



**GOVCOMMS PODCAST**

**EPISODE #130**

**GOOD PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION IS  
A PERFORMANCE**

**- WITH RICHARD MORECROFT**

**TRANSCRIPT**

# TRANSCRIPT

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One of the most challenging ways that one needs to be able to respond to a great massive information is developing the capacity to distil that which is genuinely valuable within things. That process of distilling and being able then, to articulate very clearly the simpler version of, often, the hugely complicated range of issues is a huge skill and a very valuable skill.

Introduction:

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:

Well, hello everyone and welcome once again to GovComms. The podcast, it examines the practise of communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. Today, we are joined by a legend of Australian broadcasting news. Richard Morecroft has a quarter of a century of experience in broadcasting and journalism as both a television news and current affairs anchor and interviewer. He is perhaps best known for his two decades as the principal news presenter for ABC Television here in Australia.

David Pembroke:

Richard was also host of the current affairs programme nationwide where he conducted all sorts of different interviews with different politicians and business leaders and it was a great programme. In addition to his broadcasting, Richard also has worked in helping senior executives from a wide range of Australian companies and organisations to help them improve, to help them to become better media performers, but also to be better communicators. Richard not only worked at the ABC but he also worked at SBS Television where he worked on a very popular programme called Letters and Numbers. He joins me now, Richard, welcome to GovComms.

Richard Morecroft:

Hello, David. I'm delighted to be here. Thanks for asking me.

David Pembroke:

So listen, let's just go back through the career of Richard Morecroft really, and your interest in people and your interest in communication and your interests in broadcasting. Where did it all start?

Richard Morecroft:

I think the fascination, for me, began way back in university days where in Adelaide, I was fortunate enough to be able to become involved with the student radio station. There was one on campus and as a student at that time of English and drama, I also became very much involved with making radio programmes of one sort or another on student radio, doing a few interviews. We played all sorts of interesting music and made some ridiculous comedy and the whole process of broadcasting and making programmes was just fascinating and hugely satisfying so I think I spent a lot more time locked in the radio studios on campus than I probably did in the lecture halls.

David Pembroke:

At that time, were you focused on news or was it much more in that drama space?

Richard Morecroft:

I was fascinated by the really good quality authoritative communication of information to people, whether it was news or current affairs. You would remember the legendary figure of the late Clive Hale who was somebody who, I think, inspired many of us youngsters in those days with his arch eyebrow and his communication of current affairs information.

Richard Morecroft:

But I wasn't specifically focused on news in those days, I was just fascinated by the whole gamut of being able to potentially be a broadcaster, be an ABC announcer, which is what I wanted to be and eventually auditioned to be and was fortunate to get a job to be. In those days, it was very much a case of when you were an announcer, you were expected to be able to do everything and reading TV news was one of those things. But announcing and talking about classical music or doing an interview for a morning chat show, whatever it was, you were expected to be able to do it as an announcer not specifically as a journalist or somebody focused on news and current affairs.

David Pembroke:

In those very early days... The thing that fascinates me at the moment is what technology has done is really to democratise the factors of media production and distribution so many, many more people can now be presenters. They can be citizen journalists, they can create their own content, do you think back to those early days about some advice that you were given that sort of held true for you throughout your career and that helped you to become a better announcer, a better presenter?

Richard Morecroft:

I think there are two aspects. And really, I mean, you commented earlier about some of the training work that I've done over the years in trying to help other people become better professional communicators, not necessarily in the sense of being paid to communicate but professional in their jobs, whether that might be in the business sector or the academic sector or some other area.

Richard Morecroft:

Ultimately, the two things that still hold true, that always hold true, is that you need to be able, genuinely, to access the part of yourself that both cares about and understands what it is that you are talking about. But you also need, genuinely, to be able to access an understanding of the skills that allow you to communicate that material in the best possible way. Just like an athlete needs to understand how their body works, if they're going to be a successful competitor.

Richard Morecroft:

A communicator who wants to do the best possible job needs to understand what they look like, what they sound like, how they come across, and that understanding, being able to look at themselves and to make a professional, genuine assessment is a hugely important skill. But at the same time, they do also need to have an understanding of what they're talking about. It's not just a performance, it needs to have something.

Richard Morecroft:

I think, for example, going back to television news in particular, it was something where one needed to be able to have, genuinely, a sense of humanity about the stories that you were sharing because those things matter to people. To be able to communicate not an opinion but a sense of empathy for the material that you are communicating, I think, is always critically important whether you're a TV news reader or whether you are the CEO of a company or a very senior public servant trying to explain important policies. Those things, very much, stay true.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Well, let's unpack a couple of those things because I think that's... Well they're, again, they're in two reasonably defined buckets that we can dive into. So really, that first point around preparation and getting ready and being ready, again, what is the advice that you provide for people so as that they're able to give their best possible performance, if I might describe it as that way, in terms of the way that they communicate whether it's through video or whether it's through audio, whether they're presenting to a group face to face, how should people be thinking about that preparatory stage?

Richard Morecroft:

Well, it's good that you use the word performance because good professional communication is a performance but sometimes we think of performance in a pejorative way, as though that's a bad thing. The thing about performance is that if it is genuine and a reflection of the message that you genuinely feel and want to communicate, then the performance component of that is just the way in which you manage to achieve that task most effectively. And so, in terms of people being able to move towards that, first of all, they need to be able to step outside themselves a little bit and actually look at and get to know themselves. We don't have a history of doing that. We're often very shy on a personal level about how we look and how we sound.

Richard Morecroft:

The old story of the first time people hear their voice recorded. And of course now, it's very common. But even so, people tend to wince at the sound of their own voice or feel uncomfortable at how they look. As you are also, rightly pointing out the changes in technology that have occurred in recent years have now, interesting, you use the word democratised the access that people have to other people but also very much to themselves. I mean, look at the ubiquitous selfie so many people do know what they look like. But I guess, I'm talking about encouraging people to recognise that by getting to know what they look like and what they sound like, they can also decide to make constructive and genuine changes to that to recognise their strengths and make their strengths better but also to be able to recognise their vulnerabilities and to build and compensate for those things.

Richard Morecroft:

Being able to do both of those things, I think, is enormously important. But the advice that I would give to anyone wanting to do it is don't expect that you're just going to be able to walk into a room and have a quick chat and then walk out and be a changed person. We're really talking about things that go right to the core of people's, often, perceptions of themselves and the way in which they're prepared to communicate and share that perception and that takes time to shift because the important thing about the performance that you referred to is that it's genuine.

Richard Morecroft:

Whenever I work with people, I always want them to be and to feel that they are being themselves but that they're being the best version of themselves, that they can help themselves get access to. Just like, as we say, we're, in many ways, so often we're a sporting nation so those sporting analogies tend to help people

understand. If you wanted to improve your golf swing or your tennis swing or your swimming stroke or whatever it was, you wouldn't have any hesitation in actually working on those things, there would be no self-consciousness about that. People are often very self-conscious about trying to make themselves look and sound better or look at some of those practicalities but they're very much just part of what should be a professional toolkit for anybody who takes their communication of important matters in the workplace or in other forums seriously. If you make a commitment to working on that, it can make a huge difference.

David Pembroke:

Again, staying still in that preparatory container that you outlined earlier. Just how important then is it when you are preparing and getting ready to have an understanding of the audience who you are seeking to reach and to engage and to influence? How much preparation should you be doing into understanding that particular group and what may move them or not move them further towards your point of view?

Richard Morecroft:

Well, of course, it's important to know as much as you can about anybody with whom you're speaking, whether it's a single individual or a several thousand people in a huge forum or even across sectors of the media. It's really important to try to understand them because at the foundation, the reason that you want to communicate with them is because you have some interest or care in what they think about whatever it is that you are trying to talk about. Whether you are explaining some sort of development or idea in some context, you care what they think about it.

Richard Morecroft:

And so, to understand what the values are, what the variables are that they may incorporate into their assessment of you is really important. And so, that sort of research and I'm not necessarily suggesting that every individual should do that. Often, there are teams of people involved in that better understanding and of course, there are whole industries now built around trying to understand what and why people care about various issues. But of course, it's important to do that because it's important to you, the speaker, to be able to share the information that you think will be valuable to the people that you are talking to.

David Pembroke:

So Richard, if we look at that second container, this notion of empathy and authenticity and accessing that in a genuine and sincere way, what's your best advice to people to activate that particular power so as that they can be more authentic and they can be more real in the way they engage and communicate?

Richard Morecroft:

To be able to try to communicate as effectively as possible when there is a really important message to get across and to try to capture those things that you've referred to, that sense of empathy, that sense of, maybe a word we use all too much these days, but authenticity is something that has to start in simple ways. That's certainly how I try to encourage people to consider the journey of getting to know themselves as communicators. It can start in simple ways with particular exercises and this has to be done in a structured and disciplined way, but it can start by looking at yourself and getting to know yourself in a mirror. It can start by... Most of us, of course, can simply record ourselves on our phones talking with the structure that we want to be able to talk through, to be able to get messages across, and then listening back to that.

Richard Morecroft:

What I'm really getting at is that whole sense of getting to know how you look, how you sound, how you move, and not only recognising the physical nature of that but also starting to understand and being able to unpack the nature and structure of the messages that people want to be able to get across. So often, people

will go into situations where it's really important for them to get a particular message across but they've not necessarily, completely, clearly in their own mind thought about what it is that they really want to say and what it is that they might be likely to be asked in the context of whatever the meeting might be or the situation.

Richard Morecroft:

And so, those very simple first steps which can then be much more broadly teased out into bigger structures of learning. But those very simple first steps of saying, "What do I want to say here? What is really important? What are the key messages, the particular agenda that I want to get across? What sort of questions am I likely to encounter that will allow me to genuinely access those bits of information that are applicable and useful and how can I practise that process and get used to doing it?"

David Pembroke:

Now, listen, you have been around going back to those days back of university in Adelaide and playing around in the studios and experimenting with different forms of communication at different times, you are standing now sort of looking back at your career and the changes that have taken place. What are the biggest things that have struck you about the change that have taken place, what's changed, and what's stayed the same?

Richard Morecroft:

Well, I think nobody could dispute that the technology surrounding communication has changed hugely. We've all become aware of the possibilities that have occurred both through the literal, the physical technology itself, and the manifestations of that through all of the possibilities of the Internet. That technology has made a huge difference but one of the most critical differences that perhaps it's made is the speed with which we are now able to react, for example, to stories of various sorts in the news but also the ways in which bits of information and indeed, opinion of various sorts, particularly through social media. The speed with which information and opinion can travel through the community is now extraordinary. And so, I think those really are the things that have changed hugely.

Richard Morecroft:

But when it comes down to the practicalities, for example, of news and current affairs, life has changed hugely for journalists and reporters who back in the days, perhaps David, you would recall your own reporting days and indeed to some extent so would I, where there wasn't the expectation of the multitasking that there is now where reporters are expected to be able to be, essentially, camera operators and sound technicians and maybe even editors as well. That sense of generalisation and multitasking generalisation has changed hugely.

David Pembroke:

How then, when you look at that changing landscape, it's... What do you think when you look at that, when you think about the reporters who are working that environment, when you think about the audiences that are consuming the content, when you think about the speed, when you think about sort of all of those things combining together in terms of an impact, what makes you optimistic and what makes you pessimistic about the context that we're now seeing?

Richard Morecroft:

Well, optimism first, I suppose. What is now hugely exciting is the degree of access that a huge range of people have. Almost anybody who has access to even just a phone, let alone any kind of computer. A huge range of access to information very quickly, the ability to know what's happening and to know what people think about what's happening is a huge plus in many ways.

Richard Morecroft:

In so many ways though, it also then leads us to, I guess, what perhaps I would see as a huge negative in many ways which is that the quality of complexity and contemplation and the time actually given to the significance of an individual event is extremely brief. The attention span is very short from many in the community because there is such a feast of information being constantly heaped upon everybody.

Richard Morecroft:

And so, that volume of information in many ways is the huge plus but that volume of information in many ways is also the huge minus because it becomes, I imagine, very, very hard to both distinguish that of quality from that which is perhaps not. But it also makes it very hard to stay with and think about material information issues, because so quickly, there's another one demanding your attention.

David Pembroke:

This podcast is very much for people working in government who have an interest and focus on communication. You've described beautifully there, I think, the context, this notion of speed, this notion of volume, the lack of contemplation perhaps, the challenges around quality, what advice do you have to people working in government communication that they could take on? What are the two or three things that they could take on to be more effective as they try to better explain policy, programme, services, regulations?

Richard Morecroft:

Surely the key quality in so many ways that is absolutely critical is that of open flexibility. Being able to be open to possibility, being able to be flexible enough to recognise opportunity for perhaps a new way of expressing a particular issue or a particular piece of information, a new way of making use of technology as it evolves and develops. But I think that openness, if you're looking for a single word, it's a case of not being closed minded to possibilities of information and issue explanation and having the flexibility to incorporate new ideas very quickly.

David Pembroke:

And then, just in terms of how they would then deal with this sense of volume and speed and other things, is it a matter of, yes, being open but is it about acquiring different skills, is it about thinking differently about the way that you try to get the messages out, or what would some of that advice be that you would have for people?

Richard Morecroft:

One of the most challenging ways that one needs to be able to respond to a great massive information is developing the capacity to distil that which is genuinely valuable within things. That process of distilling and being able then, to articulate very clearly the simpler version of, often, the hugely complicated range of issues is a huge skill and a very valuable skill. Also, one which, like most other communication skills, actually takes practise and structure to be able to make it work as well as it should.

Richard Morecroft:

That process, and sometimes this needs groups of people working together who learn how their minds work, each of them, in terms of personalities and particular skills, but being able to take this massive information and distil it. Pick the eyes out of things and then be able to have the linguistic skills to distil those messages into simple forms that can then be readily communicated instead of just a mass of different material.

David Pembroke:

Well, Richard Morecroft, if people would like to speak to you, to learn from you, to access, perhaps some of your time to not only think about the earlier parts of our discussion, which were clearly about those presentation skills, but even to talk with you about your views on this changing context, what's the best way for people to be able to get in contact with you?

Richard Morecroft:

Look, that's a very kind question. Look, there are probably a range of ways but perhaps the very simplest first point of contact would be please send me an email if someone would like to be in touch. My email address, or certainly the simplest one is very simple, richard.morecroft@hotmail.com, couldn't be easier.

David Pembroke:

Pretty straightforward. Listen, just before I do let you go. We spoke about the optimistic and you look to that. Are you concerned about misinformation? Are you concerned about disinformation? And if you are, what can people reasonably do to either one, not contribute to the problem but if you're working in government communication, what can you do to be some part of the solution around misinformation and disinformation?

Richard Morecroft:

It's such an important question trying to deal with the problems of misinformation and disinformation, especially in ours and indeed, societies around the world that are becoming increasingly divisive and divided in their opinions. And so, quite often there is deliberate disinformation and misinformation spread.

Richard Morecroft:

The first step, of course, is simply to have a really strong sense of awareness of the risk and a sense of responsibility that it should be looked out for. And so, again, of course, it's energy intensive but the process of checking material, of questioning the motivation for particular material or information that might come through, and to have good systems for doing that, that process of trying to constantly consider the responsibility that one has for the information that goes out through whatever channels they may be and taking that responsibility seriously enough to question, to consider, and to make sure that what goes out has been well checked and well thought about.

David Pembroke:

Well, Richard Morecroft, thank you so much for being so generous with your time and your wisdom and your knowledge that you've been able to share with the GovComms audience today. I know they will take so much away from this. The idea, really, is to provide that practical advice and to be able to give people access to real experts and I know that so many people will take... I can just imagine now people sort of going back and, "Right. I'm going to go and get in front of the mirror. I'm going to start to look at myself and I'm going to start to think about it because I think it makes..."

David Pembroke:

I've done hundreds of these podcasts and no one has ever given people that advice and I think that is such a great piece of advice. It might be a bit weird the first couple of times that you do it, but again, you'll build confidence. If you know, indeed, this is what you are going to look like, know how you're going to be presented, and it could indeed bring confidence to your presentation. Thanks again for your insights also around the context, very much appreciated, and thank you for coming on to GovComms today.

Richard Morecroft:

My pleasure. Thank you, David.



David Pembroke:

And thank you, the audience, for coming back once again. What a great interview. Richard Morecroft, seriously, what a legend of Australian broadcasting. He was always just so top notch in the way that he would read the news. He mentioned that point about empathy and I think that's what I always loved about the way that he presented the news, is that he knew his stuff but he also could move with the stories. I think that piece of advice around empathy and really understanding what it is that you want to say and what you want that audience to take away is really to unlock that magic and that's where the magic comes from.

David Pembroke:

And about preparation, Richard made it very clear to all of you, prepare. Don't just think you're going to turn up and wing it and just stand up there and think that you're going to be able to be effective. This takes time, this takes practise. So really, if you're going to be serious in a world where soft skills are becoming so more valuable and more important and more valued, it is something that is worth really putting some time into.

David Pembroke:

Really appreciative of Richard Morecroft coming on today and really appreciative of you coming back once again. If you do have the time for a review, we always take reviews because they help the programme to be found so we really would appreciate you doing that. We'll be back in two weeks time with the next episode of GovComms. Thanks again for your attendance. My name's David Pembroke. We'll be back, as I say, in two weeks time. But for the moment, it's bye for now.

Outro:

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