



EP#170 UBUNTU & STORYTELLING:  
BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE  
PUBLIC SERVICE

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WITH ALFRED CHIDEMBO

TRANSCRIPT

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Alfred Chidembo:

Ubuntu is about shifting the focus from me as an individual to others because we are interconnected and finding ways that we can connect better with people. It is not really about the way that we deliver a service, but it's the spirit with which we deliver. We render that service. Really connect because when we are connected, it starts to take care of collaboration. And when we start to collaborate better, we become very innovative as well. And when we build those great relationships, we start to build psychological safety.

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. Welcome once again to GovComms, a podcast about the function and practise of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. As we begin today, may I first acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting and broadcasting today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging. And indeed recognise the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region. May I also pay my respects to all First Nations people of the lands from where anyone listening to this podcast today is joining us from?

Joining me today is Alfred Chidembo. Now, Alfred is a TEDx speaker, a humanitarian, and changemaker, and indeed a proud member of the Australian Public Service. Alfred has lots of strings to his bow. In 2015, he founded Aussie Books for Zim, a non-profit organisation dedicated to enhancing literacy in Zimbabwe.

Since its inception, the organisation has shipped over 150,000 books and established 20 libraries and built four of these libraries from the ground up with two funded by grants from the Australian High Commission in Zimbabwe, through the direct aid program. Alfred's dedication to education and community development has been recognised with multiple honours, including the 2019 Mayor's Excellence Award and a nomination for Citizen of the Year at the City of Wollongong Australia Day Awards. In addition to his charitable works, Alfred is the people and culture lead at the Department of Industry Science and Resources.

He also holds a PhD in materials engineering. His approach to leadership and community service is inspired by the Ubuntu philosophy, which means humanity to others and often described as reminding us that I am what I am because of who we all are. He joins me in the studio. Alfred, welcome to GovComms.

Alfred Chidembo:

Oh, what an honour to be on your podcast. David, thank you so much for having me.

David Pembroke:

Now, listen, before we get into the meat and potatoes of the work and all the rest of it, tell us the Alfred Chidembo story.

Alfred Chidembo:

Where do I start, David? Where do I start?

David Pembroke:

Right at the beginning. Right at the beginning. That's the best place.

Alfred Chidembo:

Well, I was born in Zimbabwe and I remember the first few years of my life was in the village in a northeastern part of Zimbabwe, little village called Mudzi. And if I can paint a picture of what Mudzi looked like at that time, which it still looks like at the moment because not much development has happened there. Mudzi is a community of subsistence farmers. People who survive on subsistence farming had no industry in that place. And I remember walking to school as a grade one student, barefoot five kilometres one way.

When people looked at us or when people look at that picture, when I paint that picture for them, they think we were poor kids. But I would like to believe we were probably some of the happiest kids we could find around because we had so much fun. We looked forward to going to school. We had a really good community around us that helped us in everything that we did.

David Pembroke:

So did you have brothers and sisters, cousins, friends growing up? How many people walked with you on that journey each day to school?

Alfred Chidembo:

That was lots of cousins, lots of neighbours as well. Kids from neighbouring villages who would walk along with us. But I grew up in a family of seven and my dad was in the city. My mom was still in the village with us, the younger three boys, and then my four older siblings were in the city. So my dad took us out of the village one by one until all of us were in the city to get good education. And that happened for me when I was seven years old. I moved to the city and I walked into the library for the first time, David, and the world just opened up for me.

David Pembroke:

What was your father's employment?

Alfred Chidembo:

My dad, he worked as a manager at a retail shop. And he was such a proud man. He loved his job. He was really good with communication. He built relationships within that space and that made him a very successful manager.

David Pembroke:

And so the discovery of books and education, was that in Harare? Was that the main city or was it another city that you're in?

Alfred Chidembo:

No, for me, I moved to Masvingo. That's more towards the south from Harare.

David Pembroke:

Okay.

Alfred Chidembo:

And I remember-

David Pembroke:

How many people in that city?

Alfred Chidembo:

At that time, maybe the population could have been a little over maybe 200,000, 300,000. Very, very small, small city. And because my dad was really big on education. He encouraged us to go to the library and he gave us 50 cents. 50 cents, David, to register the local library. And I walked into that space. I couldn't believe the amount of books that I saw because in the village school we didn't have any books. We relied on the teacher who read to us and he would be the only one with a book. I learned how to write my name in the sand. Imagine that? Because that was my first classroom under a big tree.

But then when I moved to the city, government school, great government school with all the infrastructure and everything that we needed, I go into the library for the first time and I think, oh my goodness, I'm going to get lost in this place. So I started reading and I just read as much as I could. But I had a sibling, my sister, an older sister who just loved reading. So she would go to the library with me as well and would just pick up books and go back home and continue reading.

David Pembroke:

Do you remember the first books that you read?

Alfred Chidembo:

There were a lot of books that I read. I remember the comics though. Hot Shot Hamish. I read The Famous Five. I read Hardy Boys, The Adventures of Tintin, The Three Musketeers, even Nancy Drew. I read so much.

David Pembroke:

It's interesting, isn't it? Because I remember I lived a privileged life in the suburbs of North Sydney and we used to go to the Stanton library as a boy to read Obelix and Asterix, and Paddington. And sitting there and lying in the library and sitting, and just being lost in these wonderful stories. I didn't typically feel like I was learning, but I was just enjoying the power of story.

Alfred Chidembo:

Yeah. That's exactly what it is, isn't it? And I look back now, I look at my kids when they're reading books because my kids are readers and they bring these books home and I just get lost. It takes me back to that time when I see the books that they're reading now, The Famous Five collection that they have and I'm thinking, "I read these books when I was your age as well." It just takes me back to that time.

David Pembroke:

So take us on that story then as from a young seven-year-old boy from the village into the city, living in a household, going to the library regularly. What interests did you have outside of that in school? Were you a sporting kid as well, or were you... What was life like?

Alfred Chidembo:

I was a sporting kid. I played sports. Every kind of sport that I could get myself into, I just got straight into it. We had two swimming pools at our school. Something that you don't normally see here in Australia. I haven't seen schools that actually have swimming pools.

David Pembroke:

Private schools do.

Alfred Chidembo:

Yeah, private schools. But we were government school. Imagine that?

David Pembroke:

Right.

Alfred Chidembo:

We had two swimming pools. One for the kids up to year two, and then for the senior primary school kids. And I got into swimming. We played soccer. We didn't have a rugby team at that time in the primary school, but we had athletics as well. So I just played all the sports that they offered at the school. And when I got to high school, that's when I really explored more. I played cricket and I played rugby as well.

David Pembroke:

But academics obviously was a key part of it. It sounds like your father was very keen that, yes, enjoy your athletics and your sports and other things and your community events, but keep your head in the books, Alfred.

Alfred Chidembo:

Oh yeah. That's exactly what the message was because my dad always used to say, "You know what? Get a good education because no one can never take that away from you. You can never underestimate the power of education." And the reason why he said that because he was very bright. At least that's what he told us. So we believed it. He said he was very bright in school, but he never got an opportunity to study further because he had to go and work in the city and support some of his siblings. And that's the story of many Zimbabweans during that time. They would have to go and work in the city so that they can help their siblings as well.

David Pembroke:

So from an education point of view, you obviously did undergraduate in engineering. So where did that happen? When did you start to think that that was going to be the path for you to begin with?

Alfred Chidembo:

I think it all started in primary school. I developed a love for science and mathematics in primary school. It was very competitive in the class that I was in. But I remember one incident where my grade seven teacher really put me down in front of the whole class and I was standing. She asked me to go to the board and work out the mathematics problem. And I struggled with that. And she had a good go at me. I remember standing in front of 42 other kids and I just broke down and started crying because I couldn't solve this problem and she just had a good go at me. Up until now, when I tell this story, my palms get sweaty because it was very traumatic for me.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, I bet.

Alfred Chidembo:

But then again, you can choose to be a victim. You can say things happened to me or things happened for me. And I think at that moment it happened for me because I made sure that, or I was determined that I'll do so much better in mathematics. I was going to put so much effort after that. And I ended up with a degree in mathematics and chemistry. That was my first degree.

David Pembroke:

Oh, before you got into engineering? So mathematics and chemistry.

Alfred Chidembo:

Before I got into engineering.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, right. And so was that undergraduate degree in Zimbabwe?

Alfred Chidembo:

That was my undergraduate degree in Namibia.

David Pembroke:

Oh, Namibia. Yeah. How did you get to Namibia?

Alfred Chidembo:

Oh, I love telling this story. So after high school... So I'm in the city. This village boy has grown up in the city now. He goes to high school, starts playing rugby, develops this high level of confidence. I finished high school at A-levels because in Zimbabwe, go all the way up to A-levels. And my dad passed away just after I finished high school. So he was the breadwinner and he had bought a beautiful home for us in the city. And when he passed away, and my mom was a housewife, so we didn't have a source of income anymore. And my sister, one of my sisters came to me and said, "Hey, you know what? I'll be going to Namibia for a week. Would you like to come along?" And I thought, "Well, why not? Let's go."

So I went to Namibia with what was supposed to be a seven-day trip. It turned out to be a seven-year stay, David. And then I got to the University of Namibia. Funny enough, I wanted to register for engineering. So they allowed me to do my first registration for the engineering degree. And when I did that, I couldn't get a scholarship to transfer because that first cohort of engineers were supposed to go to South Africa to complete the degree. So they had a partnership between the University of Namibia and universities in South Africa.

So I didn't finish my engineering. So I thought, "Well, if I cannot go to South Africa and complete my engineering degree I might as well just fall back on what I am comfortable with." And that was mathematics and chemistry. So my first degree was in majoring in mathematics and chemistry.

David Pembroke:

And then did you do your engineering degree there or did you move to another university to do engineering?

Alfred Chidembo:

I love this. Then I started teaching.

David Pembroke:

Oh, you did teaching?



Alfred Chidembo:

I taught at two schools in Namibia and I thoroughly enjoyed it. Probably one of the best jobs I've ever had. And then after that I realised that I wanted to grow. And I remember when I was in Namibia, I used to say this to my sister, I say, "One day I want to work with the best. I want to be the best at whatever it is that I'm going to do." And that was a statement that I put in my personal statement, which I used for when I was applying for postgraduate studies.

I always wanted to work with the best no matter what field it was going to be. So I saved up enough money and went across to South Africa to do an honours degree in chemistry. And then after that, I did my master's degree in chemistry. Then I got a scholarship to come to the University of Wollongong to do my PhD in engineering.

David Pembroke:

Okay. That's how you ended up in Australia.

Alfred Chidembo:

Yes.

David Pembroke:

So did you choose Australia or Australia chose you? There was the opportunity to come to the University of Wollongong. Otherwise would you have stayed in South Africa?

Alfred Chidembo:

I could have gone pretty much anywhere.

David Pembroke:

Anywhere.

Alfred Chidembo:

Because I always remember I was saying I wanted to work with the best in the world. It's something I didn't know what it was. And the more I continued with chemistry, it became I want to work with the best in chemistry.

So I was looking for postgraduate studies in the States, in the UK. And I, one day in 2008, after finishing my master's degree, midnight on Valentine's Day. I was sitting in the office, googling all these scholarships. And guess what? Naturally you would have Australia right at the top because alphabetical order. And then they had two scholarships. So I applied for those two and then I got one. And then I came to Australia in Wollongong, landed in Wollongong of all places.

David Pembroke:

And so when you were sitting over there thinking about coming to Australia and you were researching about Australia, what were some of the things that you picked up about Australia?

Alfred Chidembo:

I was particularly looking at Wollongong because I'd never heard of Wollongong, right? I was like, "What? A place called Wollongong? Really?" And when I Googled Wollongong, the beach just for me just ticked that box. This is a place where I could live. This is a place where I could study. And I know I'll grow. They also had a really

great program, but I just loved pictures. As we were talking about Wollongong early on, you mentioned the escarpment and the ocean, and that really stayed with me. And I was like, "This is a place where I can see myself staying for a few years."

David Pembroke:

I've declared an interest to Alfred earlier that I began my career in Wollongong. And Wollongong in Australia gets a bit of a bad rap. But I had a very happy couple of years down there. And as you say, it's one of the most, that northern part of Wollongong is one of the most beautiful parts of the world. Wonderful community, great people. So anyone listening from Wollongong, Alfred and I send our best to you. So again, tell us the story. Take us from there. So you've landed in Wollongong because we're going to get to it in a minute because you've obviously moved into different parts and you lose nothing from having all of this education along the way. It just enriches your ability to be able to understand and perceive and to interpret and to communicate. But it's an unusual path in many ways, isn't it?

Alfred Chidembo:

It is. It's only now when I look back, I realise that it's an unusual path.

David Pembroke:

And you've done all these things. It's like how did that happen? Because accidental in many ways also by the sounds of things.

Alfred Chidembo:

That is, yes, spot on David. And so when I moved to Wollongong, I developed this love and desire for speaking, developing my speaking skills, because I had presented at two conferences in South Africa when I was doing my master's degree. And I actually won two prizes for that. And my supervisor came to me and said, "Hey, you've got a gift. You've got a gift. When you stand in front of people, people listen." And I thought, "Well, wow, okay, great, that's great." But we need to explore this a bit more, right? So when I came to Australia, I thought, "Well, I'm going to explore this a little bit more."

As a student, I would go up to Sydney and join Professional Speakers Australia and hear all these great speakers come on stage and share their stories. I was just amazed by how they crafted their stories and so much impact how they could move an audience through a whole lot of emotions. And I thought, "Wow, this is amazing." So I developed a love for speaking, and I remember writing this in my journal that one day I would love to do a TEDx speech, and I just kept it there. And this was in 2010. But throughout that whole time, I just focused on my PhD.

In the first year of my PhD, first six months of my PhD, I published an article in one of the highest ranking journals in Renewable Energy through the Royal Society of Chemistry in the UK. And then I worked with some brilliant guys who were working on graphene and nanoparticles and all sorts of interesting materials. We were developing electrode materials for supercapacitors. And then we published another article and we published another article.

We got into the groove of things and built up this momentum. And I really enjoyed my PhD because of that. I worked with some really, really great people who were very helpful. So when I finished my studies, I remember walking down the corridor and I had met Paul Scully. He's now the member of parliament for Wollongong. He was working at the university and I said, "Paul, you know what? I've got an idea. I've come this far and I'm graduating soon. But where I came from, the school where I started off, they still don't have books. I've got this idea of going and picking up books from Vinnies or..." Yeah, it was Vinnies at that time. "I want to send these books back to Zimbabwe for the kids to start reading from a young age."



And he said, "Well, great. That's a great idea. Why don't you do it?" I said, "Well, I'm scared." I said, "What are you scared of?" And we talked through it and before I knew it, I was at Vinnies, got my first donation of books 564 from Vinnies. And then it just started the whole movement. Then I had book drives, then somebody got us a Facebook page, then I went on ABC radio. Then Lifeline came on board, and then they donated so many books to us.

Before we knew it, we had 2,000 books. Then it went to 3,000 books. We filled our garage with books. My little apartment was full of books. Our friends garages full of books. We just had books everywhere. So my wife went and registered the charity. Aussie Books for Zim in 2015 and said, "There you go, you run it. It's your thing now. You started this." So I started running a charity. And at that time I had also started working for a startup company that was working on electrolyzers, building electrolyzers in Wollongong. So there was a lot happening there, and my kids were born around about the same time.

David Pembroke:

How did you manage it all?

Alfred Chidembo:

I don't know, David. I really don't know. Somehow I managed, but you know what kept me going, David? There were times when it got so hard with the charity and I thought, "You know what? Let's just park this. This is too much. We've taken on too much." And my wife kept saying to me, "Well, if you stop right now, what do you think is going to happen to those kids who may not get access to reading material just because you stopped?" And we couldn't stop. In our minds, I think we quit a hundred times, but we kept going. We packed shipping containers full of books. We sent the first consignment with 30,000 books to Zimbabwe. And guess where some of those books went? To my former school.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, the numbers are, I think 30,000 children in rural communities have now benefited from Aussie Books for Zim. How do you feel about that when you consider the impact that you've had?

Alfred Chidembo:

I was talking to a friend sometime last week about this exactly. They asked me exactly the same question. I said, "How do you feel?" And I said, "I feel like there's still so much to be done because 30,000 compared to the millions of kids that you have in Zimbabwe, there are some are still falling through the cracks." Now, this is where I really get emotional because I know that the kids will fall through the cracks. The boys have it easier. It's still hard for them, but they have it easier.

But the girls, it's not that easy for them. I look at my kids. I have got a 10-year-old girl and seven-year-old girl. The girls get married at about 13, 14 years old, David, because they dropped out of school. Their grades were not so good. Their literacy levels are pretty low. So they drop out of school. They don't transition to high school.

David Pembroke:

But the expectations are that they will drop out. The people expect them to, and they're not encouraged to go on and gain education.

Alfred Chidembo:

You're looking at about 50% of those kids dropping out. The girls get married at the age of 13. They're not getting married to a 13-year-old boy or 14-year-old boy. They're getting married to probably... They become a

second wife or a third wife, whatever it is, what the situation is. But you want kids to be kids. You want them to enjoy their childhood. You want them to develop their potential and blossom and become these amazing professionals. And so I always look back at that picture and I realise that 30,000 could just be a drop in the ocean. There are so many other kids that need help, and it all starts with just giving them a book, giving them an opportunity to open a book and read and develop their literacy. It can happen for any other kid.

David Pembroke:

And again, you're obviously very passionate around literacy and the importance of literacy for people to be able to achieve and accomplish. And I think for those of us living a comfortable life here in Australia, to even hear that story about the reality for young girls in Zimbabwe, it's incredibly challenging just to... Because as soon as you said that... I would never have thought about that until you just raised it with me now. Understanding that it's a much larger problem than just the literary piece, do you look to try to understand ways that you may be able to change that, change the culture?

Alfred Chidembo:

Well, I think what we've done is we've picked our little corner where we know we can make a difference. Because if we try to do everything else, it can be very overwhelming. So literacy for me, it speaks to me because my story, just like you've heard me talk about my own story, just opening a book and travelling to different parts of the world through books opened up the way I think, the way I had a desire to travel around the world to go to these places that I read about the countryside of England through *The Famous Five*, reading about all of that and having lemonade with *The Famous Five*, I didn't even know what lemonade was.

But you could start to imagine all these things, right? Solving mysteries with *The Hardy Boys* and the Aztec warriors in South America. And this is a kid from Mudzi who's reading about this. And you're thinking, these places actually exist? I can actually go to these places. And I think that really sparked this sense of curiosity and discovery for me. And in science, I got to explore a lot of that.

David Pembroke:

So with your science, and let's go back to the story. You've finished your PhD. You've started the charity. It's all up and moving. You're working for the startup. What was the journey for you to move more into the people space, the people and culture space where you started to take an interest perhaps in people rather than atoms and particles and other things?

Alfred Chidembo:

I think as a scientist, you're working in the lab, sometimes I would find myself in the lab at 2:00, 3:00 in the morning all by myself. You're not dealing with people. You're dealing with a system that you understand. It is complex in its own way, but you can find solutions to it. You know if you follow a certain protocol, things are going to work out in this way. If they don't, you can tweak one or two things and you get the results that you expect. That's the thing with science. I could do that.

But with people, you can't do that because people are complex. But I realised that through the charity, again, all these things are interconnected. Through the charity we started talking to people. Whenever we went to collect books, we'll drive up down to Nowra, drive up to Sydney and North Sydney to collect books. What we did was we would get there, have a conversation with the people, whoever was donating books, have a cup of tea with them.

We realised that we were forming some really great relationships. We loved meeting up with people, hearing their own stories as well. So when I told my story, I also heard so many stories where people would sit with us and talk about their passion for books, their childhood and all sorts of things. And that's when we realised that

relationships were our currency in the charity because we had some really, really great relationship. We still have some really great relationships, and we formed some friendships for life through the charity.

So that's when I realised that I have this passion for people, but I couldn't exercise it then because I didn't know what I could do with it. All I did was stand in front of people. I pitched our idea of the charity. I told stories of Aussie Books for Zim. I went to Zimbabwe, gathered all these stories, brought them back and inspired people. But I still had to feed my family, and I had the degree to do that. I had a science degree to do that, degrees to do that. So I kept doing that until I moved to Canberra and I joined the public service again in the science space working at the TGA. But then I got an opportunity from one CEO from ThinkPlace.

He gave me an opportunity and said, "Hey, maybe you should come and join us as one of our consultants here working in the Human Insights team." Then I realised that my passion for people, I could actually do something with it. Then I could stand in front of people and help them in front of teams and help them to work through their strategic plans, their ways of working and building a great culture.

David Pembroke:

And you've all the way through the development of your... Well, your life really, and indeed through the development of Aussie Books for Zim, you've applied the learnings and the practise of Ubuntu. So explain, how does that sit as an underlying philosophy in the way that you go about the work that you do, whether it's your professional work or whether it's your charitable work?

Alfred Chidembo:

I like that you said the way of life. It is a way of life. It is a way of being. It's not something that you go and practise. And I think we all have Ubuntu in us, all of us. And Ubuntu is about shifting the focus from me as an individual to others because we are interconnected and finding ways that we can connect better with people. So just like what happened this morning when I walked into your studio and you were sitting at the desk and I greeted you, and I told you about how I got lost looking for parking space, and then we start to share stories.

Eliza asked us what we had for breakfast. Funny enough, in some of the cultures in Southern Africa who practise Ubuntu, when they ask you, "Have you eaten?" Instead of saying, "How are you doing?" They say, "Have you eaten?" And you can respond and say, Oh, I've eaten a lot or a little bit." And that is all about checking your wellbeing. Are you okay? Have you eaten? Yes. It all starts from there. It means that we are connected just because we are in the same space. And then in South Africa, they say sawubona. When they see somebody you meet on a path, they say sawubona.

David Pembroke:

Sawubona?

Alfred Chidembo:

Yes. And it means I see you. It's not to say, "How are you doing?" You say, "I see you." And then you respond and say, "I'm here." So we are acknowledging that we are in each other's space. And the moment we do that, it means that we have to take care of each other. It means we have a responsibility for each other. I can put my own problems aside and focus on new problems. And when I do that, you also do the same thing. And guess what? We begin to form relationships.

So Ubuntu shows up in everything that I do. The charity, I cannot stop. I cannot stop collecting books just because it's hard. There's a kid who needs this more than I do, and I'll go out of my way to make sure that they get that opportunity because you don't know what it's going to do for them and their family. So it's not really just about the kid, it's about their families, their communities, the generations to come. You are always looking out for people in that way.

David Pembroke:

So take us through how you think about Ubuntu in your role with the Department of industry and the work that you do inside the department, in service of the Australian people? Because effectively every Australian public servant takes on the job because they work in service of the government serving the people. But how do you apply that and how do you think about that in your daily work?

Alfred Chidembo:

So in my daily work, I just show up. So it means whenever I show up at work, I'm talking to people, I'm gauging where they are. I can never walk into the office, David, and sit there by my desk and not greet anyone. It feels heavy for me to do that because I'm in their space, they're in my space. I just need to check on them. Just reach out to them and say, "Hey, how are you doing today?" Because these people are not just individuals who show up at work and they start being amazing at work. Now they have families. They have homes where they're coming from.

So if you can connect, then you can start to build those relationships where even if somebody walks in and you realise that their shoulders are down, you can't ignore that. Ubuntu says you can't ignore that. You have to reach out and say, "Hey, find a way of connecting with them so that they can tell you more so that you can help them." So this is what I do when I get to work. I'm talking to people all the time. I'm Gauging where they are, checking on their well-being. Not just ticking a box to say, "Hey, how are you doing?" And say, "Oh, I'm well, thanks."

And then we walk past each other and we do that a lot. But it's really taking it to the next level because these human beings that we work with, our colleagues are not just... They're not machines. They have backgrounds. They have characters. They have stories. They have all these. They have communities where they're coming from and families. So in the people in culture space, really, I'm reminded of something that Professor Mbigi from South Africa wrote about in one of his books. He says, "It is not really about the way that we deliver a service, but it's the spirit with which we deliver. We render that service."

So I can come in and say, "I'm a people and culture person." I have a checklist and I'm just checking all these things and say, "Oh, this is our staff action plan. We've checked the list. This is what we do, dah, dah, dah, dah." But then the spirit with which we are delivering that service. If you are using Ubuntu, if you are tapping into Ubuntu, it means that when you are doing a consultation with somebody and you want... Whether it's change management, you're doing some consultations, it means you have to sit down with people and actively listen because I am because you are, you are because I am.

It means I'm looking out for them. I'm not just doing consultation for the sake of ticking a box. I really want to know exactly where people are and where I can help. I'll find ways to help. So that's the approach that I use because when we do that in our places of work, even our clients whom we serve also get to see the difference because we are all connected. We are collaborating really well. We are very innovative. We feel valued. We feel that the work that we are doing is making a difference. Our clients will feel that.

David Pembroke:

So what advice then do you have for people who might not find it that easy to go and have conversations? They may be shy. They may not have that type of personality. They may find it difficult. What advice do you have for people to perhaps apply and learn the skills of being more open and more engaging and being able to have, in some cases, difficult conversations with some of those people who you've got to engage with?

Alfred Chidembo:

And I think what you're touching on introverts there, and my sister is one of those people. She's very introverted. And she would not go out and strike a conversation with somebody straight away. But nowadays,

we have so many platforms for communicating. So you can go on your teams chat or your instant messaging chat and just say hi to somebody. Then you don't have to switch on your camera. You don't have to speak into a microphone. You just type and say, "Hey, how are you doing today?"

If you're engaging with authenticity, David, it shows, right? Even the questions that you ask, the open-ended questions because you're curious. You want to know. And now we could be introverted or we could be extroverted, but you know what if we lead with that curiosity to really just try to understand who people are, and we start to form these relationships, and then we become aware of those who are introverted, those who are extroverted, and you say, "Hey, you know what. Let me give them their space because we've taken time to understand each other." So I would say it's all about tapping into all these other forms of communication that we have and really making use of them.

David Pembroke:

So one of the big current issues in the Australian public service at the moment, post-COVID is now remote working, and we have people working. Everyone is not in the office all the time. People working from home on different days. And it's an issue in trying to understand what is the pathway to effectiveness and how are we going to make this new reality successful over time? What's your experience of remote working and how are you being effective in that new world?

Alfred Chidembo:

Remote working is a challenge because it's something that we've just recently adopted, so we are still finding ways of doing this better. And again, it requires a lot of effort. A lot of effort and a lot of planning. So most teams, I've noticed this, David, that there's somebody... You can actually have a new hire who comes into your team, you've never met them in person, and then two years later they leave and you've never met this person. This happened with teams.

David Pembroke:

You've never seen them.

Alfred Chidembo:

You've never seen them. You talk to them, yes, maybe in the meetings that you have online, but you've never seen them. And I'm thinking there's something that we are losing there, especially in terms of connections, building the connections because it makes a difference when we meet up in person.

David Pembroke:

We could not have this conversation that we're having over the computer or over the phone. It doesn't happen. You have to be in the presence of people, I believe. So I can see your eyes, I can see your head, I can see the way you're moving, and I can pick it up. I pick up that engagement. So again, sorry, I interrupted you.

Alfred Chidembo:

Oh, you're spot on, David, because that's exactly what it is. When we are communicating with people, when we're engaging with people, we engage all our senses, right?

David Pembroke:

Yeah.

Alfred Chidembo:

And when we take away two or three of them, it means that we are missing something there. So if I was on a teams call right now, when I talked about kids falling through the cracks, you wouldn't have noticed that I got teary-eyed. Now you see that I'm getting teary-eyed, and you see that I'm really passionate about this because we are in each other's space like this. We are connected. So it is a challenge, and I think what it requires is for leaders to be intentional with it. Sometimes we can go for a whole year, a whole year without meeting in person as teams.

We can just sit aside a day, two days in a year. Two days, David. At the beginning of the year, bring your teams together, connect, and you don't have to talk about the work stuff. Really connect because when we are connected, it starts to take care of collaboration. And when we start to collaborate better, we become very innovative as well. And when we build those great relationships, we start to build psychological safety. And then the innovation happens.

But if you take away those bits and you don't have psychological safety, because you can... On screen, you can get a message that comes to you and you can interpret it whichever way you want, depending on where you are. And I'm sitting at home in my own little corner, and I can interpret that message whichever way I want, and I can say I don't feel psychologically safe. But in person I can pick up the nuances and be able to shift that conversation to build rapport. So it's for leaders. It's really about really putting that effort into bringing the teams together at least twice a year. Bring the teams.

David Pembroke:

But is that going to be enough two days a year? I would've thought... I don't know. It's interesting here. In my company here at Content Group, everyone comes into the office and I think they come into the office because they like to come into the office because we hopefully create an environment where they like to come and work and they like to get out of home and engage. That's my perception of it all. But I find it this whole thing, I just don't know how I would operate. I just don't think I could do it successfully. I don't think I could get the performance out of the team if people were spending large amounts of time not in the office.

Alfred Chidembo:

There are pros and cons to it as well, David. There are some people who just thrive in that space, and then others who just really need the connection. But the good thing about the public service is that people have... They can work in all these different offices and you can just go into your office. You don't have to all need to come to Canberra, but their office is all over the place, which they've done really well to do.

So you can just walk into the office if you need that connection. But some people would just go into that default setting of saying, "Hey, I'm just going to work from home." But we need that. We need to bring people together. Two times a year, it's not enough. It's not enough. If you could do it at least two, three times in a week, that would be great. But then when you look at the bigger, so many departments where you have people in Adelaide, in WA to bring those people into Canberra so that everyone connects, that's going to cost a lot of money.

So within their offices, they can actually have those office days where people come in and connect then. But then at a broader level, much bigger level, just bring the teams together. Just bring the whole branch. Bring the whole division together at least once or twice a year so that people get to meet. Because then you start to break the silos. You hear people talking about silos in the public service because people don't know each other.

They don't know who's doing what and where they sit. So there's no way they're going to start communicating like that out of the blue. But if you can bring them in the same space where they build these connections and the relationships, then they start to collaborate better.

David Pembroke:



So for you, in your role in the public service, in the department of industry, what are you hoping to achieve in the next, say, 12 to 18 months? To me, you see, you're obviously a very motivated person, very task driven, very objective driven. What are the changes that you want to make and the improvements that you want to make, and the impact you want to make as an Australian public servant in this next period of time?

Alfred Chidembo:

Well, there's a lot that I would love to do, David, especially around the people space, especially working with leaders and helping them to realise that you can never say you don't have enough time for your people. That's the first thing that you need to focus on. The work will take care of itself if we take care of our people. Because when we don't take care of our people or when they're going through challenges, retention suffers. I always talk about the four D's that you hire somebody, they come into your workplace and then they realise that they're not feeling valued. They don't have their sense of belonging and the sense of purpose, it kind of diminishes.

The four D's come into play. They get disappointed, they're disillusioned, they disengage, and then they depart. So for me, I think I would want to help leaders to realise that there is a way of doing things, showing vulnerability, building relationships, and all these soft skills that sometimes people want to brush aside because they think it's difficult. But this is exactly where the work is. If you can start to build your teams around that so that even when you have difficult conversations, you have a place where you can retreat as a team and find yourselves and build up again, holding each other accountable. But leading with empathy and compassion and vulnerability. This is what I love to help leaders with because I notice a lot of people shy away from that because they think it's difficult. But from-

David Pembroke:

And they're busy.

Alfred Chidembo:

And they're busy.

David Pembroke:

The pressure, and the tempo, and the pace of delivery in support of government is high. So it is that eternal balance, isn't it? I've got to get the work done. I've got to manage my people, but how do I make both of them happen?

Alfred Chidembo:

Exactly. If you manage your people well and you build those relationships, people will give you 120% and they won't even feel like they're going over what they're supposed to do. They won't even feel like that because people are always looking for three things in the workplace. They want to have a sense of belonging. They want to feel that they're valued and that they have a purpose. And if you drive them to just get these goals right? Again, it comes to that quote from Professor Mbigi to say, it's not really about delivering the service, but the spirit with which we are delivering it.

If I'm a mean manager and I come into the office and everyone gets anxious the moment I walk in, you know what? It means I'm just a manager. I'm not a leader. There's a difference there, because leaders really, they're looking at a vision and driving people towards a vision. And for you to do that, you need to get your people on board. And it all starts by building their relationships.

And then when you can get them to rally behind that vision and you start to build momentum, guess what? People want to get more wins. Then you become a high-performing team. Because of that, you build that momentum, you have the camaraderie, and you have the cohesion and alignment.

David Pembroke:

So what's your best tactic to get leaders to avoid the four D's, to understand the benefit of connection with people?

Alfred Chidembo:

Oh, they're also looking for connection. They are also looking for connection.

David Pembroke:

Okay. So they're people too?

Alfred Chidembo:

They're people too. So you really start with their values. So really start with their values. And you know what? In coaching leaders, I've noticed that if you really tap into those values and take time to discover what your values are, no one has ever landed on a value to say, "I just want to make people miserable." I haven't seen that. No one has landed on a value which says, "I want to be mean to people." In that conversation, people always land on, "I want to help."

But somewhere along this career journey, we miss that because work just becomes work. And we say there's a work self and home self. I don't know where you switch on and off when you put that switch on and when you put it off. I don't know where that happens, but I find it very difficult because the person that I am at home should be... If I have compassion at home, then it means that compassion should not disappear the moment I walk into the office. I should just continue with that compassion and sharing with everyone else. If I have empathy at home, then it means it should show up everywhere else I go.

So if we tap into those values for leaders and they say, "Well, I want to help people," then it means it should show up in the way we interact with our teams. And when we do that, we start to see people resonating with that connection and that effort. They also want to do exactly the same. So you're creating ripples. So this is how I help leaders to really just tap into those values. Taking time to tap into those values and say, "From here on our communications, if you're having one-on-ones with anyone, you're tapping into your values."

If you're going to be talking about helping people and you get teary-eyed, when you help people, let the person who's sitting next to you know that you are about helping people. Then you don't have to worry about authenticity because it's just you being you. Then you don't have to worry about psychological safety because when you are authentic and you're leading with your values, the next person can pick it up and then they feel free to speak up and to share the ideas as well.

David Pembroke:

There you go, people. In the last 10 minutes or so, I take that as a masterclass in how to build high-performing teams, because I think Alfred certainly has unlocked something there and a pathway for people and a framework really for people to think about. So take that with you. Now, listen, that's your career in the public service, the work that you're going to continue to do, which is fantastic because that'll continue to strengthen the performance of the Department of Industry. What about Aussie Books for Zim? What's next?

Alfred Chidembo:

Aussie Books for Zim, we're still continuing with the work. As we speak right now, we are setting up two libraries. This should happen this week and the next. So we continue...

David Pembroke:

Two libraries where?

Alfred Chidembo:

In Zimbabwe.

David Pembroke:

Whereabouts?

Alfred Chidembo:

Close to Harare.

David Pembroke:

Okay.

Alfred Chidembo:

Just outside of Harare. We work with a communities, rural communities where they just don't have any resources at all. So we have a shipping container, a 40-foot shipping container that arrived in September with over 60,000 books and library shelves that we got from the University of Wollongong. So we are setting up libraries in all these schools, and we'll continue to do that into the new year. But shipping books and shipping containers is a nightmare, David. 40-foot shipping container. It's 25 tonnes. And at some point I found myself and my wife, and my two little kids having to pack that shipping container.

Now that takes a toll on us. So we are saying we are becoming a logistics company. No, no, no. We are going to come up with a new approach. So we've been working on this with our board, with our team. We have some ideas of how we're going to do it so that we have smaller libraries that we can just pack right here in a pallet. It's more like a library in a pallet really. And with solar lamps as well. So we've partnered with SolarBuddy. So now we are donating books and solar lamps so that kids can read at night.

David Pembroke:

So if people are listening or as they are listening and they'd like to get involved, what's the best way that they can learn more about the charity?

Alfred Chidembo:

They can go onto our website, [www.aussiebooks4zim](http://www.aussiebooks4zim). The four, is it number four for Zim, [zim.org](http://zim.org). Or they can just get in touch with me on LinkedIn, on Facebook, on Instagram. We also have our Instagram handles, Instagram handle, and also in Aussie Books for Zim page on LinkedIn and on Facebook. So you can just look us up on any of those social media platforms and just get in touch with us.

David Pembroke:

And what help might you be looking for? Is it the manual labour help or is it financial help or what?

Alfred Chidembo:

Right now it's financial help. Because we have the books in Zimbabwe, you just need to start distributing them so that they get to where they need to go. Many people want to give us books. The moment they hear me speaking, they want to give us books. But Australia sends over 5 million books to landfill every year.

David Pembroke:

Landfill every year? Oh wow.

Alfred Chidembo:

Every year. So there are so many books out there. It's very easy for us to get books. But the shipment of books is what really costs us a bit of money. If you really look at it for a 40-foot shipping container with 60,000 books, that probably brings it down to about 50 cents a book. So you can make a huge difference just by donating money to the charity.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Well, congratulations on the selflessness of that endeavour and incredible story to think about that little boy all the way all those years ago, starting on that five kilometre journey to school with brothers, cousins, sisters, friends, to where you've got to today and what you've done. What would you put at the heart of your success? What are the things that have guided you through all of that?

Alfred Chidembo:

So for me, David, I'm a Christian and I believe that my steps have been... God has ordered my steps. There were times where I could have just gone the other way, but I realised that this is not my own doing. Sometimes you need someone to see it for you when you can't see it for yourself. Also, the fact that I've had a very supportive family. There's a story which I didn't tell for me to go and study in Namibia after my dad passed away. I ran out of money to pay university fees. And you know what my mom did? She sold our home, gave me money to pay for my university fees, and went back to live in the village.

Now, that is unconditional generosity. This is what Ubuntu is all about. She did not expect anything in return. She was just happy for me. So I've had all these people around me, my siblings as well. They did exactly the same thing for me when I ran out of money, when I was studying. When I moved to Australia, they looked for accommodation for me and they didn't expect anything in return. So that's the power of Ubuntu. It is not just a philosophy that I talk about because somebody has written about it. It's something that I've seen happening around me and within me.

David Pembroke:

Well, listen, thank you so much. We could talk all night. There's plenty more things that we could continue to talk about. But thanks so much for giving up some of your very valuable time to come and share it with the audience today. I think an extraordinary story that many of us who've had such privileged lives, when you reflect on what you've been through and what you've done to get to where you have done today and really as you say, lived Ubuntu, I think we can all take something from that today. So thank you so much for coming in today.

And listen to you, the audience, thanks again for coming back. We're always grateful for your attendance. Now you can find all the latest information about GovComms on LinkedIn at the GovComms Institute. You'll find lots of information, updates, insights. But if you do have time to rate or review the program, it does help us to be found. So wherever you're listening to this podcast, wherever you are in the world, and hello to our listeners in Finland. We checked some of the data the other day and we have a lot of people listening in Finland.

So a very warm welcome and thank you for tuning in. But certainly a joy to speak to Alfred today and we certainly look forward to bringing you another great story about the function of communication and how it can impact people and performance. We'll be back in a fortnight with the next episode of GovComms. But for the moment, my name is David Pembroke, and it is bye for now.

Voice Over:

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