



About the Emergent Series

This episode is part of the Learning Uncut Emergent series where we talk about rapidly changing business models, and how Learning and Development can support organisations to adapt. Exploring how learning professionals can emerge from disruption as relevant and effective. The series is co-hosted by Michelle Ockers, Laura Overton and Shannon Tipton.

Michelle Ockers:

I'm very excited today to be having this initial conversation in our Emergent series. Laura Overton, welcome to our discussion today.

Laura Overton:

Thank you for having me, I'm excited as well.

Michelle Ockers:

And Shannon Tipton makes up the third of our little group here of co-hosts for Emergent. Welcome Shannon.

Shannon Tipton:

Well, thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to be a part of this conversation.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. So I thought we'd kick off by introducing the listeners to Laura and Shannon. And I'm sure that when you hear them talk about what their passions are, what they do, you will agree with me that they are fantastic choices to be co-hosts for this series. So Laura, can you introduce yourself to the guests? And tell us all a little bit about what you do.

Laura Overton:

Okay. Well, I'm Laura Overton and actually for the last 35 years, I've had a kind of consuming passion about learning innovation and business results. And probably most people will know me through the longitudinal research program that I ran for 15 years under Towards Maturity. Where we were looking and exploring how we can use technology, how we use new thinking, new models, to really deliver what's important to business. And actually since the beginning of June, I've also now joined up with the team at 70:20:10 Institute to form a new organization called Tulser, which is an anagram of results. You get the theme of what's working through my career, which is really about how do we reimagine the future of learning and development, to become business critical and to really drive change within an organization. And obviously to do that, we have to look at change within ourselves as well. So that's 35 years in a nutshell, Michelle.

Michelle Ockers:

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Thank you for bringing that 35 years to the Emergent series, and I think completely aligned with what we're trying to do, which we will be talking about in a little while. And Shannon, can you introduce yourself as well, please?

Shannon Tipton:

Sure. I am Shannon Tipton and I am the owner of Learning Rebels and Learning Rebels has been around now, I'm very proud to say, for seven years. Yay. But I have been around, like Laura, the learning profession now for well over 25 years. Working in various learning leadership roles and the passion that drives me forward and that drives Learning Rebels forward is all about connecting learning to the business. And Laura and I have this in common, all three of us have this in common that it's critical that learning realizes its value, reaches for its value, so we can help the business at its moment of need. But also, it's about helping the people get the information they need when they need it when the business needs them to have it. So connecting all of those dots and that's what Learning Rebels does.

Shannon Tipton:

It's helping businesses at that moment when they realize, wow, this isn't working, this isn't sticking. What can we do? How can we help our people be better, smarter, faster, and true to my business name? It's nothing like putting your vision statement as your business name, right? It's taking a non-traditional approach to helping businesses with their training issues. We're not going to solve the training issues or the learning issues of today using yesterday's thinking. So we need to think forward and we need to move forward with that. And this is where Learning Rebels comes in is to help them with that realization to bring those business matrix into the learning function, so we all succeed and that the business succeeds and clearly that's where my passion lies. And I'm really looking forward to having these conversations with Laura and Michelle and our assorted guests to really make those theories come alive.

Michelle Ockers:

Fantastic. And one of the things I loved when I first met you Shannon, and maybe a little bit of backstory about how I connected with each of you is relevant for people to get the context as well. I met you at a conference and you had this hashtag, let's do this. You're someone who is a change maker, and I wrote that hashtag down and I actually had it sitting on a card on my desk for many years afterwards, so that's how I met Shannon. And Shannon of course, you are in Chicago in the US, and we maintain an ongoing conversation across the globe. And Laura, I met you on Twitter, I think, on a Twitter chat about bench marking, when I first started getting active on Twitter in 2014, that's right, isn't it?

Laura Overton:

I think so.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah,

Laura Overton:

It was definitely online, given the fact I'm based in Wimbledon London.

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Michelle Ockers:

Yes, and I'm sitting here in Australia. So I was working at Coca-Cola Amatil at the time, and I think that was 2014 when I had what I would call my personal awakening in terms of modernizing learning and what was truly possible with learning as opposed to training and letting go of control and sharing responsibility. And I found the research work and the very practical insights that were done at Towards Maturity, which was your organization that you founded Laura. I found that so informative for my own practice, so now I work independently, of course, as an organizational learning strategist and also a capability builder. I do a lot of work with learning and development teams who are going through periods of transformation, wanting to modernize approaches, looking at their mindset, skillset, and tool set to help equip them to do that. So I think regular listeners will know me as the host of the podcast, but I actually do real work in the real world as well. And I have a very practical bent to my work and a very keen interest of making change happen, and the podcast is a super vehicle for that.

Michelle Ockers:

So that's, what's brought us all together and it's been several months since our daily lives were radically altered in response to the pandemic. And we all have felt that, I've got this little saying we're all in this together, but each of us also is in it individually and has to make sense of it and figure out what it means for us individually, as well as collectively. And when now, as we start recording the Emergent series, we're at the point where, although the pace is different around the world, some parts of the world are starting to come out of the physical distancing. And it's quite clear, that as restrictions ease, there will still be an enduring impact on how we work and live. So I've invited Laura and Shannon to help me to explore with a series of guests from around the world, what this means for learning in organizations. So Shannon, tell me, what has the change and disruption meant to you in the past few months?

Shannon Tipton:

Well, I think it has shed a very bright and specific light on where learning and development is right now. It doesn't matter if you are an external consultant, like the three of us, or if you are an internal consultant managing an L&D department within an organization right now, that light is shining just as brightly on all of us. And it's really about the pivot, how are we flexing? How are we adjusting? How are we moving with this wave? That never seems to end and, how are we moving with this? And, how are we looking at what is changing around us?

Shannon Tipton:

When we sit back and contemplate the industry, it's easy to want to just plow forward and get through what we need to get through. But I think here, the important part is sitting back and really taking inventory of what has happened and how those happenings will affect what we do in the future, because there's a ripple effect here. There is a cause and effect, and we can't just sit back and wait for the wave to wash over us. I think that we're still going to be standing in the same spot, that's not going to happen. So now how do you pivot? How do you move? And so, the last few months has really made me lean back and think about what is going to occur in the future. How are we going to emerge from this? And that has been my train of thought over the last few months.

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Michelle Ockers:

So Laura, what about yourself? What has change and disruption meant for you in the past few months?

Laura Overton:

Well, I really obviously echo what you've been saying Shannon there, because the change in our industry potentially has been very, very, very fundamental. And there's been so many shifts, but it's actually, it's not just the industry, it's our lives, isn't it really let's face it. You know, ladies, it's all of our lives and it's all of the businesses that we work in. And it's all of the businesses that we support in our day to day work. Everything had been put on pause and to be honest, the first few weeks or whatever of this, has been, I think slightly easier than the latter part of the time, because it was very clear what we all had to do. We all had to stop, we all had to think, we all had to re plan very rapidly in order to cope with what was happening.

Laura Overton:

And it was kind of clear. We had a clear direction, but now we're kind of as a society, we're starting to move through, what does it look like next? There isn't a clear direction, for us as individuals or as businesses, and certainly as learning professionals. I see a lot of people say, "Oh, I can't wait," and I think Shannon, when we've been talking about this, that can't wait to go back to what it was before. A lot of learning professionals saying, no, it's going to be absolutely brand new, but regardless of what we think, it's going to be ambiguous as we come out.

Laura Overton:

And there's a lot... I've been through different types of recessions before, where everyone's flooded into online learning. They glutted on online learning and it has made them sick to be quite honest, they were rushed into it. It was done really badly, and in fact, that was one of the reasons that Towards Maturity research started in the first place was, at the end of a recession, when so many bad things were happening online, but a few good things were and, how do we unpick that? And for me, I think that we're at a pivot point, as you say, Shannon, but it's not just a pivot point about us, but it's a whole pivot point about the decisions that we have to make now and what we choose to bring from the past, into our future, and what we choose to bring from the last few months into our future.

Laura Overton:

So I'm kind of excited, but I'm also very scared as well, because I have been through this kind of gorging and then flooding back into what we used to do because the gorging wasn't satisfactory enough, and we need to get the right balance as we emerge and we've got to be sensible because it's going to be ambiguous.

Shannon Tipton:

I completely agree with that, and if I might add, the last recession back in 2008. And I remember those times and all of the eLearning that everybody was doing and everybody was wanting to do. And at that time I was working for a very wise person, and when I approached him about the future not only of the business as a whole, but of our department specifically, he said, "We have

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to plan for the future, if we don't do training right now, we will not get it right for the future." And boy, those words hung on me. Obviously they still hang on me.

Michelle Ockers:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). So it's interesting, and I know one of the themes we're going to explore in Emergent is around business models and shifts in business models, but I think there's something different about this from just a recession. This isn't just an economic contraction for a period of time. I think there will be more radical shifts and you talk to Shannon about pivoting and I'm part of a business coaching group, and there was lots of examples of businesses which needed to radically shift quickly. Not just moving what they did online, but thinking about, well, what else could I do? Where is the actual need now? And how could I serve the market in this very different kind of context? So I think that will be, something that will both challenge and provide opportunity, which is one of the things we really want to lean into Laura, and why this is called Emergent is because of that ambiguity and the lack of clarity as to what will things look like in a year? In two years? In five years?

Michelle Ockers:

We know they'll look different. It's not just resuming businesses, normal. I've had lots of conversations, that's been one of the things I have been doing way more of, which is ironic, given the physical distancing, right. I refuse to call it social distancing by the way, because my life has actually been more social than normal because people have been reaching out, there's this thirst for connection, and that's not just learning professionals, I think that's everybody. But in one of those conversations I was having recently, it was a group conversation. Somebody said a learning professional said, "Going back to normal, as it used to look like would be like going backwards, I don't want to go back there. I want to move forward." But this grasping for what does that look like?

Michelle Ockers:

I think Laura to your point in the early period of things being locked down everyone swung into action. It was clear, we as learning professionals had a job to do, to support people, to adapt to working remotely, working at distance, or to keep them safe in their work environments, or to move people into roles where there was high demand in the business customer facing roles in many cases. But now it's like, well, where are we headed? And one of the things I did early on, of course, was create the Disruption series of Learning Uncut. Just to address that question around, let's not just take existing practices and put them online and do them poorly, and I think that's still relevant, hence this conversation.

Michelle Ockers:

But I would definitely say in terms of what's happened for me in the past three months, I've never been busier, I've never been more engaged with conversation, with clients. I've done new work, I've been able to deliver to more organizations to touch more people in workforces, in organizations with speaking, with workshops, with developing continuous learning skills, because all of a sudden, it's not odd that I'm sitting in Brisbane, Australia working from a home office, that's been normalized. So I think that's a good example of a big shift, and for those who are ready

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for that, I feel in a way that it's an expansive period, if you had the right mindset, and if you've positioned yourself well enough, and that learning is critical.

Michelle Ockers:

So let's move on to that question then around, to what extent is learning important in this context? I think it's everything, and it's not learning through having what is known, shoved at people in classrooms, be they online or be they in physical environments. It's about this, sense-making, the conversation, the figuring it out together in terms of what's happening and being very fluid. What would you like to add to that Laura? If I can move back to you on that one.

Laura Overton:

Yeah. I think learning is so critical, and it's very exciting when you listen to some of the conversations that are going on about people in the field of learning and development who are willing to experiment and try new things. It's almost as if, for some it's been a permission to fail. I've been looking all these new models of modern learning, and learning in the flow of work, and all of those types of things, maybe now is the time for me to experiment. And I think organizations as a whole are having to experiment, they are having to suddenly bring great sways of their workforce online into the remote learning, where before there was a five-year plan to be able to achieve that. There are edicts that are coming out from CEOs giving permission, different organizations giving permission to their staff, to think creatively and to innovate and to try and create a new culture, that's massively exciting.

Laura Overton:

And yet when the same CEOs look at the learning function, they say, look, help this to happen, but do it in all the old-fashioned ways, "Is there a course on how to help people experiment and be creative? Is there a piece of online learning?" To me, the opportunity for the way that we learn and connect and make meaning together, and the role of learning professionals to shift from not just being producers of experiences, but enablers of that process. How do we oil the mechanics of that process? How do we make it easier for the whole organization to connect and engage and learn from each other? And how do we help teams perform more efficiently and creatively?

Laura Overton:

I used to do a presentation a really clunky PowerPoint, cogs, the cogs in a wheel, this was in the '80s, and learning and development was a spanner in the works. You stick the spanner in, you pull the people out. Whereas I do believe now, even in 2020 compared to 2008, 2009, whenever it was all that time ago, that we should be the oil in that engine, how do we enable that to happen? So for me, I'm incredibly excited because all of the evidence shows that that type of approach delivers better business impact, and business [inaudible 00:19:21] are the things that matter to business. So some stuff, we need to be working on that, but I think it's really exciting the role we could play.

Michelle Ockers:

Would you like to add anything to that Shannon, and maybe then move into talking about your goal or aspiration for the Emergent series?

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Shannon Tipton:

Well sure, and I think it does dovetail nicely for what our goals are for the Emergent series. And I love Laura's analogy here about oiling the mechanism, because it is about moving the thought processes forward, and nurturing that process really. What I like to think about is when we're thinking about the learning function, as it connects to the business, how can we bring everything together and then help it move forward? And it's not our job to own it, and I think that that is part of the misconception that's out there, is some L&D people may be thinking about, well, okay, how do I put this together? And now how do I track it? How do I measure it? How do I control the environment? And that really isn't what I believe the need is, the need here is to help the business be able to move some of these new innovations and creativity forward, and most importantly, to be able to model that behaviour, right?

Shannon Tipton:

So we ask businesses to be more creative, and we want them, and would like them to be more innovative in what they're doing in regards to supporting the learning culture. Yet, some people still may be saying, "Well, when can I get back into the classroom?" Not to say that that's a bad thing, but again, it's about wrapping ourselves in that comfortable blanket. So now how do we unwrap ourselves? And help move forward some of these new... not really new technologies, technologies that have been out there. That a lot of us in the industry has seen sitting out there, out on the horizon, just beyond our reach and we know that those technologies work and we know those applications work, and now we have the opportunity to really move it forward through collaboration, through cooperation, innovating and creativity. And I think that that is just so exciting right now. And I think that [inaudible 00:22:06] really can help move that.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So it feels for you, part of the key here is the experimentation and how do we take things forward that we already have, but maybe use them in new ways Shannon. Laura for you what's your goal or aspiration for Emergent?

Laura Overton:

We've talked about this, the three of us and I've always wanted our industry to live up to its potential, to become much more business critical. We talked about, is it about us future proofing, but no, realized actually we need to be preparing for the future. And it did just remind me, and I just try to be really brief on this, but it reminded me of when I was doing a presentation on learning transformation all those years ago, just five months, in Berlin in December last year. And we were looking at this, and I was kind of using that metaphor of the Hungry Caterpillar, the kid's book.

Laura Overton:

And I was really reflecting, this is just the end of 2019. Was that we were gorging on so much, we were eating up whole libraries of eLearning content or you're eating up multiple learning management and learning experience platforms. We were eating up loads and loads of different types of content, stuffing our faces with gamification and curation and new types of models. And whether it's 70:20:10, or modern learning, or design models, or 5D, every acronym we're being thrown at. We were just getting just overwhelmed, and that kind of the caterpillar just feeling

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sick and not making any changes whatsoever, and getting fatter and fatter and fatter with ideas and the echo chamber, and this concept of us needing to just eat something healthy.

Laura Overton:

So outcome led, evidence informed ideas, that will deliver business results in my organization, go back to the leaf. And I delivered that story last year, but it really strikes me that the last few months have been that cocoon, an opportunity for us to cocoon to say, okay, we've gorged ourselves on all these different things. We've gone back to the straight, evidence informed, outcome led, and we now have the opportunity to emerge as something different and something new. And for me, that's the goal of the Emergent series, how do we help us make sense of all of those things in the past? And apply them to the business challenges that we have ahead, and come out new and refreshed and different and ready to go.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. There's a-

Laura Overton:

That's my goal nothing much.

Michelle Ockers:

Nothing much.

Laura Overton:

Nothing much. Well and if we don't-

Shannon Tipton:

No pressure.

Michelle Ockers:

Laura this is all entirely consistent with the thoughts you shared on the past, present and future of the learning profession, back in the 50th anniversary episode of Learning Uncut, which we recorded interestingly, shortly before the pandemic hit. And I think it was all still very relevant and I like the way you've built the cocoon into the hungry Caterpillar analogy; people are going to love your analogies. And it reminded me of a phrase I picked up when I was going through a major period of life change a couple of years ago, liminality, which is picked up from social anthropology, and it originally came from the idea of a rite of passage. However, it's been kind of morphed over recent years to be talking about a state that is between and betwixt two states. And in this case, we don't know what the state is on the other side, but we've got this, it's an exciting period because it's an opportunity for reinvention, re imagination.

Michelle Ockers:

But to your point, Laura and Shannon, I think what you both alluded to is some of the answers are there in our past, both in terms of what worked, what we know works, or what has the potential to work. But we need to be clear headed about how we link that to what makes a

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difference in the business, and to the shape of business into the future, so I think that all lines up really nicely. So there's three big questions we're kind of exploring through the series. One is how do we anchor ourselves in business reality, making sure that L&D is more useful.

Michelle Ockers:

The second is what can we do as learning and development professionals as learning and development teams? What are the concepts and ideas we can apply? Are there skills? Is there reorganization? How should we be working to become more useful? And what can we do now to prepare for the future? Whatever the shape of that future may be, and this will be enduring because this won't be the last time that the world goes through change, change is constant, right? But it's just very intense right now, but I love that idea, the cocoon idea, and the idea that we're still, as we record this series in that period of sense making of trying to figure out what the future looks like and how we can be really well positioned to, to be relevant and effective as we come out of it.

Michelle Ockers:

So let's talk about what listeners can actually expect from the Emergent series. I've just talked a little bit about kind of the questions we'll be dancing around with our guests. Laura, would you like to talk a little about the types of topics we're going to cover and what sort of guests we're aiming to have in the series?

Laura Overton:

Yeah. And I just pick up on your point about liminal spaces, when you're in a liminal space, and most of us have been there in our careers in some form or other. It's a great place of potentially great creativity, but also great vulnerability. So I think this series is about, how can we help us take advantage of both? Not to let the vulnerability of our uncertain future pull us down. So the guests that we're going to be having on board will be people like our listeners, it will be chief learning officers, it will be people who are having to make decisions about the role of learning and development, and also what role their teams will have to play in that. And there'll be people who have had to be vulnerable in this time of change and have also been vulnerable in their past as well and have made changes in the past and have seen how that creativity can release that.

Laura Overton:

So we'll also have consultants and practitioners, or have models that have ideas, so there'll be a lot of food for thought to buffer every person who wants to kind of scaffold and buffer, every listener in the series. And then some of the things that we're going to be covering, we're going to be looking at how business is changing, we're going to be looking at new business models for learning, we're going to be looking at courage and confidence, and how do we build that? The skills and capabilities within our own profession and the roles that we have to take.

Laura Overton:

New types of ways of considering how learning can be done and how it's been done in the past. What can we learn from the past? So lots and lots of different subjects, but that like the series suggests, they will also emerge, we're rolling this quite rapidly. And as new themes come up, we will also dig in deep and explore those and hopefully create an opportunity in that liminal space

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to say, look, you're not alone. Don't be frightened to let go, we're here with you and you can make it to the other side and make it stronger, and with a stronger network and a stronger vision of outcome led, evidence informed based system, making those decisions and taking those risks.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And I think that is a good point. We haven't mapped out every episode at this point, to some extent, we've got some ideas, but we will be following our nose a little bit in the path of the conversation, as well as any listeners suggestions that may be relevant. So Shannon would you like to talk about just what we've been calling the arc or the storyline of the series, and how we see the series running?

Shannon Tipton:

Sure. What we imagine and it goes along with what Laura just said, we're not alone, you're not alone, we're not alone. We all need help, right. We all need to be able to come out, whatever we see as the other end, and how do you get there? And the vision or the way that I make sense of this and in my scattered brain, my ever so, ooh, look, shiny thing, brain is, this is like a story. Every story has three parts to it, you have your setup, you have the beginning, where are the characters going? What are they doing? Who are they? Right? And then that set up leads into the action part, the climax, the big fight, or the big reveal, whatever that looks like in that particular story, so you had that setup, and then you have all of these wonderful action items that happen leading to whatever the conclusion is. Wherever the story ends or wherever the journey goes.

Shannon Tipton:

And that is how I imagine this series as flowing, is at the very beginning, we'll set this up. Here is where we're hoping to go, here are the theories that we are going to base this on, here's the foundation of the knowledge that's going to come from our guests. That's going to help lead us to those important action items. Now that we've given you this foundation, what do you build on this foundation? What does this look like? What's your house going to look like within your story? And then at the end, you've got the conclusion. We're answering that, so what? Question. We give you the theory, we give you the foundation and through those two steps, you're going, yeah, so what? So now, what am I supposed to do with this, Shannon, Michelle, Laura? Okay, so we're going to answer that question for you.

Shannon Tipton:

We're going to give you that. So what? So that at the last chapter of this maybe there's a to be continued, maybe it's like The Avengers, "Here we come." but really what we want to do is we want to give you that plot line that finishes up, that gives you the pathway, that helps you move to whatever your next steps are going to be. And like you said, though, that might change, who knows what's coming? 2020 can you believe it's only halfway through, so who knows what's going to happen, but we're going to be along on that ride with you and giving you this map.

Michelle Ockers:

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And to move to a slightly different movie analogy, Shannon, I think we need to be prepared that it's the never-ending journey as well, right. We're not going to wrap it all up neatly in a bow and say, well, there you go, this is the answer. That this is a continuing exploration, it just happens we are leaning into this more intensely right now because of the situation we find ourselves in. And in terms of that, so what? We are talking about doing an online event, a live online event. So there'll be an opportunity for others to participate in that kind of sense-making and pulling the threads all together towards the end of the series. So we'll provide some more details as we go through the series. So you found us here. So you obviously know that you can find episodes on the Learning Uncut podcast site, plus in your favourite podcast app, all of the episodes will go out through the normal Learning Uncut platform.

Michelle Ockers:

You will find a transcript of each episode and additional resources in the show notes, and I will include in this episode, links to LinkedIn profiles for all three of us. Plus we'll throw in a resource we've all created an individual resource each. Which gives you a greater sense of the kind of conversations we've been having, or our thinking at this point in time. And we'll curate all of the emergent episodes and resources onto a Padlet board for easy reference and share that as a collection. So you can join in the conversation using #LearningUncut, our normal conversation hashtag for the podcast, on social media platforms, particularly on Twitter and LinkedIn. And we are so looking forward to you being part of this exploration with us. Any final words, Shannon?

Shannon Tipton:

Well, I think we just want to make mention that we plan on kicking this off on June 23rd, and the hope is to have two episodes per week, and the episodes arriving to you every other week after that, or a fortnight.

Michelle Ockers:

If you're in the right part of the world, you'll know what a fortnight means. And if you're not it's a learning moment for you.

Shannon Tipton:

And if you're not in the right part of the world, that's the hope that we're going to kick this

Michelle Ockers:

And we're going to run through, we think, until late September, early October. Although again we're emerging, we're figuring out as we go along. So we're not quite sure when the last ones will be published, but when we feel there's enough to do that, so what? To have our aha moments, we will wrap the series then. Laura, any final words for this preview of the series?

Laura Overton:

Listen, you don't want to miss out, basically.

Michelle Ockers:

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I like that, I knew there was a reason I asked you to join us. Thank you so much. And thank you for joining us listeners, and we're excited to have you in this conversation with us.

