

Episode 3 – New Leader, Old Team: The Inherited Hand

Regina Lewis Welcome to the inside straight and lingo. And inside straight is a hand with only four of the five cards needed to win. The missing card is what we're calling the gap. But we're not here to talk about poker. Instead, this site Inside Straight deals with all things branding and communications and the gaps that foil even the best laid plans. For example, a gap in brand alignment can cost ten percent of annual revenue. A poor reputation sixty percent, a crisis triggered by a failed implementation, fifty percent of stock value over two years. Miscommunications leading to corporate inefficiencies up to eight figures. So who's minding the gap and who are we? We're a group of seasoned pros from various sectors who've banded together for this series of critical conversations on the hands that we've all been dealt. We're here to say the quiet parts out loud. In each game, we'll ask three critical questions to help close the gap. One. What's really going on here? Two. What assumptions were made? Three. What solutions would we recommend? Let the games begin. Here's the hand we've been dealt. We accept the role. Head of communications. You walk in energized. You have ideas. It's going to be fab. You walk in with a vision, a strategy, the mandate to transform external communications. You're energized by the opportunity. Then you learn the team's already in place. Budget's pretty much spent and reporting lines are fixed. So here's the question. Are you building strategy or absorbing structural decisions already made? Okay players, what have we really walked into? What suits do you want to play in this round?

Russell Holley Well, I'm going to throw in diamonds because I definitely think it's systems and resources. So I'm just going to unless anybody sort of going to disagree with that one.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel I'm not going to disagree, but I'm going to throw in hearts because there is a definite relationship between the person that's coming in and leadership and also the team that they're inheriting.

Russell Holley Okay.

Regina Lewis Oh, yeah. I'm going to throw in a spade just because it's structural decisions have been made, and it's set up a scenario that somebody's got to live with.

Mark Evans Yeah. I don't think it's I don't think it's clubs on this one, not execution. We're talking about the process before that, but I certainly agree with the with the other three comments. So all right. What do we do first.

Regina Lewis Yeah. Does anybody have an example. Has anybody ever walked into this situation had a client or a colleague. Let's hear some stories. Let's. Let's go.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Not only do I have, I have both. I have one that I walked away from and turned down the job because that's what I walked into. It's early. Way back in time. Um, early internet days when agencies hadn't gone digital yet and were looking to go digital and trying to find the right people to lead those teams. Got an offer to come in and work for an agency. Uh, top person in comms spot. Left. Left the entire team. And when I met the team, I said, hold on. I'm not taking this team. I'm not taking this team. Number one, they hadn't explained to this team

that a new person from the outside was going to come in and be their boss. So you were already walking in on a lot of resentment of people who already felt that they should be the next head of that team. So that's number one. Number two, they weren't explicit about what resources, skill sets, capabilities that were available. Also, they weren't even clear about the mandate of what it was that we needed to achieve. It looked great on paper. The offer looked outstanding, but when I got a chance to really look at that closer, it actually beat the team. It was like a no go. No thank you. I think I'll walk away. Uh, and I don't regret making that decision because I think that is really, really hard, not only for the leader that is coming in with their own ideas and the directions that they want to take, but also for that team. So that's my story. I don't know what anyone else has a similar story.

Russell Holley I don't know where to start on this one. We've, uh, you know, as a, again, as an agency head, we get, uh, relationships of are key. We go, we go and meet, uh, communications teams on a, on a, on a weekly daily basis. And when there's a change at the head of that organization or that division, it influences everything. And we feel that a lot of the time when that change happens, you're, you're pushed even further out of the sort of the picture, and your relationship almost starts afresh. Obviously, you have to meet the new person when they're at the at the helm. But it's, it's, it's almost as though you're the last part of the puzzle. Uh, and ultimately, you're one of the, one of the, the cogs that, that, that is integral to the, to the success of the team. And it sort of leaks into other areas as well of the conversations that we've been having about how much the communications agency is respected, renowned. And it's very, very often that we're pushed right to the end of the process, or we'll have a word with the agency at the end. Let's just rather than bringing them in right at the beginning and sitting down and discussing as part of the team. It's that's probably one of my biggest concerns or issues. Is that as being part. You're just a a tool that delivers rather than part of the team. So it happens to us on a regular basis. Um, and it's something that has really changed. Um, and I think that specifically as we go into sort of really uncharted, uh, times, how, how do we as an agency make ourselves more valued more, more part of that team? We should be integrated right from the beginning. So it, it affects us massively in terms of, um, our ability to deliver through the, through that transition when someone comes in. Um, so yeah, it's, it's, it's a, it's a big issue for us.

Regina Lewis Yeah. That's, that's a great example of a structural issue that leads perfectly into, into the spades. Um, and I, and I've dealt with that on the agency side as well as in corporate. And what I've found experientially and typically after the fact is that when an organization is looking to hire a head of com regardless of the title, but usually in the upper management role, leadership role is that they hire for whatever pain they're experiencing in that moment that causes them to say, hey, wait a minute, we need a change. And between that moment and the moment that that head of coms can comes in can be anywhere from ninety days to six months a year's time. And so much change occurs within that gap.

Russell Holley Even more so Regina at the moment, even more so in, in, in the sort of the climates that are not just say, in Geneva and Brussels where we where we mainly were, but I think globally and setting these sort of time frames or strategies and say, this is what we want you to carry out or work with us. They're they're out of date within six months.

Regina Lewis Oh, exactly. And my point is that they hired for yesterday thinking that they're hiring for the future, because you coming in as a new lead, you are representing the future. And yet the the team that's in place and the resources that are in place are yesterday. And they're part of the problem that the organization is trying to solve. So you have a very mixed bag, and it's almost a setup to say to fail situation because you cannot win with that hand. It's just it's unfortunate for the people that are inherited. It's unfortunate for the person that's there. But to have to face the facts that you've got a pretty untenable situation unless you take some sort of action. And none of it's pleasant. But you've got to face reality.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel And not only that, it's almost like being a sacrificial lamb. You know, you're going in there. And the fact of the matter is, is that leader that's coming in and that comms role, they probably have not been briefed on what the real pain point is, not honestly, you know, so it's going to take a little bit of their time upon onboarding to really understand a level above them. What's the real pain point that they have to solve for and then be able to turn that over and to how that impacts the team. And then it goes back to once again with Regina saying, who do I have? What skill sets do they have? What's the capabilities and how is it going to take us from now? And as she said, rightfully into the future, do you.

Russell Holley Do you think almost a different process process should take place is, uh, actually there's two, two, two sort of threads here is that the first one is when a new head of a lot of experience comes in. Do you think the majority of the time they know that what they're inheriting, they're going to inherit, they can't control?

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel No.

Regina Lewis No.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel You're broadsided.

Russell Holley On numerous occasions.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel But it's packaged pretty. It's packaged in a way that makes you feel like I can solve this. It's a pretty package and a pretty problem. It's a pretty problem you want to solve because that's part of it for you. You want to solve that. But the fact of the matter is, it oftentimes run far deeper than what's presented to you.

Russell Holley Because I see it over and over again. I suppose it in a sort of a unique situation is that if, for argument's sake, you work with thirty, forty clients in a specific field in, in, in, in a specific country, and I don't know, maybe three or four times a year, you get changes. Uh, but with that huge turnover, with that turnover, these people probably have several jobs in their career at the head. But they must have to have the same sort of like Groundhog Day, really, for them. They must see the same situation. So therefore, if they were going into a new job role, would they not maybe say, right, I'd like to meet the team.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Yes. So for if I could really quickly just simply say that it is like Groundhog's Day. So no matter how much experience that you have, and if you really step back from the pretty problem, you will notice right away what the problems are. It changes even the questions that

you ask, even when you're interviewed because, okay, I've seen this before. Let me ask this question. Right. And, and get that straight. But at the same time, you go in there and sometimes you are able to interview the team. And I think it's really important that the team interviews you too, as a new leader coming in, because there's a trust factor that's kind of broken when somebody just suddenly comes in. They weren't even consulted. No one's asked them their opinion about what they need as a better manager for them, so that they can do their best work. They haven't been consulted. There's a trust factor that's also broken. So I think that it's it's a little bit of both. You know, the leader coming in needs to be able to interview and look at the team, the whole team, starting with the leadership into the team that they're inheriting, but also that team in this case, communication teams, needs to really be able to interview that person too, so that they understand that they can establish some bit of trust and they know what the expectations are of that person coming in. Well, let's.

Regina Lewis Let's drive the elephant in the room here because a lot of times with those teams, you don't know, you may not know that they even exist. And the elephant in this room is, are those people respected? Because if they were, were they interviewed to take this, this role on, or were they just overlooked? And if it's the latter, you're walking into a situation that is a particular problem, and unless you address it up front, you're going to have a lot of back end problems they can give you, not in compliance, but it can be a real setup that will not bode well for the leader.

Mark Evans I think you're absolutely right. And I've been in positions where you're put into a job and you are given carte blanche and you've got authority, but it's going to take a long time for you to sort of suss out, well, what what are the skills of the team? What are their capabilities and what do we have to do? And is there a fit? And heck, I'm now going to have to start firing and hiring people. And that's, that's not what you sign up for when you when you walk into a role, but that's often what you end up with because you realize that one, you've got to overhaul all the systems, and then you've got to look at who's going to be doing all of these particular parts of the job that we need to fulfill the strategy. And oh my goodness, we've got one person, a team of five.

Russell Holley But that might be the remit though, isn't it? You, you, you, you need to cut. Absolutely. I said.

Mark Evans That sometimes come into organisation they.

Regina Lewis Want. Yeah.

Mark Evans But they want someone to come in, they want to bang heads and they want you to fire people and they don't tell you.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel They don't say that. And they need to actually say that oftentimes that leader comes in and that's exactly what their role is to kind of clean out and look at what they actually have. And then they'll say, thank you very much. You can go to actually, that's because now you've done that part. I've been there and that's absolutely happened. Yeah. Um, and the other part. Yeah. I'm sorry. Go ahead. Regina.

Regina Lewis Oh, no. I'm sorry. Um, yeah. You end up being being the bad guy and I, and I did walk into that role as chief communications officer. I was interviewing with the CEO and he said, oh, there's a team there. But if you want other people, bring other people. And I was like, huh? And then I realized he was telling the truth. And a lot of times there's dead wood there that gets either moved into comms for you to clean up. As Carolyn said, or there are people that they know need to go. And either people don't have the chutzpah to get rid of the people, or they're just ignoring it and just passing them along and on.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel To be fair, on the flip side of what Regina is saying, my experience has been that a lot of times organizations are not aware of all the capabilities that they actually have because they they actually don't go around. Yes. The but the but actually what they have, they'll start going out looking for. We need fill in the blank. And actually there's a person quietly sitting over there misaligned, doing a job that. Because it was an opening and they took it. And they actually have all of the capabilities that you're looking for, but you only think about the what, what the role that you hired them for, not the full capacity of what they could actually do. And nine times out of ten they'd rather be doing. That's things that you need to do.

Russell Holley And they're very specific management style where um, in, in, in our situation, in our agency, we, we would rather hire within if we have the skill sets within. Yeah. They have institutional knowledge as long as their institutional knowledge is, you know, it's dynamic, it's looking at new technologies, looking how to change, looking at how to improve. And it's fine to hire within, um, it's not, you know, every, almost all the time I've seen, um, changes in, in, in, in, in industry, it's always bringing in, uh, external, um, individuals rather than maybe looking at what's in-house.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Can I give you a good example of that? I remember working on in a position where once again, we need to expand our team looking at that. And we just had a whole bunch of interns, you know, not just freshly out of school, you know, have multiple master's degrees and things like that, but can only find a job as an intern. So they're working there. I'm trying to build the team and I'm looking around and this one kid quietly comes up to me and says, I have a master's in public relations.

Russell Holley Oh, right. Yeah.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel But this kid is an administrative assistant right now. And and I looked at him, I said, you come with me. And I started and then they all started feeling more comfortable to tell me what their backgrounds are. And I said, hang on, everybody. Tell me what you have. What what do you have a background in that you're not using? And then I just started categorizing all of the people that were already there in. I said, okay, you, you, you, you come with me, you, you, you. I'll think of something for you later. Yeah, but I built a team within with the capabilities that were already there. People just said, well, we hired them for that, and they never thought about the full range of what they could actually do.

Regina Lewis Yeah, we're at the halfway mark. So this is a good place to summarize where we are now to make sure that we're asking, answering the question that was asked from the beginning. So based on what everybody is saying is, one is a lot of times the scenario you

walk into doesn't match the job that you're hired to do, nor does it match the reality of the situation you find yourself in. The staff and the resources are often a mismatch for the job at hand, or the pain that you're allegedly hired to solve, or the one that you find yourself solving. It's short. There's not a lot of truth in the advertising and what's put up. And a lot of times organizations don't know who they have on board, what skills and capabilities they have. And also, I would add, like the, the broadness of what a communications or brand professional brings to the table. So any further thoughts on that? Any other takeaways from the first part of this conversation?

Russell Holley For me, I think it's a lot of this can come down to the importance placed on communications. Yeah. How much do the organizations that we, we're referring to across the board truly believe that communications should be at the heartbeat of that organization? And I think a lot of it stems from, well, it's only communications. Is it really important? I over and over again, I hear, well, there's a new new DG starting or a new head of the organization. I really hope they're focused on comms. I really hope they they understand communications. And I think a lot of the time, if if certain people above them don't respect communications, it doesn't feed down. So therefore, it's always going to be an underfunded, under-resourced, under valued part of the organisation that then has less respect when people are hired, less respect about being honest to these individuals, and therefore it filters down to the agencies we're less able to. It actually happens to us. We then get given a brief, which actually isn't the right brief because, you know, they don't quite know what they're what they're actually asking for. So we're never or we can't be expected to deliver exactly or above and beyond what's needed when we don't quite know what the, uh, the brief is.

Regina Lewis Well, that leads to our second question is what assumptions are being made here?

Mark Evans So yeah, I think that again, we talked about this last week as well, didn't we? we saw a couple of instances on on LinkedIn where people were asking for a comms person to come on board, but what they really meant was they want someone to do all the PR for them. So it gets a bit bit of what Russell was talking about as well. What is the role? What how are people mixing up here with comms for a start up? And another instance of, you know, people getting candidates applying for a job who don't necessarily have the right skills, but they have expertise in a certain area or they have a, they want to work in sports management, for instance, but they don't really have marketing experience, but they used to be athletes or they've got an interest in football or whatever. And that person had oftentimes promoted over someone that's got real skills because those skills aren't valued, those skills aren't appreciated, or perhaps they don't even understand the scope of those skills. So I think that in this ever expanding and diverse digital environment, you need people with very, very specific and wide ranging skills, but a lot of people don't even know what those skills are. And that sort of leads on to other conversations we've had about, you know, SEO for AI and, and geo. And people don't know people at the top don't know. And we've had conversations with this week with, with people that have said, we understand the need to change, not just probably now, but, you know, twelve months, two years. And we realized that the teams are going to need to change. We're going to have to change, but we have no idea how. But we now realize that we've got to look at strategy. We've got to look at, you know, pull it right back, you know, look at the look

through the other lens end of the telescope and look at it from a much broader perspective. And I think that can only be a good thing when you're looking at, as you said earlier on in the in the podcast, Regina, you know, take a step back. What do you really want to achieve? And not just now, not just for tomorrow, but for twelve, eighteen, two, three years time.

Regina Lewis Now you're, you're absolutely right. A lot of times organizations have no idea of what they're looking for. They'll say they want a comms person to lead comms, but what they really want is somebody to make media calls. Or they'll say, oh, I want internal comms. Not recognizing that's a completely different field with a completely different body of skills. And I think those misnomers and the more complicated our world gets, the more complex and depth is adding to the communications arsenal of skills.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Can I throw in one last one?

Regina Lewis Yeah, please.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel And that is, um, there's an assumption that structure and strategy don't go together. Like you can have one or the other and that's perfectly fine. But they if you really want this to work really well, they go together structure and verse that team, you have to be able to be able to say, this is what we want to do, and am I hiring the right person that's going to actually able to deliver that. And leadership needs to be able to be okay with being rigorous, rigorously, um, challenged about if that's a problem that needs to be solved, number one. And if com should be the one doing it, because that's the other thing is comms the right team to actually solve that problem. Um, and if not, you know, then who should and how can com support and if it is comms, then let that new comms person that's coming in do it and then develop the strategy and then looking at the capabilities that they have available to them to design the strategy that best works.

Russell Holley One thing I'd like to just throw in, because I've heard it on numerous occasions when, uh, you meet new communications, um, heads who, who, who have recently started their, their, their new roles, I've got no budget. So all of a sudden they've entered this new arena, new set of challenges, been told they need to do X, Y, and Z and they start. They they pull the chair, get comfy, and then all of a sudden we have. We don't have any budget. How, how, how on earth does someone from a from their own sort of integrity and their own sort of, I don't know, their own career sort of path suddenly sit there and say, well, I've been taken on to do this whole new challenge, but I can't actually do anything that needs to be done because I've got my hands tied behind my back. And I look at it. I always think to myself, did you not know that when you first when you first came to the position, is it is it normal that they don't know?

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Yes, yes, it's normal, but it's something you gotta learn. And I always bring it down to four things. When you're looking at a job and you're coming in at leadership number one, authority, you need to be able to run your teams the way you need to run your team's autonomy. You need to be able to move and, and be able to, uh, make a decision flexibility, you know, be able to be able, they always like to use the word agile, but I don't like the word agile. In fact, I hate that word. Um, but flexibility to be able to move around budget, budget, if

you don't have any money, uh, and which to work, um, that is that walk away. And the last thing is, and there's a fifth in that, and that's for the, the actual leader that's coming in salary, that's salary had better if you're coming in and it's a mess that you're walking into a pretty problem that you're walking in as a, that there is hazard pay that is needed for that in order to come in. So there are five things that I look at whenever I'm walking into those types of.

Russell Holley I know we have a time constraint to these. But the other the other, if I can sort of put into this, is that it, if you come into a new position. Um, are you when you start those new positions and. Well, someone's left for argument's sake, someone's is the the majority of the time someone's just retired. Why have they moved on? Because it's always that question. I wonder why that why why there's a position there. As communications head. I wonder if a seasoned professional would sort of like interrogate that. Right. Okay, first of all, I need to understand why there's a position there. And I know that in at the moment or a lot of the time in industries, you know, peaks and troughs of business, uh, recessions, whatever, there could be a glut of communications experts and very few jobs. So maybe people just take the job because I need the job, I need an income. But, but I always see myself, right? There's a position. Why did someone leave? Do do do do you think people have you ever asked that?

Regina Lewis Yeah, there's, there's a lot of reasons for that. Um, and it just depends on it's voluntary or, or involuntary. And a voluntary situation is sometimes you just realize you can't win. And I think I speak for all communications people is you want to win. And if you cannot win or you're not being heard or you don't have a seat at the table, it's time. Time to move on or you've reached your capacity in an involuntary situation. There's a there's a number of factors that we really can't get into here. But when that job is left open, a lot of things change behind the scenes. Like I mentioned, budget. Your budget is taken. People are moved into different spots to cover up the hole while you're gone. Can't tell you how many times I've walked into a new situation and my predecessor had zero skills. So, um, there are a lot of factors and there's, there's been a number of reports.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Lately on the dissatisfaction, particularly at senior level leaders. You've you've been around the block enough. You know what time it is, and there's just some stuff you really shouldn't take on or do. Um, and we can continue this, but I think it's time to shift to solutions. Oh, right. Because we can talk about this, uh, ad nauseam. I'll jump in. Yeah, I'll throw one in on solutions. I think we've we've circled a lot of those really quickly. Number one is you got to be brave enough to ask those questions while you're being interviewed. Much of what, um, Russ is talking about really interrogate what do you stepping into? So, you know, you got to be brave because if they can't answer the questions leadership, then that's not the job for you. You know, they got to feel comfortable, vulnerable enough to answer those questions and, and, and say, listen, you know, this is the situation gives you some choices. And next, you need to also be able to really talk to that team that you're inheriting and really interrogate them and invite them to interrogate you. You know, so you really understand who you're working with. And then also, um, in a, in a way that isn't scary. Be sure to go in and find out very conversationally if you, if you decide to take the role, sit down with each and every one of those people and find out a little bit more about where they've been, what do they know, what would they like to do these types of things, because that's going to help you to kind of shape

that team and know how you need to supplement the existing team that you have.

Russell Holley I've got a similar sort of thing is it's get to know the people that you you have. When we often meet new people, obviously they've, they've got almost their, their preferred suppliers that they've worked with before because it's only natural. Um, we all take people that are good with us through our sort of, through our careers. Um, but that doesn't mean that the people who are then incumbent are not good or can offer. It's a, it's a case of getting to know. And I always think if you're that good at your job, I, I listen more now than I ever have done throughout my career. I want to understand what people are doing. I want to know why they're good at what they do. Um, and then therefore, if I've got an agency or I've got staff people around me, get to know them, spend some time, get to understand what their incumbent issues are. Because I think a lot of the time you can learn how you're going to tackle your job by another seasoned professional telling you, telling you what the issues are. It's just whether or not you want to listen to those.

Mark Evans I think from.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel The content perspective.

Mark Evans Yeah, I think from where I'm sitting, you need to know that the challenge you're taking on is one that you can win. And Carolyn mentioned that earlier. You walk into something if something doesn't fit right or something feels right, or as I say, you don't have a budget. But I think that any any problem is solvable if you have as rich as Carolyn has already said, if you have time and authority and ability and, and budget and you can make decisions, you know about the team, whether you can interview the team and bring people up through the ranks, or whether you say, we're not going to employ someone, we're actually going to go and go to an agency for this because we need more than one specialism. We need multiple specialisms to, to solve this problem, or we need brand experts or we need strategy. I think that you do need that authority. You do need to understand what you're walking into, but most of all, you need that backing of upper management. They need to know what they want or they need to be able to trust you. Hormones. Yeah, exactly. You need you need them either to say, this is what we want and you agree with that and you do it. Or they say, we don't understand comms. We're leaving that to you. You've got you've got control. And if you don't have it, it's a whole mess and it's never going to work out. And you're just banging your head against a brick wall. So you might as well stop before you start.

Russell Holley That's going to take a brave person. I don't think I've ever come across one.

Mark Evans No I don't. I think if you're walking into a role and you as a problem that you've found out that you can't solve, you, you would be silly to walk into that role.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Yeah, you would be. Yeah, I agree with that. Um, from a spade perspective, I would say trust, but verify. Because you're going to get limited information in the initial interview for the job that you're going to take, you're going to get very limited cues from, from the brief that you're given for the role. And there's a lot of factors that that play in And and as a newcomer coming in, especially as a department head, you probably have your first hundred days to

make your mark. What I mean by trust, but verify is in that hundred days, while you're building out your plan, you should also do an audit, do a perception audit, understand what the customers think, understand what the partners think, understand what senior management and junior management, and even the person who opens the mail thinks, because all of those things give you clues and cues as to what you're walking into. You got to know what you're dealing with. And is it a solve or a fix? You can solve problems, but you can't fix a broken organization. That is not your role. That's not your job. You also have to be hyper aware of the of the culture. Carolyn, you mentioned mentioned autonomy. If it's a micromanaging organization that you're going to find out within that first one hundred days, you're going to know that. And so your, your first one hundred days is either going to be going forward or building out your exit plan, one or the other. Once you've accepted that role and you have to decide based on the criteria and the information that you get in that initial period of time. Because I don't know that organizations intentionally mislead, I think they misdiagnosed what the issue is, and they also misdiagnosed the solution. And that's woefully unfair for a person coming in and needing to solve or fix that. So that's my two cents from the stage perspective.

Russell Holley Listeners, thanks for listening in to the inside straight. You know, we don't promise perfect, perfect outcomes. You know, we just promised it promises better ones. Subscribe to the inside straight. Send us your stories for analysis. Follow us on social channels for clips, reflections, and conversations beyond the episode.