm or something, but they're functional. So, we use them to measure brain activity, and what they found is that different parts of the brain are responsible for disbelieving false information. So, distrust is activated in a particular part of the brain, and then building trust is another part of the brain.

Previously, we had thought that when you break down ... If I go and I say, "This thing isn't right and here's why, and you should trust me." That you could kind of do it all in the one fell swoop, bit like a McDonald's Happy Meal, like package it all up. That's not the case. What we actually have to do is employ a certain set of strategies to break down misinformation and increase that distrust and critical analysis and sceptical thinking, but there's a whole bunch of separate strategies that are needed to come in and build trust.

So, what you are saying there, that ability to think critically, but also the ability to trust, I'd probably split them out. I'm not sure that we're there yet in terms of the building of trust, but where we have seen improvements is in people starting to become more sceptical, wary of sources, wary of dates, wary of potential vested interests. And that's really good, especially for a democracy, that's part of a healthy democracy. We should have Australians going, "Hmm, I'm not sure about that."

David Pembroke:

Yeah. So, listen, where to from here? Where do you see your work evolving to? What are some of the big challenges that you are working on at the moment that would be of interest to the community?

Sharon Rosenrauch:

Well, I can talk about things that are publicly available. So, one of our key focus areas is this concept, and I'm a little bit reluctant to use the term just because it came from the mining industry and we're really trying to move away from it, but you might've heard of the term social licence.

David Pembroke:

Yes.

Sharon Rosenrauch:

Yeah. So, for those who are listening who aren't aware, social licence essentially, it came from the mining industry and it referred to community acceptance to have something dug up or put in. That's not really what we're trying to do at the moment. What we're trying to do is to really instil best practice community engagement and benefit sharing, nudging developers of renewable large-scale infrastructure to really consider community needs and listen to communities about what they want out of this energy transition. So, that's one of our key lines of interest at the moment. We've just released some national guidelines for community engagement and benefit sharing for transmission, which you might know transmission is a particularly hot topic in the media at the moment. Community understanding of the role of transmission lines in the energy transition is not quite where we need it to be. So, it's really opening a bit of a gap for misinformation, but I do think we're making significant strides.

And then, the other area of interest that I think would be of most relevance/interest to your audience would be in misinformation. Misinformation with regards to everything. Misinformation with regards to energy prices. Misinformation with regards to the safety of things like batteries and electric vehicles and solar panels and transmission lines.

And more broadly, I think, as well, focusing on how we can create really accessible messaging that communicates really inaccessible concepts. Energy is a wild place. Every day I'm learning things. I work with some of the smartest people in Australia and it's so heartening when I'm in a meeting and they're like, "What?" I'm like, "Well, great. It's not just me." It's not uncommon that I'll be researching things.

It's a highly technical space that involves many moving parts. And a big part of us getting to net-zero and achieving our climate change targets relies on you and I, David. It relies on us changing our behaviours and changing the ways that we think about things, changing the way that we engage with energy usage, changing the way that we dispose of items. So, human behaviour is going to be crucial for this.

And for you to want to perform those behaviours, you need to understand the why. Why is government asking this of you? Why is it so important? Why should you feel empowered to take action? So, that's a really hard one because there is a real tendency to go, "Well, I'm just this 30-something-year-old on the Gold Coast. What can my individual actions do for the whole world?" And it's common fallacy, tragedy of the commons, but the reality is that there is a lot that we can do, particularly through our collective efforts. I like to describe the transition and net-zero as a giant uni assignment and we can't have any slackers or we all fail.

David Pembroke:

You, having had the opportunity and perhaps the privilege of sitting in on a lot of those discussions, does it make you optimistic that there's a path?

Sharon Rosenrauch:

Yeah, absolutely. For the reasons that I've said earlier, is the ability for us to overcome adversity even when all signs are pointing to no, never ceases to amaze me. And we've got pretty much all the smartest people in the world really scared and working really hard at the moment to come up with a solution.

But more importantly, I trust the public to do the right thing. I trust the public that they will get on board. And there will be people who will try and undermine the attempts for a range of reasons, but I actually see the need to educate the public to be able to discern this to be a really ... It's a really positive outcome of a really unfortunate circumstance, which is unfortunately sometimes where the best learning and social progress

occurs. So, I do. I wouldn't be where I was if I didn't, David, what a depressing job, right? Like, if you didn't believe in the end goal, that would be a really hard sell to myself every morning. So yeah, I really do.

David Pembroke:

Excellent. Now, listen, just before I do let you go, you're working with the OECD, and we often on this program speak about the work that the OECD is doing in terms of the improving, the understanding, the professionalising of the communication function in government and the public sector. Can you give us just a bit of an insight into some of the work that you are doing with the OECD in that particular area?

Sharon Rosenrauch:

Yeah. I mean, the work that we do with the OECD is fascinating because every country, despite having, like Europe might have a little bit more of a focus on heating, we've got a bit more of a focus, say, on geographical distances that energy must travel once it's been generated. We all face the same human barriers to the transition.

So, in terms of things that we do, a recent example would be that there's efforts at the moment to try to coordinate some of our surveys. And the reason for that being that if we can rely ... When we develop a survey, we like to include questions that have been validated. Validated meaning they've been tested and shown to measure what we want them to measure using a range of nerdy methods. That's really expensive and time-consuming.

But often what we find is that survey questions and their validity, it's got cross-cultural generalisability. Like if it's tended to work in one country ... We can't be assured of it, but more often than not, if we test it in Australia, it's also, those results hold constant. So, it's honestly resource saving is to be able to share survey instruments and perhaps in the future even create this one golden survey instrument that looks at, for example, community support for renewable energy, community belief in climate change, willingness to engage with electric vehicles or uptake of electric vehicles.

So, I mean, there's a range of policy questions, but if we can really, I guess, standardise and create some commonalities, ultimately, humans are more similar than we are different. And I think that being able to have this really strong global community of scientists can only be a good thing for a problem that is a global problem, right? At the end of the day, climate change doesn't discriminate whether we're in Australia or elsewhere. The impacts can be felt more in particular regions, but eventually it's going to affect all of us the same. So, it makes sense that a global problem necessitates a global solution.

David Pembroke:

Now, listen, on indulgence, I will ask you one more question because it's just jumped into my mind. But in terms then of people listening to the podcast today who are now interested and thinking, "Look, I've got to learn more about the principles of behavioural science to become better, to become a more effective communicator." The EAST framework, which has come out of the UK, you know about that. But where else might you advise people to go to begin, perhaps, their learning around this? Are there any websites or journals or podcasts or other things that people might listen to, to start to help them on this journey?

Sharon Rosenrauch:

Yeah, definitely. Well, in terms of seminal books, if we had to say the bible of behavioural science or the new age bible of behavioural science, you can't go past Daniel Kahneman's Thinking, Fast and Slow. That really laid the foundation for the discipline to develop. And then there have been others since, like Nudge. If you're going to go Nudge, go the second edition, because it's been updated with some new fun facts. And that's been written by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein. So, that's more from a just to get, what is this behavioural science thing? How did it come to be? What are the different cognitive biases that exist? Once you read them, you'll

become the most annoying person in the world because you'll see them everywhere and be pointing them out to all your friends and family who will very quickly veto your attendance at a dinner party.

And then, if you want to look specifically at behavioural science applied to public policy, I would recommend they go have a look, some friends at Monash have the most amazing institute called BehaviourWorks, and they have developed the INSPIRE framework. They also offer courses in INSPIRE if you really want to commit. And that's probably one of the best courses that I've seen that applies behavioural science in a very accessible way. There's not a huge amount of assumed knowledge going into it. If you can read, if you can write, you can do the course or you can read up about it and you'll get it. And then, probably the other ones would be the COM-B model. If you type into Google, "The COM-B model," there's been a range of books that have been written about that, but that's also one that I particularly like applying to government communications as well.

So, hopefully that gives you some sort of food for thought. Podcasts. Do you know what? Before you go podcast, I'd actually sign up to what I think is the best, I've never contemplated unsubscribing, free, The Behavioural Scientist. It's a website. If you go there, they've got a monthly periodic newsletter that gets sent out and it recommends podcast of the month, book of the month. Their recommendations are infallible. Like, yeah, total trust. I'm very happy to back that. So anyway, some options.

David Pembroke:

Very generous and comprehensive, and I wouldn't expect anything else. So, Sharon, Rosenrauch, the principal behavioural scientist and director of behavioural science at the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water here in Australia. Thank you so much for giving up some of your very valuable time, because I do know how busy you are and how in demand you are. So, it's very kind of you to make a bit of time for us today with GovComms, and I know the audience appreciate your wisdom and your insights, and we have all learned a great deal today from our discussion. So, thank you so much for becoming a guest on GovComms today.

Sharon Rosenrauch:

No. Thank you. Thank you for having me, David. And thank you for your very interesting and intelligent questions. That was a lot of fun.

David Pembroke:

Thank you very much. And to you, the audience, thank you once again. What a fantastic episode there. This is a wonderful thing, isn't it? Being involved in the public sector when you know people like Sharon, she could be working anywhere, could be working for anybody, but decided, "Well, actually, you know what?" She's going to dedicate her talent to the public sector, to make sure that things are improved for the community. And aren't we lucky that she and many, many others, as she says, that inspiring work, where she's sitting there with other very bright people who are working in the interests of the community, and indeed, in the space that she is working in, in that energy transition area? What a big challenge.

But indeed, the fact that Sharon is optimistic is a good thing as well. And from the communicator's point of view, how can you work with these really clever people to make your comms better? Because I'm sure they'll have plenty of ideas when you do take your ideas to them, and they'll be very generous in giving their feedback as well. So, a big thanks to Sharon for coming on today, and for you, coming back once again. A rating or a review of the program as I ask each week, it does help us to be found. So, thank you, if you could do that, if you do have a little bit of time. But listen, we'll be back at the same time in a fortnight with the next edition of GovComms. My name is David Pembroke and it is bye for now.

Voice Over:

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