



EP#167: COMMS UNLOCKED:  
INSIGHTS ON INFLUENCE,  
ETHICS AND A LASTING  
CAREER IN GOVERNMENT

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WITH MICHAEL PLAYER

[TRANSCRIPT](#)

# TRANSCRIPT

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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 podcast about the practise of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me.

As we begin our conversation today, may I first acknowledge the traditional owners of the land from which we are broadcasting today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging and recognise the ongoing contribution they make to the life of this city and region. And may I also pay my respects to all First Nations people on the lands from where anyone listening to this podcast today is joining us from.

Today's episode is going to be a special two-part episode of GovComms. And my guest today is Michael Player, a veteran of the government communication business. Through his almost five decades of service, Michael is perhaps best known for his stint as the general manager of New Zealand Police for 13 years from 1999 to 2012. During that time, he managed the communication for several major crises, including the Pike River Mine disaster, the Christchurch Earthquakes, and the Rena oil spill off the coast of Tauranga in 2011. Along with dealing with these major disasters in a short period of time, he also refreshed the police's visual identity. He revamped the website and negotiated better commercial contracts that bought the realities of policing to the public through many of those very popular New Zealand police TV shows. He's also served on a number of boards, he's been a communications and engagement manager for the Ministry of Transport and also worked in central government in communications. And he joins me from his home in [Porirua 00:03:21] in New Zealand. Now Michael, welcome to GovComms.

Michael Player:

Kia ora David. And yes, I'm living here in Porirua in the Mana Whenua area of Ngati Toa.

David Pembroke:

Very good. So listen, what a career. It's a long time and as we were discussed just before we got started, that you're at the point now where the phone stopped and people aren't asking you to do any more work because you've got the message out, but when you sort of turn around and you look back at your career, what do you think when you look at the career, how do you feel about the career that you've had?

Michael Player:

I feel totally blessed by it really. And it seems such a short time and it's a bit of a... I know it's a thing that people say when they finally exit their vocational work for a lifetime. But yeah, it really was no day was the same in communications and that's one of the key fundamentals, I think, of what makes it such an attractive job. And I was lucky to stick with it and rise up through the ranks in the public sector. I only had two years in the private sector just to show me how the cold cruel dollar worked, but I really relished the opportunity and the intellectual challenge and the great ethos of public servants who really wanted to make a difference. And I worked with some fantastic people all through my career in a variety of departments and ministries.

David Pembroke:

So listen, what is the Michael Player story? How did you find your way into this extraordinary career?

Michael Player:

Yeah, well, believe it or not, I tried to initially start a law degree and after the first year of that, I was a bit wobbly on it. And about midway through the second year, I decided I think I better do something else. The funny thing, so I went to a vocational guidance counsellor, and he said, "What about journalism?" And I thought, yeah, I wasn't keen on getting into daily news sort of hour by hour deadlines, but there was a magazine journalism course on the go. And so I signed up for that and it was a year long course. So the interesting thing was I could either do that by a university postgraduate course and finish a BA degree or go into a tertiary technical institute course, which is what I chose. The irony also was that the reason I hadn't done well in law apparently was because the tutors couldn't read my handwriting, but they only told me that on exit.

So one of the benefits of signing up for a communications or a magazine journalism course was to actually have keyboard skills and I took to that like a duck to water. So that gave me a great skill. So I was... But the problem when I exited after the end of the year of graduating as one of the leading students in my year was that there were no jobs in journalism because even now, it's be far worse because of the changing nature of the scene. But then there was a bit of a slump in magazine titles. And so I looked around and went home to lick my wounds in Sunny Hawke's Bay, which is a provincial centre in New Zealand. And I saw this role for assistant press secretaries and which was then the Tourist and Publicity department who provided press secretary services for both departments and ministers all from the one department. I thought, "That sounds like me."

So I rang up the Information and Publicity section and said, "Look, I'm interested in talking to you about this and I'm prepared to fund myself an airfare down. I'll be down there in a fortnight. Can you give me half an hour to talk to you?" And on the strength of that sort of initiative, I got an interview and the next thing blowing me down, they offered me a position, at the top of the assistant press officer grade as a starting point, so I never looked back from there.

David Pembroke:

You must have impressed them.

Michael Player:

Well, maybe, but I always remember starting there because it was a public service department and they were not quite your usual public servants having most of them coming from a journalism background. But the admin officer took me aside and she said, "Look, now you're right here. You've got a job for life and a forty-year career and unless you actually become an alcoholic or you steal." And then I looked around and sure enough there were some people that sloped off at lunchtimes to the back bar of the local hostillery, but I never went down that route. So I guess I stuck the distance.

David Pembroke:

So when you think back to that magazine journalism course that you did, what were some of the lessons that you took from that, that you carried through your career?

Michael Player:

Well, it's a people business, communications and you establish a rapport with whoever you're dealing with, whether it's your client that you're serving or the customers out for the organisation that you're working for. And so that ability, I picked up a lot during that year of the basics of establishing a rapport with people and asking the right questions. And I always remember meeting up for doing a profile piece on a well-known New Zealand poet, Dennis Glover. And he welcomed me. I mean he didn't know me from [Barra Salt 00:09:34] , and I rang up and he answered the phone surprisingly and he said, "Yeah, come around." And he gave me an interview on that strength. So having a little bit of initiative and not just waiting for things to come to you was one of the key lessons I think I learned during that time. We were lectured by an old-time journalist from the, actually he had been the head of the Truth newspaper, which was a real scandal rag actually at the time. But he was a Scotsman and he knew his trade.

David Pembroke:

And his advice was show initiative, it's a people business. step forward, get on with it?

Michael Player:

That's exactly right. Yes. And take applied common sense approach to things. He said there are lots of people in this world that try to make things mysterious and hide behind a welter of words and technical jargon and you've just got to cut through that and you've just got to talk to people as if you're talking to them over the back fence or in the street.

David Pembroke:

So going through your career and thinking back on those lessons, what advice do you have for younger people starting out in their career who may struggle with this idea of, "Well, it's uncomfortable for me to approach people. I don't really feel like I want to take the initiative." What advice do you have for people as they're sort of acquiring the confidence to be able to do that?

Michael Player:

I think you just have to have the courage and take it gently. You don't have to be a super communicator in your first few months of the role, but I mean, I'm an introvert, so I'm a role model. You'd think that extroverts make good communicators and they do of course, but so do introverts. And I'd have to say that you just need to take it a step at a time and everybody's just a human being at the end of the day. And a bit of a smile, don't be aggressive, just get into a conversational mode and approach people, and you'll be surprised. Also, if you are asking people about themselves or you're talking about what they've done. That actually is probably one of the keys to it because people, at the end of the day, they like actually to be able to reflect on what they're doing and what they're achieving and what their views are. So it doesn't take much to tease out of people some interesting stories and everybody's got a story to tell.

David Pembroke:

And that really what you're suggesting also there is the importance and the power of being a good listener.

Michael Player:

Absolutely. I mean, you should be listening far more than you're actually talking. And that was one of the things that I did when I got into the corporate sort of more executive side of communications. My strategy really in being in meetings was to get a bit of a reputation for speaking reasonably infrequently, but trying to make at least one compelling point in every meeting. That was a little personal objective. I didn't share with people, but I did. And people would say, "He doesn't ramble on or say a lot, but when he does, we listen."

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well it's very important that you have that influence. And I'm interested then in your reflections on the role of communications and that role of influence and how you use influence and how you acquire influence. Again, when you reflect on that, what's your advice about becoming influential?

Michael Player:

I think it takes time. You have to be patient, you have to earn the respect really and the knowledge. I always say going to a new job in communications, it takes six months to even begin to know what an organization's all about. It takes a year to really start to contribute and then you're probably right for the next three to five years. It's amazing that I lasted 13 years and policing, was onto my fourth commissioner and one acting commissioner. But the police was different because it was one career and many jobs and there was an exceptional number of change going on there. But yes, the ability to actually... communications is all about the applied common sense and the willingness to say in a simple straightforward manner what others might be afraid to say. I reflect on the fact that we are an ethical profession, which we are labelled spin doctors, but that's from people who often want to aspire to actually jump across from one part of communications into another, ironically enough.

And the really good practitioners are people who have a high sense of ethical behaviour and are not afraid to speak truth to power and give frank free and frank advice. That's an old-fashioned term around the public sector these days. But being prepared to give free and frank advice, even if it is not really wanting to be initially heard. Once you develop the relationship, particularly at senior levels, with your clients and those who might be spokespeople and you're trying to role play them through tricky situations, then they actually, you do after a while, they will respect that you are able to reflect back to them perhaps what others won't tell them further in the line.

David Pembroke:

So in terms then of building a career in communications, what are the habits and what are the skills that people need to acquire to be successful over time as you have been. You had a long career, but what were those habits and what were the skills that you acquired that were critical to your success?

Michael Player:

A peer of mine early on told me there are the three A's that are the key to good communications, accessibility, affability and ability. And of the three of those, accessibility is the most important. So you need to be available when your client needs help in a communication situation, a crisis develops, whatever you need to be accessible. So that's probably... I feel for young practitioners these days because there is a lot more pressure on to achieve life balance. And also guys, as in the workforce now must play a more equal part in family situations and do a lot more caring for children and also what would have been previously called household chores. I must admit that over the early years of my career, well right through actually, I was always pretty well on 24 by seven call. And I can't... there's numerous holidays where my wife would say that I had to cancel at short notice.

So that accessibility and availability are keys as well as I've stressed [or in 00:18:09] my remarks, you need to be able to get on with people. And if you're in a job that you don't like and you actually don't like the people

that you're working for, then move, don't stay there because you're not doing either you or the client any good. And the ability bit, you will pick up. Every day is a learning experience, and you can go to a certain amount of professional development courses, but it's very hard to learn. It's still, I believe, communications is more still a trade rather than a profession in the sense that you can artificially learn techniques. But you really need to... it needs to be a living thing. And somebody like yourself, David, who's equally got had a long career and a varied one in terms of communications, I'm sure it is more of a vocation.

And I hope more people in communications will stay in the lane of communications. I've seen a lot of people look up at the shiny offerings of HR and corporate relations and other diverse, more generic type professions and jobs. But communications, you might not get rich in communications, but you certainly never get bored on it.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, I don't know why people would ever leave. I think as you say, every day is a new day and there's an opportunity every day. And particularly in that public sector sense, as you've mentioned right at the beginning, you spoke about a vocation, you spoke about going to see the vocational guidance counsellor. So when you look back on that career, you do clearly see that the work, your work life, your professional work life was a vocation.

Michael Player:

Absolutely, yes. Absolutely. And I continue through into, I'm no longer in paid work, but I'm not retired from life. I hate that word retirement.

David Pembroke:

That's right.

Michael Player:

And so now, I'm trying to give back a bit and so I'm fortunate enough to be serving on an environmental trust and I'm the chair of that. And of course, being a small non-governmental organisation, communication is one of the keys. And so I still get to exercise my skills in that sense. And you look for opportunities and it just sort of continues to happen naturally as you move from one phase to the next. You never lose [what 00:21:03] that way of operating.

David Pembroke:

So when you look back, again asking you to go back to that young man who, first opportunity in the tourism board, all the way through to the professional who retired, how have you seen the game change and how have you seen the game not change?

Michael Player:

How have I seen it change? Well, obviously the media channel side has changed so dramatically. For most of my period and decades in the role, the mainstream media were the channel of choice for citizens to get their news. That's changed now. And I was just doing a little bit of prep for your podcast, was looking at the figures now where streaming video on demand and podcasts actually right just behind mainstream news in terms of New Zealanders' viewing habits. So I think that it's so much harder now, that there's so many different channels. Everybody now is a publisher in their own right. I don't believe there was, earlier in my career, so much misinformation or disinformation. It wasn't a thing, it wasn't a deliberate thing. And I just cringe now when I look at politicians. I served as a press secretary, and I just cringe now when I see that some of the over

media trained politicians that really just use lines and that they've been fed talking points and just harp on them ad nauseam it is, it's like their brains have checked out.

But then you see idiots, you see Donald Trump type types and they just say absolute garbage. But obviously, they've worked out and their advisors have worked out, if you say it often enough and you say it in such a jokey and relatable way, then people actually start to believe you've got some charisma and the next thing they'll flipping, well, vote for you as well. So I am starting to sound like a grumpy old man, but I believe that perhaps we have moved and not for the better. So the basics of communication will always, you can't not communicate. You communicate by your demeanour, you communicate by what you say, you communicate by your overall behaviour.

I was a bit astounded one day when one of the police commissioners fairly early on in my relationship during his time said, he said to me, "I can tell you've been well brought up." He said, "Your parents must be great people by the way you carry yourself by the things that you say and by the way you listen." And I'd never really reflected on the fact that I had indeed come from, in the 50s and 60s, which was obviously post-war time and economy was booming, my parents were middle class, never had a whole lot of money, but had enough, and we just had a good lifestyle. And another one of my CEs, Dame Margaret Bazley who's regarded as one of our top public servants in New Zealand, she said, "Actually, if you've got a team and you're working with a team, you need to know what's happening in their lives at home. Because if their lives are home under stress and there's difficulties, then that person won't be a top performer at work."

And she was right. And so that old-fashioned term of pastoral care comes when you become a senior communicator. And so that's just looking out for your neighbour, looking out for people. Those are the sort of common things that are a thread through anybody's life when you boil it down.

David Pembroke:

So for government communicators working in this sort of highly contested, fragmented context, again, seeking your advice again, how do they be more effective? How do they understand the channels? How do they create the content? How do they evaluate what they're doing? Because clearly in some of the work that you did with the police, as that media environment was evolving, you were starting to change and adapt and look at different ways to get the message through, even though the audience weren't just sitting as they used to in one big blob in front of the six o'clock news each night to get their information.

Michael Player:

One of the privileges I had, reasonably late in the piece, was being anointed as head of communications from the public sector by then one of the state services commissioners. And that arose because we used to have a monthly meeting of the heads of communications of the core departments of state. And that was a real learning opportunity for us as peers to step back from our individual departments and to look at the trends, to look at the changes in technology, et cetera, and to actually brainstorm ways around how we were going to portray ourselves as a group, as a cadre of professional communicators. And in fact, in 2000, we were very stung by this term spin doctors, and there was a government, an opposition who became the government who really attacked our profession quite badly. It sort of became every election, communications people would become the kicking box.

And so we actually sat down and we looked at best practise in like democracies such as Australia and the UK and Canada, and we actually came up with a series of ways of doing things, and we recorded it down in a document and shared that throughout the public sector. And it's amazing, that piece of work, it wasn't a large piece of work, it was published in 2008, 9, even as recently as a year ago, I was still getting inquiries about what we did then and how we did it. And it was because people pulled down the barriers of the narrow blinkers of just looking in their own department and saw across, stood back and said, "How do we get the message across? How do we embrace these new media in the form of social media sector and how do we do it

in a way that helps inform, educate, communicate, and becomes a two-way conversation, not just Brochureware like some of us used to do in the old days?"

David Pembroke:

I love reading that stuff because it's funny, I sit on the OECD's expert panel for public sector communication and the problems in Wellington are the same problems in Canberra, it's the same problems in Dublin, are the same problems in London. It's same, same. And it sort of goes back to your first point that it's a people business and really people are people, doesn't matter where you meet them, wherever you find them, wherever you come across them, they've got the same Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It's all of them. Everyone's got the same.

Michael Player:

Yeah, that's exactly right. I mean, I see you had on your show recently, Strath Gordon. Of course, Strath and I were colleagues and I still keep in touch via social media because he was head of New South Wales police at the time and we attended a couple of, we've visited each other and of course, he's got a foot in both New Zealand and in Australia as well and way back. There's lots of connections, lots of connections there.

David Pembroke:

Indeed, indeed, indeed.

There you have it. Part one of this special two-part discussion with Michael Player. From that young guy back in the day when he started out at the tourism course all the way through to the top, and the simplicity of the advice that he shared with us. The three A's, the basics are the basics and people being at the centre of the work that we do every day. On the next episode of GovComms and in the second part of my conversation with Michael Player, join us as we discuss Michael's important experiences in crisis communications from the Pike River Mine disaster to the Christchurch earthquakes. You don't want to miss the stories and the insights from this wonderfully experienced man.

If you do have some time and you did enjoy this episode, a rating or a review is always appreciated because it does help for the programme to be found. Thanks to Michael Player, thanks to you the audience. My name is David Pembroke, and we'll be back at the same time in a fortnight, but for the moment, it's bye for now.

Voice Over:

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