Learning Uncut Emergent Series
Kevin Thorn & Arun Pradhan
Building Creativity and Innovative into the Future of Work
Conversation with Shannon Tipton published on 7 July 2020

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.

Shannon Tipton:

Hello, everyone. My name is Shannon Tipton and I'm thrilled to be a guest host on Michelle Ockers' Learning Uncut podcast, the Emergent Series.

Shannon Tipton:

Today I'm very excited to welcome two incredible creative and innovative contributors from opposite sides of the world, by the way, from the U.S. and Australia. And first I'd like to welcome Kevin Thorn, and Kevin is an award-winning designer and developer, consultant and owner of Nuggethead Studios. And those of you who follow him may realize that he is Nuggethead, the Nuggethead.

Shannon Tipton:

And it's interesting that after retiring from the U.S. Army, Kevin pursued a career in corporate IT and training development, a couple of things that I would not attribute to creativity. But he has made his name and garnered many awards by solving learning problems in a wide range of creative projects using creative techniques such as illustration, graphic design, animation, serious comics, and is a certified facilitator in Lego Serious Play methodologies.

Shannon Tipton:

So welcome, Kevin. I'm happy to have you with us today. Good evening, I guess I should say to you.

Kevin Thorn:

Thank you. Welcome. Thank you, Shannon. Thanks for having me.

Shannon Tipton:

Oh, my pleasure. And then we also have Arun Pradhan who was recognized as the AITD learning professional of the year in 2017 and won the E-learning industry prize for individual excellence in 2015 in Australia. And Arun describes himself as a learning and performance strategist and overall geeky human. That's interesting, because his LinkedIn page has him as being extremely curious, empathic, and his website has him as a curious geek who empowers people to learn, innovate and perform.

Shannon Tipton:

And the app Learn to Learn enables curious learning. So in all of that, I'm seeing a trend there, Arun.

Arun Pradhan:

A consistency?

Shannon Tipton:

I'm seeing some consistency in who you are as a developer, as a learning professional and all-around human being. So welcome, and good morning to you, coming from Australia.

Arun Pradhan:

Yes, thank you very much, Shannon. And hi, Kevin.

Kevin Thorn:

Hello, Arun.

Shannon Tipton:

Well, I really do feel so honoured to have you both with me today, because as we were talking before we hit the record button, when we were discussing the importance of creativity and innovation, and doing this particular episode of the Emergent Series, your names just immediately came to mind and I knew I had to have you on this podcast to be able to share your thoughts.

Shannon Tipton:

And so I'd like to start the conversation here, if you don't mind. The Emergent Series is all about how businesses are emerging from the pandemic situation that we've been in and also the implications for learning professionals. And one of the things that Laura, Michelle and I really wanted to ask everyone in general, how does L&D anchor themselves in business reality as learning professionals? But more specifically, how can L&D have a creative and innovative first mindset?

Shannon Tipton:

So Kevin, my first question goes to you. On a personal level, when you think about creativity and innovation but then you also think about everything that's been happening around us with this pandemic here in 2020, what has disruption meant to you personally? How has this affected you?

Kevin Thorn:

Great question. Kind of twofold, because I hear creativity and innovation and I've got some different thoughts on the differences between the two. But in terms of disruption, actually the disruption in my business, actually, increased. So in a positive way, I'm hiring more subcontractors. So those that were either got furloughed or were not doing as well before this, I'm sort of passing it forward, because now I'm getting a lot of work that I can't handle on my own so I'm subcontracting. So I'm hiring more people, so that's the good news out of it.

Kevin Thorn:

Other than a couple new grand babies in the house at the same time, I guess that's disruptive, or it could be. But just to expand on that creativity, innovation, I think everybody's creative. I think everybody has some part of being creative somewhere inside them. But

being creative is not creativity. Creativity is how do you apply that creativeness to solve a problem or do something, or how do you apply creativity? Which then leads to a deeper question, can one be taught creativity?

Kevin Thorn:

I can teach you how to be creative. I can teach you how to look for inspirational things or look for innovative ways to approach a problem, but then how do you take that from a creative standpoint and turn that into something, that then becomes creativity. That's sort of the thinking I've been doing around that subject.

Shannon Tipton:

And I think that's a really important point where you've talked about being creative is not necessarily in that same realm of creativity. And I appreciate that and I think that's an important comment to make. I'd like to circle back around here to Arun and talk about the disruption in your world. So what are you seeing from businesses, L&D professionals? Are people looking to take an innovative approach because of this pandemic or in spite of this pandemic?

Arun Pradhan

Yeah, I think it depends on where your business lies within the pandemic, because obviously some businesses have been totally impacted and been turned upside down. Other businesses not quite business as usual because they're headed into a recession, but they haven't been as directly impacted.

Arun Pradhan:

I think that both the businesses and the L&D teams within them, there's the cliché words of pivoting and adapting have been coming to the fore, and they are cliché and yet they are true because that's what companies and L&D teams have had to do.

Arun Pradhan:

And I think the nature of creativity in that context or the way that Kevin described ... the way he described creative and creativity, I use the terms probably creative and innovation in that sense, but that's probably another bigger discussion. They're the same sort of concepts of the applied creativity, really.

Arun Pradhan:

But for me, the flavour of that at the moment tends to be about there's lots of different flavours of innovation, flavours of ways of looking at things creatively. And for me, the key thing that's coming to mind at the moment is I often talk about holding your mental models lightly or holding your assumptions lightly and being able to shift with evidence, which obviously we don't do. It's a very conscious process to do that, because we play into confirmation bias and so on.

Arun Pradhan:

And I'm reminded at the moment of Duncker's candle experience where you may have heard, it was this quite famous experiment way back, where they gave you a candle and a box of tacks and said ... and some matches, I think, and said, "You have to fix the candle up on the wall." And most people who were given the box of tacks and the candle took ages to

try to work out how to do that, because they just tried to use the tacks to pin the candle to the wall. However, when they removed the tacks from the box and they had a box, the tacks, and a candle, most people got it straight away.

Arun Pradhan:

They stuck the box to the wall. So it's this idea of what are our assumptions? How are we using things in the past and how can we use things in the future? And they might not align, because now we're in a different context. People that were working in one way can flip and resources that we were using in one way can flip.

Shannon Tipton:

I think that's wonderful. And I think that's a great way to start this conversation. There are things that we have in our history and in our past, can we think about what we're doing or that we have done and put it in a different context? So I think that that's so interesting. And it goes right to this quote that I found. According to a McKenzie survey, "94% of executives are dissatisfied with their firm's innovation performance." Across industries, one survey after another found the same thing, "Businesses aren't getting the innovation ..." or I'm sorry, "innovative impact they want."

Shannon Tipton:

So how can L&D support this? So businesses feel as though they're not getting the innovative impact that they want. So now, how can L&D be the business partner to help them see what businesses want to see, or what they think they want to see?

Kevin Thorn:

That's quite a broad question. I mean, there's a number of different factors. L&D, the role of training in L&D and a lot of times for many of us who have experience in the corporate world, the speed of business takes priority over any training, any learning or sub-development programs or training in that regard.

Kevin Thorn:

So I think the lack of innovation that survey shared was ... I think it comes down more to culture, because if you don't have the attitude from the bottom-up or from the top leading down, then the culture's not going to be ... And I think what Arun was just describing about the conscious versus the subconscious, if we are subconsciously always looking for inspiration, innovation naturally follows that. Because then you'll get an idea, your creative, "Oh, look. There's an idea." I've been trying to look for a problem ... or trying to solve this learning problem at work for a couple weeks and I just can't.

Kevin Thorn:

But if you're subconsciously always looking for inspiration, then that fosters being more innovative. So I think it's more about the overall attitude and culture of an organization. And that's something specifically that L&D can't create a checklist and go, "Well, if we go do this, we can be more innovative. And if our executive team does this, we'll be more innovative." I don't think it's that at all. I think it's broader, much bigger than that.

Arun Pradhan:

Yeah, I'd agree with that. I think that a lot of the evidence has shown that not just high-performing teams, but innovative teams rely on a foundation of psychological safety and a culture of psychological safety at the very beginning. And having a fail-friendly culture where people can be vulnerable and say, "I don't know this," or, "I'm experimenting with this," or, "I screwed up this," and feel open, that's one of the key foundations of both high performance and innovation.

Arun Pradhan:

And if you think about the context we're in now, there's a lot of lack of psychological safety. When you're thinking, "Oh, who's going to go next?" They're starting to look at you like, "Do I really need you?" It's a hard place to come out of innovation from.

Arun Pradhan:

The flip side of that is I often use a reference of Gary Klein's Insight Finding and one of the ways he talks about finding insights, there's three models that he uses and one of them is actually creative desperation. I think the other ones are connection and contradictions, looking for the contradictions and connections.

Arun Pradhan:

But one of them is creative desperation. Examples of creative desperation, where you've got your back against the wall. It's almost like that Thelma and Louise moment where there's no other choice, what are you going to do?

Kevin Thorn:

Fight or flight.

Arun Pradhan:

Yeah, and sometimes you just fall off the cliff, sometimes you'll come up with something wild and crazy. And so there's that sort of extreme. I don't wish that on anyone, because that's usually the moment before the end. But in L&D, I've seen that. One of my clients, for example, was working for a face-to-face event company before all this happened.

Arun Pradhan:

I was actually doing coaching with him over a period of time and I was dreading the call. And when I called him, he had pivoted totally and he had actually turned his understanding of digital blended learning into becoming almost a product manager in the company. So rather than just developing learning, he was actually helping the company to reform their product based on his expertise.

Arun Pradhan:

In another really large company I'm still working with now, they had data analysts, VAs, and so on doing a lot of learning surveying and so on, and they pivoted really fast. They were incredibly fast, even before people were really doing the lockdown stuff, they were talking about this and they embraced scenario and modelling to understand what the impact was going to be, what it was going to potentially be, and then we had talent strategies to actually mitigate those impacts if the worst happened in this front end area, what was going to

happen as a result and having talent strategies in place. So I think there was a lot of creativity shown by a range of businesses, and certainly L&D.

Shannon Tipton:

That's fascinating. So Kevin, are you seeing that same sort of shift?

Kevin Thorn:

Yeah, different companies they pivot, like Arun was just saying. Some are pivoting to the positive. Some aren't pivoting at all. Listening to this, listening to our conversation just reminds me of when we talk about innovate, the event that we put on last year, Step Away, which is innovation and creativity. So it's an immersive event that you go to.

Kevin Thorn :

The goal is to start with a learning problem and then by the end of the week, you have a physical card game artefact that you've created that solves that problem. So we take you through the creativity or the creative process. And it's 100% in analogue, so the idea of Step Away, you step away from the digital noise of your life.

Kevin Thorn:

But one of the card games that came out of that was Innovate or Die, that was the name of the card game. And it was a card game for executives to play to find out whether or not your company is in positive to pivot or shift or innovate. And it had a lot of examples, like we can look back at companies in the past, for instance, like Kodak or Blockbuster or these different companies that saw the technology but didn't believe in it enough to shift their business model enough to keep up with it.

Kevin Thorn :

And if you don't know, also I've got half of my feet inside the academic university world as well. So a lot of what I'm doing on the university side, I'm working with three different universities right now and all of them are scrambling, almost at a panic level, to convert what they already have, that's a face-to-face environment, and they need to convert it to a virtual environment by this fall, or by the end of the year. I think corporate can shift a little faster than the academic or the K12 world.

Shannon Tipton:

So how do we do that? How do we then support the business in having these creative movements, these innovative movements to help them emerge from the other side of all of this and be successful? Yet, as you say Kevin, it's planning now in the case of the schools, planning now for what may occur in the fall. And businesses are the same, so you're going to plan now, hopefully for a successful outcome. So now, what is our role, if we have a role. I'm sure we do, but what is it?

Kevin Thorn:

I think it's what Arun just said a little bit ago, it's ... Arun just said a minute ago it's being the consultant and being the mentor, to say, "It's okay to fail, because you're shifting a dramatic way in what you're used ..." The new normal is not ever going to be anything you've ever experienced before, so you don't have any history to base your ... you have nothing to measure your success against. So you have to accept that and own that from executive

down, and then make a decision and don't try to detail it so much, because it's not going to work until you start working it.

Kevin Thorn:

I don't know I would advise folks "Just chill out, come up with an idea, let's make it happen. If it doesn't work, we shift." But we got to be comfortable knowing that it may not work the first time out.

Shannon Tipton:

Yes. So Arun, how do you manage that conversation?

Arun Pradhan:

Yeah, that's the real big conversation. Because normally, before all this happened, I was making a bit of a name for myself for a number of years using quite an in-depth design thinking process, using co-design, and it feels very luxurious now in hindsight some of the jobs I did, which went over a period of months where we actually co-designed with the audience group and we had them in workshops. We used them to empathize further with further audience groups. So by the end, we'd been in touch with hundreds of people who were part of our audience group and so on.

Arun Pradhan:

And in the context that we have now, that whole co-design process, not that all my jobs were like that, but some of them, every fourth or fifth would be like that. And that seems, as I say, very luxurious. And compared to now where organizations are almost ... there are people that'd be stressed out and they'd be almost buckling under the pressure of not knowing what's happening.

Arun Pradhan:

The way I've shifted is for one of my big jobs at the moment, I was engaged to do a learning strategy for engineers, for this organization of 60,000 people. I had planned to go through my usual co-design process and then so on, and then COVID hit and suddenly I'm told I can't have access to any of them. So what I did instead was I actually developed great practice examples of what other companies had done.

Arun Pradhan:

I reached out to my network, interviewed people from Amazon, from Microsoft and others to say, "Well, how have you done it?" And I came back with, "Here are my top eight takeaways from other companies," and then I led with a bias to action. "I don't have access to you, but here's my bias to action proposals. Here's what I think we should do." And what I originally did was, "Here are some options. I suggest we just go into the business and get two to three champions to champion two or three of these, to experiment."

Arun Pradhan:

And they were no-brainers. They were mentoring or peer programming or developing hackathons more effectively and so on. And even that I had feedback from one of the key managers saying ... you could just almost hear the cognitive load in his voice, "This is too much. Just make it simple for me." And I think that's what I really took away. And so I have. I've now said, "Okay, do this, and this is what we're going to experiment with first."

Arun Pradhan:

And I've posed it as an experiment, I've posed it as a hypothesis, because I haven't done my usual due diligence in terms of the co-design process. So my big takeaways are have

ruthless prioritization. Get rid of all the fluff. Just understand what's aligned to business, what's going to deliver value, what's going to take off the pressure or solve key problems right now, otherwise lose it. And be less timid. For me, I'm so now ingrained in co-design, for me that co-design looks quite different, as opposed to taking everyone with you every step of the way, now it's coming up with some ideas, which you almost need to make look rough and look a bit rough around the edges.

Arun Pradhan:

If people see it as a prototype, then they are more willing to experiment with it. And throw it out into the ecosystem as ... and pose it as a bias to action that people can experiment with and we can iterate around and develop. So that's probably been the big shift for me. I mean, I always had that as part of my process, but it's come right to the front now, that bias to action.

Shannon Tipton:

I like that a lot. I don't think I've heard that term, bias to action.

Arun Pradhan:

It came out of Amazon, I think.

Kevin Thorn:

Yeah, Amazon.

Shannon Tipton:

Okay, so it really is about moving forward. We are going to make a decision to generate action.

Arun Pradhan:

Yeah, absolutely.

Shannon Tipton:

And I like the term where you talk about ... or not term, but the idea talking about experimental hypothesis. Now, Kevin, your work with Serious Play Lego has a lot to do with that. Is experimenting, where can this take us? Can you talk a little bit more about how that can work with what Arun was just talking about?

Kevin Thorn:

Yeah. Well, it comes back down to it's a communication methodology, but one of the main things is it level sets the room. It doesn't matter who you are in the room, it doesn't matter what your role is, what your job title is, because if we look at typical meetings or typical ... whether it's a focus group or a meeting or a discussion and everybody gets into a room, we refer to the lean out versus the lean-in meeting.

Kevin Thorn:

The lean out is 20% of the people in the room consume 80% of the conversation. And the rest of them are just sitting there. They're either wandering on their phone and they're leaning back, or they're leaning out, away from the conversation. With Lego Serious Play on the table, everybody has the exact same inventory of block, and then there's a question,

there's the model is you pose a question or a statement and then you build a 3D metaphorical model to answer that question in the form of a story. And then you share that story. So you share your model as a way to speak to your model, and it tells a story from a 3D metaphorical approach.

Kevin Thorn:

And then as a group, you reflect on that. One of the most powerful things that have come out of those little sessions are perspective where I can present the same question to a group of 15 people and 15 different people will answer that question. And they all have the exact same inventory of Lego. Nobody has a red brick when somebody else has a green brick. Everybody's the same number, same account, same pieces.

Kevin Thorn:

So when you look at the combination of models that you can build from a small inventory, but yet you get 15 completely different answers, then you reflect on that perspective. There's a couple things that happen, everybody leans in. So everybody's participating at one time. And then when you share that result, nobody's left out. Everybody has a contribution to that conversation.

Kevin Thorn:

And then you build on that, so then the next question builds on, it gets a little deeper and it causes a really deep-thinking exercise, what we like to call our hard fun. I mean, you're playing, but at the same time, it's difficult because you might have to answer a question you might not be comfortable verbalizing. But if you can answer the question by building a model, you don't necessarily have to expose yourself and be as vulnerable. But at the same time, it makes you feel more comfortable in participating.

Kevin Thorn:

So there's a lot of power behind it. I mean, there's unlimited ways to use those methodologies. We've done it in strategy building. We've done it in communication. We've done it in a global connectivity, how do we connect global teams together. The first thing we do is we identify what the problems are, what are the gaps in whatever the ... what are the gaps? What do you want to try to solve? And then from there, we build ... we craft and spend time with them crafting the questions and the statements that we're going to be using. And then the participants then go through those exercises.

Kevin Thorn:

Unfortunately because of COVID, we're not able to do those because it's all ... it's very difficult to do this with real Lego bricks.

Arun Pradhan:

So are you pivoting to Minecraft, or what?

Kevin Thorn:

No, actually. I'm actually experimenting with a virtual model that we're going to do at Step Away this fall whereas a registered participant in the event, you're going to get your own Lego, brand new kit, sealed packaged, never been touched, shipped right to you.

Arun Pradhan:

I think you should use Minecraft.

Kevin Thorn:

Well, we'll see how it works. Minecraft, very similar.

Shannon Tipton:

That would be interesting. And I think that you've touched on something that I found to be curious is, one of the things, Arun, you were talking about was being less timid about this. Going in, putting in your plan, you're creating that bias for action. And Kevin you said something about in the process in Serious Lego, it was about discovering yourself, but also about a certain amount of vulnerability.

Shannon Tipton:

Now, the question here is, do we think that a lot of times is innovation stymied, is creativity stymied because we are afraid of those vulnerable times where we-

Kevin Thorn:

Yes.

Shannon Tipton:

... put ourselves out there?

Kevin Thorn:

Of course. That's natural. Of course. I mean, the way I look at it or the way I teach different consulting things is you need to let yourself be a Nuggethead. I mean, it's kind of serious, because in the true sense of the thing, that's what it is, being vulnerable.

Kevin Thorn:

Be okay with making mistakes. Be okay with embarrassing yourself. Put your ego away, because you're not going to grow unless you're uncomfortable. And if you can't allow yourself to be uncomfortable, then you got too much in the way. So we got to knock and chip away those vulnerabilities, or let you be vulnerable so that you can be uncomfortable, so that you can grow. And the only way you're going to grow is to start making mistakes.

Kevin Thorn:

One of my great mentors in my life ... I had made a significant mistake and it impacted and it was similar to what Arun was talking about. It was a company I used to work for and it was 60,000 employees and we are just launching the LMS, and I was the LMS administrator. Brand new, didn't know what I was doing, trying to figure ... so we were testing some things and I ended up sending an email out to every company email address, anybody that had an

email address got an email, but then their boss got a double email on top of that. So you think by the time it got up to the CEO-

Shannon Tipton:

Oh no!

Kevin Thorn:

... he was getting duplicates of duplicates of duplicates, and his inbox ... I mean, he couldn't delete fast, they were coming in so fast. And it took me a better part of a weekend to fix that problem, and I came in Monday morning thinking that was it, my job's over. And I walked in and I had to explain myself to the VP, and he said, "Okay, did you solve the problem?" I said, "Yeah, I finally got it fixed." He says, "Okay." I said, "That's it?" He says, "Yeah if you're not making mistakes, how do I know you're not doing anything?"

Kevin Thorn:

So if I make a mistake, if you make a mistake, own it, fix it, and let's move on. But if you're not making mistakes, how do I know you're not doing anything? And that's just stuck with me ever since then. It's like, "Wow." It's comforting knowing there was a leader that allowed me to be vulnerable and make mistakes.

Shannon Tipton:

And that's what innovations all about, isn't it, Arun?

Arun Pradhan:

Yeah, absolutely. And it is quite counterintuitive, because if you look at us as people, there's almost this longing to be safe. As a fundamental thing, there's a longing and so therefore, we want to have certainty. We don't like feeling uncomfortable, so that longing to be safe is quite ... it almost draws us to those elements which push us away from ... like pushing out of our comfort zone.

Arun Pradhan:

Similarly, we want to belong. Now, we want to have acceptance with our community or our team. And so we're scared of looking stupid. So there's a lot of fear there, there's a lot of stuff there. And I just would encourage people to be compassionate with themselves and others. I mean, usually the challenge is being compassionate with yourself. When you are just going along with the crowd, it's an automatic thing.

Arun Pradhan:

I think behavioural economics, one of my big takeaways is that we're on automatic pilot for most of the day and most of our lives. And when we're on automatic pilot, one of the ways, one of the heuristics that we use to make quick decisions is using the herd. So when people who are peers make a certain decision ... It's the way social media works, like when 10 people who you know have liked this thing, you probably are more open to it. And that's a positive thing in the sense it allows us to work efficiently in our world, and we also know that going along with that herd group thing and not questioning why or not stepping back from that is a challenge.

Arun Pradhan:

So it's trying to be compassionate. Yes, this is the way we work, and there are opportunities where we can try to slow our thinking down, to try to challenge ourselves and to others, and when it doesn't happen, understanding that it's because we want to belong we're scared of looking stupid, where being outside of your comfort zone, it sucks. It's really hard.

Arun Pradhan:

That's where learning happens and that's where innovation happens, and it's really quite a scary place to be, and to be there consistently. I mean, as an example, I use LinkedIn and Twitter quite differently in terms of how I generate my filters. So LinkedIn is a place for my confirmation bias. I follow people who support my thinking and my ideas and I definitely challenge myself with other industries, but I'm not offended when I look at LinkedIn.

Arun Pradhan:

When I look at Twitter, if you look at my Twitter channel, you would not know what my politics are or what my anything is, because I just follow such a diverse group of people. I also know I can't live on Twitter, I can only go there when I'm actually got my cup full and I can actually open myself to these other views, because that's actually quite a strain. So you have to be feeling safe, you have to have your cup full, and then you can go there and you can play with those ideas, otherwise you're just going to fall into confirmation bias as well.

Arun Pradhan :

So you have to resource yourself. It is hard in this period for a lot of people to resource themselves effectively. So if you're not innovating and you're not being totally creative and you're not rethinking things, it might just be because you're scared about someone getting sick or scared that you're losing ... either yourself or someone else is losing their job, and that's totally understandable. Just bring that compassion to the table as well.

Shannon Tipton:

Wow. I think that that was such an important point. We don't often think about the environmental effects of people and what might be getting in the way of their creative thought process or their innovative thought process, or why for some reason, they don't seem to be moving forward with new ideas, or what have you.

Arun Pradhan:

Well, you see companies are doing it well with agile, with cross-functional teams. They're trying to get diversity, and we know diverse teams. And one thing people don't really talk about is when you work in an agile team or a highly diverse team, it can be exhausting. You both know yourself, when you work in a group of people who you just work with before, it's easy because you don't have to go back to your assumptions. It's just plain sailing.

Arun Pradhan:

And you know if you work in a diverse team with someone with totally, not just culturally, but cognitively different to you, it's more ... you're going to create more innovative results, and it's exhausting. And it's exhausting but is something that we don't often talk about and I think we've got to acknowledge. And we can't be like that all the time. It's about almost organized opportunities for that and then some rest periods as well. Kevin, I'm curious to know if that's your experience too? Sorry.

Kevin Thorn:

No, exactly right. Because when you have a group of diverse backgrounds, not only diverse ways of solving or approaching a problem. And then even though ... It kind of ties back to that first question you had, Shannon, about disruption, so you have a lot of people right now that are looking for that safety net, because they're not sure if they're going to get furloughed or they just got laid off. Or are they going back to the office because now the company's ...

Kevin Thorn:

And we said it all along, working from home is more effective, it's more efficient, there's lower overhead, all these things. And companies still had that mindset about you got to have a butt in a seat in order to be productive. Well, now companies are starting to recognize that, "Oh, we're still being productive and look, half our workforce is at home, if not the whole workforce."

Kevin Thorn:

But now we've got this group of folks that are at home that are not comfortable. There's no security in their future in terms of, "Do I need to set up a home office in a permanent setting? Or is this still a temporary setting?" Not to mention the kids are home. So some of these folks who are home that have school-aged children, their entire world is disruptive, so the idea of them being even more innovative or creative right now is asking a heck of a lot. Because they're already, like Arun was talking about, they're already exhausted just by the shift of what they've had to do as an individual contributor to the company.

Kevin Thorn:

So when you're getting into these ... this still has to move forward as you get into these projects and different things where you now bring this diverse group together, and I totally agree that it is exhausting, especially if you're the coach or if you're somebody facilitating that conversation. And when two people are completely at odds at which direction to go, from two different backgrounds, both of them are excellent ideas or they wouldn't have thought of them. And I love the word compassion. You have to be compassionate about everybody's contribution, because one, they were courageous enough to participate and contribute their idea. And even though somebody else doesn't agree with that idea, we have to coach them that you have to be compassionate and respectful of the other person's idea to the centre of the table.

Kevin Thorn:

Now, let's dissect that together and find out what comes out the other end of that, where it has a little bit of your idea and a little bit of your idea, or we can change minds and say, "Well, maybe your idea is better than mine." But we're not going to do that unless we're free to be vulnerable. I totally love what you just said, Arun, about we have to be compassionate about where we're at right now. But I mean, there's so many different things, we can go down a rabbit hole on everything about the disruption and about being safe and compassionate and being vulnerable. There's just a whole lot what ...

Kevin Thorn:

And then how L&D can help ... I think it all really comes back to culture. If companies or if employees, individual contributors, whether you're leading an L&D team or you're part of that

team, if you know that you can, without being chastised or criticized or condemned for contributing a new idea, and I think a lot of that goes on too. A lot of people have great ideas, but they've been shut down so many times they give up. They stop contributing because they already know what the answer is, so why should I contribute? Because I know

I'm not going to be heard. And that's culture. That's culture. That's a bigger problem than I think we can solve.

Shannon Tipton:

Well, that's true, and I do agree with that. It does come down, I believe, to what you both were saying was nurturing that environment. Helping organizations take a more compassionate view and a more nurturing view and conversely, a less timid view of just being able to be free to say, "This is what we're going to try."

Shannon Tipton:

And Arun, I love the example that you gave about at first, you were talking to the businesses and you were giving them all these options. And they're like, "No! I can't handle all the options." Okay, so now here's one. And I think that that is a really brilliant example of how we could utilize our own creative thinking processes to help our businesses move forward.

It's quite different, as I said before, before I used to focus more on co-design up front, and I still do, but it's shifted. And even the bias to action concept I talked about in Learn to Learn, I got a section there about the goalkeeper challenge where, basically, goalkeepers who stay still in a penalty can actually save more often than if they dive left or right. I think the difference is 12% compared to 30% or something. And yet, people always dive.

Arun Pradhan:

So sometimes bias to action doesn't help and reflection is really important, but right now, in this period when people are stressed, when there's companies under strain and don't know their future, now is the time for us to be scrappy. Now is the time for us to have that ruthless prioritization and that bias to action, and just take things out there. From a business stakeholder point of view, we've almost got to be the magic box. Previously it was about transparency, now I think it's like they don't want to know about how we deliver.

Arun Pradhan:

They don't want to know. No one's going to sing folk tales about our co-design sessions and tell these stories in years to come. They just want us to be a magic box who delivers impact and takes this off their place. That's what we've got to be right now. And so it is a bit of a shift of bias to action, it's a different sort of co-design. It's not like doing it from the start, it's trying to be empathetic, but it's being fast, scrappy, and iterative, I think, at the moment.

Shannon Tipton:

That's excellent, and that's a nice segue to my wrap-up questions here for us, because I can't believe that time has just blown past us so quickly. This has just been such a fabulous conversation. For both of you, in regards to the topic of the conversation today, creativity and innovation and how L&D can help effect this is, what does L&D need to stop doing? What can we stop doing? Arun, you want to go first? You get the hard one first.

Arun Pradhan:

Oh, okay. I'd say as long as you play too, Shannon, I want to hear your ones too here. So-

Shannon Tipton:

This is not about me.

Kevin Thorn:

Tag, you're it.

Arun Pradhan:

I really like to know what you say too. But I think for me, it's the same thing I would've said previously, it's the content obsession with creating, curating, and delivering content as our job.

Kevin Thorn:

Yeah, you summed it up nicely. And I tend to agree, it's not because of this new normal that we should stop doing ... there's a number of things. Stop chasing shiny new objects, and stop pushing, allow ... And it goes back to design thinking, in a way. Arun, you do more work in this area than I do. But I don't think we spend enough time with our audiences enough to know what they need, versus what some training manager says they need or they want.

Kevin Thorn:

So it's finding out what we can put together or pull together as opposed to push content.

Shannon Tipton:

Okay. So then Kevin, what does L&D need to start doing? So if we were going to encourage L&D to go out there and start the building blocks of being more creative and having an innovative first ... creative and innovative first mindset, what should they start doing?

Kevin Thorn:

Shut the lid of their laptop, get away from technology ... I'm serious.

Kevin Thorn:

I think we have so many channels right now that we're trying to keep up with and I think it has to do with the discipline of knowing how to turn those channels off when it's time to really do design work, and it's really to think through the inspiration, innovative. Because if we're always being distracted and we have to go check this or check this channel or respond to that channel, the first thing I think we should start doing to be, as I say, be more innovative is step away from the technology.

Shannon Tipton:

Yeah, start by closing the laptop. That's great. So Arun, what would you say?

Arun Pradhan:

To start-

Shannon Tipton:

Start.

Arun Pradhan:

... I think to just be consistent with what I've been saying in the session, it'd be the whole bias to action thing. So it'd be letting go of perfectionism, it would be get scrappy, work out ... if you've got that leadership program, throw it out the window and consider, what are the five little behaviours that would make a difference in a workflow? And focus on little nudges, like what Google uses, they use those whispers to get out to managers rather than ...

Arun Pradhan:

I'm not saying all leadership programs should be ditched forever, although I'm tempted to say that. Instead, just consider what little nudges, what sort of supports can you make to bump people's behaviour in the workflow and start to make that marginal difference? And see what works and then iterate and then improve that and deepen that. So bias to action, iterate, and keep asking what's your ... basically see yourself as project manager. Think of yourself as creating a minimum viable product that you're just getting out and testing in the market.

Arun Pradhan:

And then based on feedback and impact and data, you'll then change that product to make more of an impact.

Kevin Thorn:

I like what you said about getting scrappy. And the first thing that comes to mind is Scrappy-Doo from the later Scooby-Doo movies. Get scrappy.

Arun Pradhan:

It did go downhill at that point, in my opinion.

Kevin Thorn:

Get scrappy.

Shannon Tipton:

One more now. What does L&D need to accelerate? What do we need to put on the fast burners?

Arun Pradhan:

Kevin, do you want to-

Kevin Thorn:

That's a real-

Arun Pradhan:

Maybe quick responses.

Kevin Thorn:

Right. I'm lost in thought on that, because ... I think I'm going to be cautious in answering that question, simply because if we make a conscious decision to accelerate something ... I mean, it kind of goes to the bias to action, what Arun was talking about, just make a decision. It doesn't have to be 100% correct.

Shannon Tipton:

Just start doing it.

Kevin Thorn:

Just start doing something, because not doing something is, in fact, a decision. But if we try to define exactly a list or a checklist of things that we need to accelerate, that might be too hasty without really knowing ... I don't think it's L&D as a business. I think the context applies to each organization and each sector industry within ...

Kevin Thorn:

So I'm a little cautious of answering that question.

Shannon Tipton:

Okay, fair enough. All right, Arun?

Arun Pradhan:

I mean, I agree, and I'd probably go contextually. I think it's really important to accelerate our business alignment and our understanding of what our organization is trying to achieve and where it's trying to play and where it's trying to achieve that.

Arun Pradhan:

So if once we align with strategy, that's what allows us to be ... I talked about that ruthless prioritization, you can only ruthlessly prioritize when you have a sense of commercial business acumen and can make a call on what's important and what's not. And you don't want to be knocking on executive doors every minute for them to make a decision for you. You've got to be their mind in that space. I think that sort of developing business and commercial acumen and having that great alignment. I mean, people are doing it, and I think we need to do it more right now.

Shannon Tipton:

Yeah, just do more, right? Do more.

Arun Pradhan:

Yeah. And faster.

Shannon Tipton:

And faster. Do it more, do it faster. Well, thank you. Thank you, gentlemen. This has been a fascinating conversation. And your views on creativity and innovation, I believe, really could help businesses move forward and help the L&D industry move forward. And not only that, to help them develop a symbiotic relationship in regards to L&D stepping out from

underneath the bed covers and being able to do something that's a little bit more productive than what they currently could be doing.

Shannon Tipton:

And what I really like is how you two have really tied in the roles that we play as learning professionals and that we should be transformative, and we could be transformative if we just get down to it, like you said. Bias to action, get scrappy, be vulnerable, all of these traits

rolled up together can really lead to very important forward progress for the industry in this area.

Shannon Tipton:

So on behalf of all of our listeners out there across the world, I want to say thank you again for sharing your thoughts, your ideas, your passion, your time. It is much appreciated.

Kevin Thorn:

Thank you. Thanks for inviting us.

Arun Pradhan:

Yeah, thank you so much.

Shannon Tipton:

It's been a lot of fun. Thank you so much.