



EP#177: FROM JARGON TO
GENUINE: RECLAIMING TRUST IN
GOVERNMENT COMMS

WITH ROS WEADMAN

TRANSCRIPT

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Ros Weadman:

Messages are important, but they only make sense in the context of story. They need to have context around them to make them relatable and relevant to people's lives. So I think we need to ... Communicators across government need to move from message selling to storytelling, and a lot of them are doing it really well.

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 practice 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 custodians of the land from which we are broadcasting today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and 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 anybody listening to this podcast today is joining us from.

So as days pass and change continues, I think that's a diplomatic way of putting it, our focus at GovComms as always continues to be on how government and public sector leaders can better explain policy, program, services, and regulations as technology continues to transform the information habits of citizens. Pew Research conducted post the most recent U.S. election showed that the influence of social media and podcasts are on the rise and traditional TV and radio as a source of reliable news information is in decline. In Australia, we are seeing similar trends as the battle for attention continues. Every brand, every not-for-profit, every university, every sporting team, every company is now in the media business, and they are all competing fiercely for a share of a citizen's most valuable asset, which is their time and their attention.

So how do we as public sector communicators continue to adapt and change to these changing circumstances? How do we improve process and approval so we can move faster? How do we monitor our context and content to help us make better choices for our communication? And most importantly, how do we build the skills, the mindsets, and the confidence of our public sector communicators so their message not only reaches the intended audience, but is heard, it's trusted and it's acted upon?

So joining me today to discuss these challenges and where we sit at the moment is Ros Weadman who is the Director of Marcomms Australia, a fellow of the Communication and Public Relations Institute of Australia, and a trusted advisor to leaders across government, business, and the community sector. Her approach aligns culture, customer experience, and corporate citizenship in pursuit of the elusive goal of improved reputation and greater trust. She's the author of three books on strategic marketing, reputation and personal branding, and she has shared her insights on the Australian television program, Kochie's Business Builders. Ros is also leading the ELEVATE Local Government Communication Summit 2025 which is a 2 day event focused on helping government communicators and leaders build trust and connection in challenging times of change and of crisis. Ros, welcome to GovComms.

Ros Weadman:

Thank you so much, David, for that lovely introduction. It's good to be here.

David Pembroke:

So listen, before we jump into the meat and potatoes of government and public sector communication, tell us your story.

Ros Weadman:

Well, I guess if you really take it right back, as a child, I was always fascinated with words and storytelling, and I also had a love of learning. So it was really no surprise that I ended up becoming a professional communicator as well as an educator, because I'm also a trained secondary teacher. I love empowering people with knowledge and skills so that they can do more, be a better person. And so I really did evolve those fascinations and loves into a career that's now lasted more than four decades. And a lot of that has been as an advisor and trainer to government in that four decades.

And about 14 years ago, in 2011, I established Marcomms Australia. So I did a big stint, 11 year stint in state government, and then I spent 16 years as a communications manager in local government. And now I pretty much, I consult, train, and mentor a lot of leaders as well as work with the communications teams on helping them tell their stories, build their visibility, and build trust and connection with their communities. And now I'm really on a mission, and what your introduction kind of really resonated with me. I'm on a mission now to elevate the communication impact of Australian leaders across all sectors so that they can uplift people and move the nation forward because I think we need leaders now with a big vision and a bold message.

David Pembroke:

So over those four decades, what is the truth that you have learnt? How do you distil it into what you know to be the truth around effective communication from that 40 years of experience?

Ros Weadman:

Well, the truth is there's a lot of truths, I guess, in terms of universality of truth around communication. But one of them is that it's about authenticity and genuineness of communication and around creating genuine two-way dialogue. I think a lot of what I've seen through those years is a lot of one-way communication where the message was pushed out. It was all about more informing, whereas now it's more about illuminating as well as inspiring. So I think that that's been one of the biggest things I've seen, that's a shift. So I think that's a truth, you can't ... You need to kind of be very genuine in your communication.

Another truth is understanding your audience. We're now in a world of artificial intelligence and people's understanding of what's fake and what's real is becoming blurred. So again, back to that authenticity, you can never replace the human element of communication. Only humans smile, only humans have passion, and only humans can communicate an idea with true empathy. And so I think that that's a universal truth, that the human-centred communication will always be more important than any artificial communication.

David Pembroke:

Why is two-way dialogue so difficult for leaders in the public sector?

Ros Weadman:

Well, I think sometimes, David, it comes down to, I don't know, people maybe get lost in their busyness of their job. I think there's good intention with a lot of, let's say, take community engagement for an example. I work a fair bit in that space as well, and I see a lot of good dialogue happening through the engagement process. And people give their ideas and share their opinions. The government authorities take those opinions and plug it into the decision-making process, but sometimes they don't always close that loop to go back to the communities. So then people are left kind of wanting with that vacuum of communication. And we all

know that any vacuum of communication, people will fill it themselves with assumptions and judgments. "Don't they care about me? Why aren't they communicating with me? What's happened to my input? What's the decision that they've made?" So I think a big one is not closing the loop on communication.

David Pembroke:

And in terms then also around the point you raised around authenticity, what's the challenge there? Why can't people be their authentic self on this journey to building trusted relationships and engagement with citizens and stakeholders?

Ros Weadman:

Oh, look, I think it's not that people don't want to be themselves. I think sometimes it's hard to maybe cut through the noise. We are in a very over-communicated world, it's highly distracted. Getting your message through that noise has become more challenging. So maybe people are in trying to be more visible, doing things that maybe aren't so authentic to who maybe they really are. But authenticity will always be fundamental because people know when people aren't being authentic and I think that is something that should never be lost.

David Pembroke:

Right now, going through your consulting career where you're engaging with leaders at all sorts of different levels across all sorts of different industries, what's the biggest challenge that you find that most of them have at the moment to build engagement and to build trust with citizens? Is it a lack of time? Is it a lack of skill? Is it the process around it? Is it approvals, being able to move fast enough? What is it that you see in your work?

Ros Weadman:

I see a lot of communicators, their message isn't resonating with the audience because they're not communicating in a way that ... These days to be impactful in your communication, you really need to embody and embrace not just the words that you say, but your voice, your tone, your body language. It all goes into the message and the way that's received by the audience.

So I think one of the fundamental issues is that people ... Yes, they may not have those skills. Sometimes they may not have the confidence to put themselves out there as a leader. For example, we have a lot of new councillors, council elections just happened in Victoria last October, and a lot of those new people who are now leaders in the community are stepping into some very high stakes communication situations. And they may not have that experience of how to really communicate in a way that resonates. So they may be able to articulate a message and communicate that, but they may not be able to embody that into a storytelling framework that really can then engage the hearts and minds of audiences. So some of it might come down to a bit of confidence or lack thereof, or maybe some lack of understanding of storytelling frameworks and simply maybe not enough experience yet. So there's a range of different things that might be contributing.

David Pembroke:

And what's your views or your assessment on probably the other end of it, which is the citizen enabled part of the communication compact where every citizen now has a supercomputer that they carry in their pockets or their purse, they're able to express views. The quality of some of that communication is often challenged. What works in a lot of those environments is aggression, it's harsh opinion. How do you prepare communicators to communicate in what is often quite a hostile environment, that is really the place where particularly a lot of public discourse takes place around issues that mean a lot to a lot of people?

Ros Weadman:

I think the first thing is, it all comes back to understanding your audience. And I think sometimes people are focused on the message that they want to get across without having done an analysis of who in fact their audience is. And when you understand and break down the psychographics of your audience and really understand what they value in life and what they believe in, what are their fears? What are their hopes? What are their dreams? What are their aspirations? What is their common language? What do they know? What do they not know about the issue you're about to speak about?

So I think it always comes back to that first, understanding the audience and then understanding the intention. What is the purpose of your communication? It's not just about blurting out a message, but what is the desired outcome that you want? So understanding the intention and then crafting your message in a way that's going to be palatable to those audiences.

But then when you're in that thick of it, and with that myriad of stakeholder viewpoints that you're having to grapple with, it's about listening. It's not necessarily about doing all the communicating about active listening. And then you can understand the varying perspectives that people have, because I really do believe it's about partnership, and that's what really genuine two-way dialogue is all about. It's about seeing stakeholders as partners, not just about ticking the checkbox that, "Oh yes, we've communicated, now we can move on to the next thing."

David Pembroke:

What advice do you give people, particularly people who are moving into the public sphere for the first time, about growing a thick skin and having a thick skin? How do you help people through what can be fairly hostile lands?

Ros Weadman:

Well having a thick skin is, I think, important because it is a dynamic and it's a complex, and it's an ever-evolving landscape, and it's not all fairies and Tinker Bells is it? So you need to understand that environment before you put yourself into it. But I don't know. When I'm preparing people, again, it's coming back to those basics. The environment is ever-changing, and all you can do is control yourself, how you show up. So it's not always about what you say, it's also about how you say it. And so preparation is key. And I think that the good communicators across the world and the most impactful communicators of our time have worked hard at it. They've not taken anything for granted, they've worked hard at understanding their audiences and understanding their message and practising, and then showing up to the best possible way for the environment that is ever-evolving and changing.

David Pembroke:

Now, you are organising, the ELEVATE Local Government Communication Summit 2025. So congratulations on taking the initiative to put that together.

Ros Weadman:

Thank you.

David Pembroke:

Because anyone who's ever been involved in organising an event understands it's a vast undertaking. So well done you.

Ros Weadman:

Thank you.

David Pembroke:

Take me to the end of the conference. What are you hoping to leave people with? What are you hoping that people will be able to walk away from the ELEVATE Conference and feel that they are better equipped to do?

Ros Weadman:

So that goes to the heart of the conference theme, as you talked about earlier, David, being how to build trust and connection in times of change and crisis. And so I've curated a stellar lineup of speakers who are going to speak across different topics, but linking into that theme. So at the end of the summit, what I would hope is that the delegates have heard some really profound wisdom from people who are expert in various topics like governance, or community engagement, or crisis communication, or artificial intelligence, or issues management across a broad spectrum of areas. So that sometimes people, communicators and leaders, they're busy doing their job every day. And so I've tried to bring together a summit that gives a good cross-section of experts who are experts in their field, but also key leaders and communicators that work within the sector so that they can share their experiences and insights from fascinating case studies. Then people, the gift is the wisdom and the insights that people take away, and hopefully they're inspired to put those into action.

David Pembroke:

Can you give us a bit of a preview of who might be some of the speakers and what people are going to learn from those speakers?

Ros Weadman:

Sure. Well, I'm speaking. I'm speaking.

David Pembroke:

Good.

Ros Weadman:

So just so you know, day one is targeted to communication professionals, and day two is targeted at CEOs, mayors, councillors, other key leaders, but you can attend both. It really doesn't matter. But I'm focusing on storytelling and how to really embrace storytelling to build trust and connection. I have David Hawkins from Socom, and David is ... He's literally one of Australia's gurus of crisis communications. And in fact, he's one of only a few Australians who's won the International Association of Business Communicators Golden Quill Award for his work in crisis communication.

I've got Jim Stewart, he's a pioneer of digital communication and also expert in artificial intelligence.

Max Hardy, he's a founder of the Australasian chapter of the International Association of Public Participation. So he's talking on community engagement, and he's going to be really challenging some assumptions and putting it out there about what if we did trust communities. We worry about communities not trusting us, but do we actually trust our communities enough?

And Julie Reid, she's an ex-CEO, she's a governance expert, she's going to be talking on governance and leadership.

And Dr. Louise Mahler is talking on your leadership presence and how to build trust and connection. So look, there's many other speakers, but that gives you a bit of a snapshot.

David Pembroke:

Where do you see government and public sector communication at the moment? Again, you've been around for 40 years, you've been observing it for 40 years. Where are we? And I suppose it's a general question, and again, there's obviously local government, state government, federal government, multilateral government, so it's hard to sort of pull it into a single view, but maybe try. Where do you think we are on this journey towards effective communication and the ability to move with the transformation and the change that we're all experiencing at the moment?

Ros Weadman:

Well, firstly, I see in-house communications team doing amazing jobs across all sectors. I really do. I think they have a really critical role to play in not just increasing the visibility of their brands, but also in communicating with stakeholders. But I feel sometimes also what I notice is that there's some fundamental mistakes happening around, for example, sometimes bureaucratic language still being used in letters, which just people may not understand bureaucratic language and jargon. So it's just some basic things like that that people can still work on.

I see a lot of teams in reactive mode, because they may not have a crisis communications team in place, and even if they do, they may not have rehearsed and embodied that. So they're kind of put on the back foot when something happens.

Sometimes I see a little bit, what I call message 'selling' in invert commas rather than storytelling. I think that for decades, people have been focused on, "What's the message? Let's stay on message. What message are we trying to get across?" Messages are important, but they only make sense in the context of story. They need to have context around them to make them relatable and relevant to people's lives. So I think we need to ... Communicators across government need to move from message selling to storytelling, and a lot of them are doing it really well, moving into more storytelling, and especially through visual storytelling. I see a lot of good work happening there.

And I think another one I see is that there's this expectation that the corporate comms teams are the custodian of things around reputation and corporate comms. And that to me, I think is not where it should be. Everyone is responsible for communication, everyone's responsible for building trust, everyone's responsible for reputational risk management. And I think that there's sometimes still not enough chief communication officers sitting at the executive table each week. And so I think that there's still a lot of work to be done there.

David Pembroke:

So in terms of that challenge of moving from sort of one-way selling, telling that's the message that we're going to get out there to storytelling, what advice and guidance do you give to people about how they go on that journey to become better storytellers and better listeners? What are the actual practical steps that they need to take place?

Ros Weadman:

Yeah. Well, there's a few things you can do in terms of practical steps, and one of them would be to study the really great communicators of our time. You look at Winston Churchill, who galvanised a nation in World War II, you look at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who galvanised a whole generation around his, I Have a Dream speech. And these impactful communicators, or even Oprah Winfrey, people today, they use storytelling frameworks. They embody Aristotle's formula for persuasion. They embody ethos, logos, and pathos. They have logical reasoning, the logic, they also have empathy and emotion, and they also have that ethics, which is that kind of character and credibility. So they understand what makes a good story, and stories are what build trust and connection. Stories go back far beyond Aristotle even, they go ... Stories were born of fire. Hundreds of thousands of years ago, people sat around fire and told stories. That's how people evolved. That's how traditions and cultures were passed on.

So storytelling is as old as humanity, but I think we've lost sight of some of it. And so it's really about learning some of the storytelling frameworks ... You look at the way movies and books follow the hero's journey, for example. There are some classic storytelling frameworks that people can learn that can help them in their storytelling, in government communication.

David Pembroke:

And with that, where do you see the barriers to storytelling? What's stopping that taking place at the moment?

Ros Weadman:

Oh, gee, barriers. Well sometimes it's just we keep doing what we've always done. We get involved in the busyness of the tasks that come to us each day, and so we bump out a media release and we work out what the message is, but maybe we don't ... Maybe not enough time is given. I'm not quite sure. It's certainly something I work with my clients. We always work on, "Well, what is the story? How do people see themselves in this? How do we associate the stakeholder into the story so that they can not just see it as another message that's being pushed out?"

But I think that it's just really ... Part of it makes me think that we've lost control of the narrative a bit, David. I think government sometimes, the media is defining what local government and what state governments stand for. Like I hear it a lot on talkback radio that they're perpetuating in my mind, what is a myth that councils don't care, for example, or that they're always getting it wrong. Like all industries, they don't always get it right but I think there's some kind of myth that's often perpetuated that's drummed up a lot. And so to that extent, I think sometimes we've lost control of the narrative and we need to take that control back.

David Pembroke:

What about the challenge though, of capturing people's attention and their interest such that they will engage with whatever it is that you would like to speak to them about? I was talking to one of ... Well, quite a significant political leader the other day, and they were recalling a story about focus groups that they had been observing, and the focus groups just showed that there is just such a lack of interest, a lack of connection around what, certainly the political leadership would think that these are issues that we're talking about a lot, but people are not necessarily paying as much attention as perhaps they once did.

Ros Weadman:

Yeah. Look, as we said at the outset, it is an over-distracted world, isn't it? There's messages competing everywhere. So you've got that, but you've also got ... People's minds are occupied with, there's a cost of living crisis, an energy crisis, a housing crisis, a youth crime crisis. There's so many things going on in the world that I think people almost are overwhelmed in taking on board things. And then you've got a problem of people being over-consulted. Sometimes people aren't interested in every little thing. And I think it's going to get back to how do we become more memorable? How do we become more relatable? How do we connect with people in a way that is so relevant to their daily lives that they just want to be involved?

I remember getting a call from a party before an election some years ago saying, "What do you think our party should focus on? Roads and this, that, and the other?" And I said, "Well actually, I'd want you to focus on vision. Where is this country going?" I feel that there's a lot happening in the weeds, and yes, tactics and addressing things at that level is important, but I also feel we've got to start thinking bigger picture and being more purpose-driven in galvanising this nation around a compelling future because I feel that that's really lacking at the moment.

David Pembroke:

Is that risky though? Like trying to project too big a vision that then either you're held account ... Whether it's achieved or it's not achieved, or whether you could be criticised by your opponents for not being realistic about what it is that you're trying to achieve. And therefore, if it becomes risky, the risk management kicks in and it's like, "Well, let's not do that. Let's go to ..." As you say, there's sort of more tactical ideas that we can communicate because we know we can deliver on that.

Ros Weadman:

Well, I think, David, it's how you break it down. I think you can have a big picture vision, but then how do you, in a practical way, make strides towards achieving that? So that's when it comes back to breaking it down into the strategies and the tactics, and take us along on the journey, but create a vivid picture for people. I think that's what's ... I'm not talking about some nebulous big picture that people feel is ... They don't even understand what it means. You've got to actually paint the picture in people's minds about what that vision looks like. So I think there's an opportunity. I don't think it's a big risk. I think it's a risk that currently we need to take because it's lacking at the moment. What is the big picture vision, not just for the country, but for everything?

David Pembroke:

Well, that's true. Like the community or the program or the regulation, what is the problem that we are trying to solve with this particular piece of legislation, or the regulation or whatever it is?

Ros Weadman:

Yeah, that's it.

David Pembroke:

There's no doubt that you can shape the narrative in such a way that, oh, okay, yeah. All right, I understand that. And then as you say, you bring them along on that journey and continue to go back and explain and explain and explain, because I think sometimes one and done, sort of out it goes, oh, let's move on to the next thing without actually going back and saying, "Well, actually, we're going to have to re prosecute that." Because there's so much going on in government and public sector organisations, there's so many problems trying to be addressed that I think often we don't spend enough time just going back and bringing people with us on that journey.

Ros Weadman:

Yeah, I think so. And sometimes, as you say in that business of getting things out, perhaps there's not enough attention placed on evaluation. Did we achieve that outcome? Okay, there's probably an analysis of media coverage and things like that, and looking at our engagement on social media or what have you. But what have been the results and outcomes in terms of the way we've improved people's lives? I mean, everyone's got to see themselves in the mission. What's the point of having ... Councils in Victoria now have to have a community vision, a 20-year community vision. Well, unless you can see yourself, how you're contributing towards that can become a little bit nebulous. Or it can become a little bit like, well, why do you have this document that just sits on the bookshelf and collects dust? I think in creating that vision and breaking it down to smaller missions that people see themselves on, then people can see themselves in that, and the role they play that helps to leave that bigger picture legacy.

David Pembroke:

So a final question around evaluation, because a number of our audience, obviously very much focused on government communicators, they are busy, they never go to work thinking, "Oh, I've got nothing on today" because they've got so much to do. What's your advice around this evaluation piece and how can they

convince their leadership? And also to give them the time to be able to evaluate so they can make better decisions into the future. And a second question on indulgence is really your advice to those internal communications teams about how best to equip themselves for what you see is coming into the future?

Ros Weadman:

Well, with evaluation, there's some very good evaluation frameworks that the industry body has, the Communication and Public Relations Australia has evaluation frameworks that are best practice across the world. So you can use those frameworks. And as I was saying, it's looking at the traditional ways of evaluating, what kind of results did we get? But I think it's going back and talking to the actual stakeholders as well, conducting those focus groups and the people who you were working with to achieve the result. Like how has the outcome changed their lives? Know what is happening on the ground that's different and better? And I think that kind of human connection and asking the people themselves, it's really as important as doing some of those vanity metrics that we tend to get that are the easier things to evaluate campaigns on. But the other important thing is, once you've got your evaluation information is reporting back on that, making sure that you're reporting those outcomes back up to the top and back out to the community so that people actually get to see the difference that things have made.

David Pembroke:

And again, I think that's a real weakness around communications, is that we don't sell what we do. We don't sell the impact. We don't sell the benefit back up the line to say, "Hey, you know how you invested this amount, this is what we're able to achieve into the future." So listen, before you go, give me the details, please around ELEVATE and how people might be able to participate in the conference.

Ros Weadman:

Okay, so there is a website that people can go to, which is funnily enough, GovComm. It's govcomm.com.au. And that is an events and training portal. And that's got all the details and the ticketing link that takes you to Bunjil Place, which is where the ticketing ... That's the venue that the two-day summit will be held. So if you go to govcomm.com.au, you'll find all the details there.

David Pembroke:

Okay. And what I'd like to do is to perhaps post the conference after you've had a bit of a rest and a lie down, and it's all sort of settled itself down. It would be great to get you back on actually and understand well, okay.

Ros Weadman:

Oh yes.

David Pembroke:

Because again, you're anticipating and curating, okay, I think this, I think this, I think this. But then the audience is going to give you something back and it'll be like, that lit up and or maybe that wasn't quite where they wanted to be, or I'd be very interested to know exactly what the audience gives you in terms of feedback to make that a wonderfully successful conference. And I know a number of the speakers that you've just mentioned, and a number of them have been guests on the GovComms Podcast, and I'm sure that it will be certainly worth people's whiles to be able to get out.

But it's not just to listen to people, it's also to sit with your peers, to network, to have the cup of tea, to have the coffee, to find people just like you who have got just the same problems, because you'll learn from them as well as you'll learn from the speakers. So again, congratulations Ros on putting the conference together. We need more of them, and we need them more often.

Ros Weadman:

Thank you.

David Pembroke:

Because it is so important that we continue to talk about the function of communication in government and the public sector. So a big congratulations to you, and I do hope it goes very well. Thanks very much for coming on today.

Ros Weadman:

You're welcome. Thanks, David.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, thank you very much, Ros. And thank you to the audience for coming back once again. If you could give us a rating or a review, it does help us to be found. Spotify, wherever it is that you listen to your podcast, a little bit of a rating or review does help the program because it does help us to be found. So please do that. Also, stay up to date with the latest information from GovComms on LinkedIn. But again, we will continue to prosecute this case about the importance of communication in government and the public sector as it relates to the effective communication of policy, of program, of service, of regulation. It has never been more important that people understand the problems that government's trying to solve. What is being put in place? Why it is happening? And what is the progress?

And indeed, as Ros was saying, making sure from a public sector point of view, communicate a point of view that you are engaging with those audiences to understand what their views are, what their hopes are, what their dreams are, so you can incorporate that as part of your co-design to ensure that you are producing better solutions for citizens and stakeholders. A big thanks to Ros and a big promotion again there for the ELEVATE Conference. Go on and have a look and make sure you make the time to go. There's nothing better than getting out of the office for a couple of days and really drinking it in because you'll come back and you'll be five times more effective than you would be if you didn't go to the conference. So a big thanks to Ros, a big thanks to you for coming back. Once again, we'll be back with another guest from the wonderful world of govcomms in a fortnight's time. But for the moment, my name is David Pembroke, and it's bye for now.

Voice Over:

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