



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.

Laura Overton:

So, welcome everyone to the next in the series of the Learning Uncut Emergent podcast. I'm Laura Overton, and I'm so excited to be here today with both Nigel Paine and Simon Brown. We have got so many thoughts and ideas that we want to share with you today that will really start to help us think about culture, learning, curiosity, and how we can think about those in fresh ways as learning professionals to help us to emerge from this very disruptive environment that we're finding ourselves in at the moment. So before we go any further, Simon, lots has been going on in the last few months. What's the disruption meant to you?

Simon Brown:

Yeah, thanks Laura. So as Chief Learning Officer at Novartis, we've got 108,000 people around the world, and obviously huge changes that have been caused by the pandemic. So we had about 60,000 people move to virtual working over the course of a weekend and huge impact across all that we do. So from a learning perspective, we've been looking at how can we best support them? How can we make sure that business continues on as much as normal if there is such a thing anymore, and making sure we're doing all we can to support those people around the world?

Laura Overton:

Brilliant. Thank you so much for that. That's a big challenge, a big challenge-

Simon Brown:

Yes.

Laura Overton:

... by bringing all of those people on board and in such a vital industry for us around the globe

Nigel Paine:

Thank you, Laura.

Laura Overton:

... good to have you here on the podcast again.

Nigel Paine:

It's a pleasure, absolute pleasure.

Laura Overton:

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And what has disruption meant for you and your world of work with your clients and what you're doing at the moment?

Nigel Paine:

I would say for me and everybody I work with, a massive realignment. One of the more depressing aspects was just looking at my calendar for this year for 2020, and just chopping out event, conference, after company, after workshop, after visit, etc. And it really wasn't until I'd done that that I got over myself. I was kind of feeling sorry for myself. And what I discovered was it wasn't just me, that there were thousands of people who were slightly lost by all of this. And instead of being empowered and energized by the chance to have some more space and work at home, they were demoralized and defocused.

Nigel Paine:

So I've spent a lot of time trying to help organizations focus and particularly with learning teams, "Okay, let's get an agenda. Let's work out four things that you can do usefully for your company moving forward and try to get that galvanization and that energy back into the team." And where that's worked, I think there's some remarkable things have happened. I'm really impressed by how many people and by how many organizations have managed to turn on a sixpence as Simon said. Novartis has shifted to working from home in a weekend. Not in six months with 5,000 planning projects or Gantt charts, in a weekend. And that's very important, that you can do stuff. And that's what I've been saying. I've been trying to encourage people; you can do stuff. You don't have to ask permission anymore. Just do it.

Laura Overton:

Absolutely. This is the time for experimenting and trialling out new things.

Nigel Paine:

It is.

Laura Overton:

And I think that's very, very exciting. So I think traditionally, what we've found, certainly in the work that I've done through my research program over the last number of years was that a lot of learning professionals really wanted to see change happen, but were very aware, constantly reporting back that they couldn't move because the company culture just wasn't right for that change, "We don't fit in. The managers don't work that way". It seemed like the environment in which we're working has changed overnight. But I think one of the things we really wanted to hit in this podcast was the issue of culture. Can culture change overnight? I know that three of us here will have three different definitions of actually what culture even is. But 'the way that we do things around here' seem to be very ingrained in organizations. And I'm just really very interested in your views about the issue of culture in this rapid environmental change. Is it also shifting or is it staying the same?

Simon Brown:

I can certainly share my experiences and for what it's worth of one company, I guess. I'll take on it. So I wouldn't say our culture changed overnight only because we were on the culture journey and the culture change already, but I think it probably was significantly accelerated by it. So our culture journey started two years ago or so when we had Vasant Narasimhan come in as our new CEO. We set out that the culture vision around being inspired, curious, and unbossed, and we've been on that journey since. I think what we saw was that that helped us in how we reacted to the pandemic. And as an example, particularly I would say something like the unbossed principle.

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Simon Brown:

So unbossed is around certain leadership. It's around how the leader is there to bring out the best of the team rather than to say, "This is how it should be done." That the knowledge of the team and particularly of a diverse team will bring about a stronger answer than the leader coming up with the answer themselves. But then, the leader needs to get the voices into the room and create a safety that people can share ideas, etc. So that principle around unbossed and trust and empowering people I think absolutely held us in good stead. So as we saw, what was happening, it meant that teams could then very quickly feel empowered to go away, and make decisions, and make things happen. And I think that... The pandemic probably reinforced and accelerated that journey and that culture change, but I don't think it was the reason for the culture change because we were already on that journey. So I think that's the observations I make.

Nigel Paine:

Yeah. I think you're starting with one foot forward than one foot backwards.

Nigel Paine:

I think what changed overnight, Laura is not culture. I think culture is complex, and it takes a long time to fully embed. What changed overnight were possibilities and necessity. Organizations that felt completely defeated had to pull themselves together, and explore, and change. Now, once that started to be embedded, then I think you start seeing culture shift. Now, I was talking to Sarah Ratcliff from Ann Summers. Now, that was an organization based on parties and shops, both of which stopped literally overnight. That was a company with zero income going forward apart from a small online operation. They turned that round in a split period of weeks to being more successful with more people working online, much better sales, much better profits and buzzing. But you only do that because there was need backed with imagination and possibility.

Nigel Paine:

I think in the face of this, you can either sit back, put your head in your hands and say, "Isn't life tough?" or you can get on with it. And I think this advantage Simon has is that, when you have a culture that says inspired, curious, unbossed, then there's every reason. Just do it. In other organizations which don't have those kinds of freedoms, you've got to take the freedom. You've got to grab the freedom. I saw lots of organizations doing it. I encouraged lots of individuals to do just that. Take the opportunity, solve the challenges and problems, and move forward. Don't feel sorry for yourself.

Simon Brown:

I think you make a really important point Nigel, which is culture while a single word can encompass many different things. And we did some research recently to try to correlate culture through to performance. So does having a strong culture mean that a company has a stronger performance? And what the research told us was no, there is no correlation between culture and performance, which surprised us. But then we dived in to understand more what it was. And it's because culture can be anything. Culture can be positive. Culture can be negative.

Simon Brown:

Culture can be toxic. Culture can inspire people. And so, it's what the culture is that will drive performance. And fortunately, for the research that we directed, the culture of Novartis around curious, inspired, unbossed, those traits correlate through to high performance. If you've got people who are inspired to bring their best to work, if you've got people who are

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constantly asking questions and learning, if you've got people who are empowered to be able to do their best, those things drive to higher performance. But it's not culture as itself, it's what your culture actually is that will make you successful or not depending upon the circumstances.

Laura Overton:

So it's very much the behaviours behind the values?

Simon Brown:

Yes.

Laura Overton:

I was so interested to read over actually over the weekend an article on MIT Sloan Review.

Laura Overton:

Some researchers had looked at the value statements of over 500 organizations, and they said that CEOs love to talk about their values and their value statements. But how that actually is exhibited in the behaviours of the organization is very different. And they also said that, to your point Nigel, about the complexity, they flagged 62 individual values. And they were really such a wide range of that values. The top three were things like integrity reported, collaboration. What was the other one?

Nigel Paine:

Respect. Respect is always up there.

Laura Overton:

It was respect. It was the] customer, it was innovation. Interestingly, learning was the 13th. It was reported by 14%. And I would really love to explore with the two of you because organizations, we've already explored that. They're shifting and changing at the moment. They're having to grow, change, and pharma's change, improve, innovate. The whole issue of a learning culture, should we even have a separate learning culture or actually is what we're talking about in a learning culture the contributing factors towards the behaviours that drive change? I'd really like to unpack this because I see a lot of people talk about learning culture, and I love your view Simon on curiosity. So I'd love to know, what is it about culture that helps organizations continue to improve, grow, innovate?

Nigel Paine:

Well, what I would say is if you switched the phrase around, instead of talking about a learning culture, you talk about a culture of learning, you can see that that differentiates itself slightly from the overall culture of the organization. So there's something specific but linked in a culture of learning. What I define it as is an organization that can take ideas from outside, can spin them around the organization as fast as possible, extract from them what is valuable, and then adjust and move forward so that it's dynamic. And I would have thought that in this day and age, having come through what we've come through or still going through, the idea that you learn nothing, that you hang on to any insight, that you don't care what anyone thinks or says from outside is the root to failure and possible insanity. So I think a learning culture is the most important thing of all.

Nigel Paine:

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And that's why I get really disappointed when I see reports from organizations to remain nameless that claim to be evidence-based saying, "It's so vague, it's irrelevant. Let's focus on the learning systems. The learning systems." I think that a learning system without the learning culture is not going to deliver for the organization. And the way that Simon has just described in Novartis, this is a holistic idea and it's about changing behaviour, managing conflict, contradiction, complexity, and that's what we need to do in this day and age. We can't operate. In words of Chris Argyris, "We're no longer in a single-loop world, we're in that double-loop world where we have to get beyond what is the obvious issue and try to understand some of the fundamental things that are going on and make adjustments accordingly." So I unapologetically argue for a learning culture as fundamental for our age.

Laura Overton:

Particularly, when culture actually looks at the behaviours and the attitudes and the way that an organization does things around here.

Nigel Paine:

Yes.

Laura Overton:

Simon, I've listened to many of your podcasts as a result of The Curious Advantage book now. It's almost like it's a different label, curiosity to learning. But it just seems to be so many common factors. How do you define this kind of culture that enables that kind of growth and change and innovation?

Simon Brown:

Yeah. So I think if you even start with a learning culture, I think many different people will have many different definitions and perceptions of what that actually looks like. I guess how we looked at it, we tried to take it to its broadest possible definition I guess of learning through any means. It's not just about formal structured learning, it's taking it into learning from others, learning from doing, learning from experience, etc. And I think a culture of curiosity takes it even one stage further, which goes beyond learning into by definition being curious about things; so asking questions, looking for better ways, trying to experiment and find new ways of doing things. It is a learning culture on steroids almost. It takes it to a whole extra level of how we learn can be through trying things out, through experimenting, through trying new things.

Simon Brown:

And that's I guess where we're going with how we try to create this culture of curiosity. There's a lot of different elements as you start to get into it of how we try to create it. Providing great learning is one, but that's almost the easy part of it because you go buy or build some assets. You make them easily available. That doesn't in itself create a culture of curiosity or a culture of learning. It's much deeper-rooted of how you then motivate people to take advantage of that, create the safety and the space, the encouragement, the recognition, all of these elements that over time then bring about the change. So I think a curiosity culture is a learning culture, plus add several more levels if you like on top of it.

Laura Overton:

I love in your book the seven C's.

Simon Brown:

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Yes, let me walk you through them. So the Seven Cs is the model that we discussed in *The Curious Advantage* book. It came about, I guess, from us coming up with a series of elements within curiosity which we came up with. And then we realized that a number of them began with C. And then, in the conversation, it was like, "Oh, and we've got this one and this one." And before you know it, we have the Seven Cs. And then it's like, "Oh, that's a very nice analogy with sailing the Seven Cs." So that was how it came about. But the model is around firstly understanding your context. So what is it you're curious about, and what's the context in which you set? Then as you're clear what you're curious about, who's the community that can help you?

Simon Brown:

So who are the experts? Who are those who are more experienced who can help and guide you on that path? But by engaging with the community, you then end up with a wealth of information. So then it needs to be curated back down into the particular aspects. So what's meaningful? What are the things that are relevant for the context you're trying to do? What are the things you can ignore? So that then brings you to the core. Then you get to creativity. So you apply your own ideas, your own curious questions of what if we do this, or what if we try this, which is great. But unless you then put it into action, which is our next C of construction, it's just ideas. So you need to test. You need to experiment. You need to try something and actually put it into action.

Simon Brown:

And then, once you put it into action, what worked and what didn't? So you then get to criticality looking back on what worked, what didn't? What are the biases that I brought to it? What can I interpret from that? And through all of that then, the research tells us that that actually then builds your confidence. And confidence is the final of the Seven Cs, but it's also arguably the first one. Because you need the confidence to get started and ask the curious questions in the first place. And we see it as a virtuous circle. Then by going through that process around curiosity, it builds your confidence, and you can then be more curious, and ask all the questions, and try all the things as you go through. So that's the Seven Cs [inaudible 00:18:16].

Laura Overton:

It's the whole combination of skills and attitudes. And Nigel, with the extensive work that you've been doing, does that resonate with you?

Nigel Paine:

If you take Simon's Seven Cs, the most important one for me is the one he starts with which is context. If learning happens in context, organizations operate in context. The idea that you apply standard models in exactly the same way to every organization is nonsense. I think both of us are talking about being able to finesse depending on not just the nature of the organization, but the nature of the department, the problems that they're facing, the criticality of those problems for the time. So I'm completely at one with Simon on that. I think he's absolutely right. But no learning culture operates in a vacuum, it's in context. And for a company like Novartis where there's that push to move faster, develop new products faster, there is that focus on curiosity. For others, it may be about how they fix logistics problems when they're suddenly confronted with the bottom falling out of their current distribution mechanisms.

Nigel Paine:

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So that isn't so much curiosity, it's getting in there and learning what's available, what's out there, spinning that round and coming up with solutions. So I think we're not arguing, we're agreeing. I think curiosity is incredibly important. About two years ago, when there started to be a kind of ramp-up with curiosity, I had people phoning up and say, "Can you do a course on curiosity?" And I said, "Well, let's talk a little bit about the kind of organization you've got." Coming in and doing a course on curiosity where there is no context, where you are punished for stepping outside the line, where no one cares about your ideas, the Seven Cs just fall apart. So you've got to get the right context in order to deliver the message and to deliver the product at the end of the day.

Nigel Paine:

I think what both of us are saying is this is complicated. There's no kind of instant fix model. You have to explore each one of those Seven Cs or each one of the elements of my learning culture to reframe, to understand, and to do stuff. This is all about doing stuff differently, better for the context that we're in. And this context has changed so rapidly for so many millions of people and hundreds of thousands of organizations that we have to be aware of that. So I really salute Simon for getting right in there, and grabbing by the leg, and giving everyone a big shake. Because you could have just done it and say, "Oh yeah, we're a curious organization. Curiosity, that's our value." And job done. It's actually hard work-

Simon Brown:

Absolutely.

Nigel Paine:

... moving forward.

Laura Overton:

I think it was really interesting. When I was listening to the podcast with Vas your CEO and Steve, your chief people and organization officer, talking about that curious culture change is one of the toughest of the three values to be able to start to see a move on. Because you were talking originally the fact that you're a knowledge organization, where your deep knowledge and your research and your processes were valued. You're moving into this environment where you just saying, "Well, hang on a minute, we need to be curious and we need to question." You're on this journey of change. Has it made you more able to adapt with a certain change of Coronavirus? Would you have been able to adapt in the same way if you hadn't started that journey?

Simon Brown (22:17):

I think if I look at it from within a learning response, I guess to it rather than the broader company. So I think the journey that we were on as a learning team definitely put us in a very good stead to be able to pivot very, very quickly to support. So as an example, that shift to remote working. So because of what had been put in place over the previous year or two, but also even going back five or six years, things like having a single learning management system that covers the whole company where we can stand up playlists and have content that's accessible to everybody put us in a very good stead. Having access to good quality online content that covered things like how to use Microsoft Teams or how to manage team remotely or how to deal with resilience.

Simon Brown:

The content was there, the platform was there accessible to everybody. We've even recently developed a team that focuses on curation. So we had the pieces there. Also then, with the

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principle around unboss the people, just get on and do it and put things live, and also an element within curiosity is experimentation and acceptance of failure, and therefore getting away from things being polished and 100%. So we put stuff up that was incomplete or very rough and ready. But it was up and people could access it, and therefore it provided the value.

Simon Brown:

So I think the journey of the last couple of years provided the pieces that meant then when a situation like this came along, we could very quickly pull those pieces together and get something out to people. Partnering with things like our comms teams and teams around the world to be able to communicate it out so that people have access to it. So I think those foundations allowed a very, very quick pivot. It's like this, to become an overnight success actually takes 10 years' worth of work or whatever. It's that sort of principle, that to be able to respond overnight takes so many years.

Laura Overton:

Yeah. And Nigel, from your perspective, in terms of the organizations you've been talking to, there's the very practical things we can do in terms of providing people with those skills and the opportunity to experiment. But what are you seeing in terms of the different organizations you've been working with, those perhaps have embraced some of the principles of curiosity, of learning versus those that have been talking about them but haven't actually done anything to actually change?

Nigel Paine:

I think I have. And I think that there are two very, very distinct responses. The first response is that I know what you want. "Laura, you need a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and we're going to provide it for you. And we're going to make sure that you do it because you've got to do it in the next two weeks. Otherwise, we won't be able to qualify you, certificate you," or whatever. And the other organization is, "Laura, let's just talk about your life. Let's talk about what you actually need, and let's try to accommodate what you need. What can we do to support you? How can we make you do what you need to do? What are the blockages? How can we undo those blockages?" And often, those blockages haven't got a lot to do with something formal learning, they had to do with informal support, access to resources, or even access to people that you can talk to and find out what you need to do.

Nigel Paine:

So it's that latter approach that I think is proving to be much more successful. But on top of that, the micromanaging boss is failing spectacularly. "Laura, I didn't see you checking in at 10:00 this morning. I like to know that you're okay at 10:00. So could you make sure you check-in tomorrow, Laura?" That is completely inappropriate in these circumstances. The person who says, "Let me do what I can. You come to me when you need support. I'll let you get on with it. By the way, what timetable would you think you can deliver on this, because I realized since we're living in strange times? So give me an example of what you think you're able to do." Not, "Laura, I want that by Friday at 4:00, otherwise I'm going to get really angry with you. And by the way, you won't get a bonus if you haven't done it and delivered it."

Nigel Paine:

So there's big differences in approach. And micromanagement seems to be failing spectacularly to the point where people are pushing back tables are turning. You're empowered. You have all the power. You're working where no one can get you. What you deliver is what you choose to deliver to a certain extent. So if I can facilitate, enable, help

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you to do your best, you'll love the organization, you'll love me, and everyone wins. If you hate me, hate what I'm trying to do, feel you're under pressure, feel you're being dictated to, you're going to deliver far, far less. So it's really important. It's about engagement. Engagement shows now.

Laura Overton:

I think it's really interesting that you're both flagging what's going on within learning teams themselves reflecting the bigger issue of the fact that culture isn't owned. Learning culture isn't owned by the L&D team. It's not owned by the individual line manager]. It is owned by the whole organization, from, from Vas down. It's very interesting for me. Vas was saying, "What's never curiosity is learning what you can learn from your colleagues, from the external world, and from what we can learn from looking inwards." That's a whole holistic and complex process. And I'm just wondering about what role we can have as learning professionals to genuinely influence that bigger, wider cultural change? Is there something that we can actually do for people to help us all think differently?

Simon Brown:

I think there absolutely is but it's hard. And I don't claim to have cracked it though we're on the journey towards it, but by no means fully cracked it. So I think it's, how do you change the mindset ultimately around people's perception of learning? And some of the things we looked at was, what are the biggest barriers that people tell us to learn? And typically, it's not the things that we within the learning world automatically spring to. It's not that this content was developed with X authoring tool over Y authoring tool, or used in X instructional design method over Y instructional design method, or that the platform it's delivered through doesn't have feature, whatever. The biggest barriers we see or we heard from our associates was, "I don't have time to learn, and my manager doesn't support me in my learning."

Simon Brown:

So nothing about the areas we typically within learning spend our time on. So we looked at how can we change or how can we help people to address those two biggest barriers to learning? And the first one, if you unpack a bit the, "I don't have time for learning." If we changed our comp and ben policy and said, your bonus is now driven entirely by the amount of time that you spend learning, my assumption is people will suddenly find the time to be spending a lot of time learning is a nice to have.

Simon Brown:

And so, how do you move it up the to-do list to give it a greater priority? So the way we've approached that one rightfully or wrongfully is we got agreement from our exec committee that all the associates are able to spend 5% of their time or a hundred hours a year on learning, and that's an aspiration. We're still a long way from that, but it's an aspiration where we're working towards. And behind that message is not that there's a scientific, perfect amount of training and time that everyone needs to spend, it's really a symbol to say the company values learning and the company wants you to be spending a proportion of your time on building your own skills and building the skills that are going to be making the company successful today and into the future.

Simon Brown:

we want to be supporting people to be building those skills, because we know that skills are expiring very fast, that new skills are coming and we need people to have those up-to-date skills. So behind that hundred hours or 5% is a symbol to try and change the mindset and

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change the priority of learning in the organization. And also, the second piece of manager's not supporting, well, if it's a stated company aspiration that we want people to do it, then managers need to get behind that and get a clear message. Then that potentially is...

Simon Brown:

They're going to be asked questions of why their teams aren't spending the time learning. Are they not supporting it? Are they blocking it? So it's a way of sort of turning the oil tanker if you like, a cultural change, a mindset change to give a very strong symbol.

Laura Overton:

And Nigel, I'd love to have your views. Simon was just saying that people have no time, haven't got any time to learn. But actually, what if we were working at Novartis and someone starts to turn around and say, "I have no time to be curious." How would that shift our mindset? And actually, does the word learn actually hold us... I'm just wondering if it holds us back. So Nigel, what's your view on it? Is our language, one of the things that's actually holding us back from actually making real inroads? Because I don't think I'd like to own up to say, "I haven't got time to be curious," if I was working in Novartis right now.

Nigel Paine:

It's not so much the word, it's the history of the word. For many people, learning has a negative connotation. One of the arrogances of many people in L&D is they think it's a social good. "Oh, I'm doing learning. Everyone will love me because I'm offering learning." And instead, in many organizations, people will look at the learning people with a mixture of withering contempt and fear because they're the people taking me away from my work. They're the people stopping me getting my bonus, increasing my sales, getting in the way of me doing what I need to do. So I think you've certainly got to overcome those barriers. But what I've found is that if you can... If Simon, when he's talking to his CEO puts the learning frame to the CEO... So Novartis is trying to do X, there's a learning frame, which gives a different picture to say the CFO who puts a financial frame as the CFO should do or a marketing frame.

Nigel Paine:

And those are the frames which allow the CEO to make his or her decisions about the nature of the organization. So I think it's very important to be able to talk big picture with senior staff and not talk small picture, "Oh, we've got 50 new courses." "Oh, people have learnt this number of hours." It's about, how can learning help position the organization? And then, the second thing is to encourage learning in the flow of work. So when work and learning become embedded, you can't say, "I can't learn. I haven't got time because learning is work and work is learning." So it's extracting learning from the work and putting learning back into the work. And that's a way that the organization organizes its work and gives people the time to reflect, gives people the time to problem solve, gives people freedom to contact anyone they want to try and improve.

Nigel Paine:

And once you frame it like that, it doesn't become a learning issue, it becomes a workflow issue, a problem-solving issue, a curiosity issue. I think there is some issue there about using the term learning as it has come into us contemporaneously through this backdrop of something slightly burdensome, complicated, not necessarily helpful and reframe it. But I don't want to lose the word learning, but I do understand what you're saying. Now, Nick Shackleton-Jones always says, "As soon as you mentioned the word learning, you've lost

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your audience." I don't necessarily agree with that, but I do understand where he's coming from.

Simon Brown:

I think there's a really interesting build on there, which is learning is the means to the end, not the end in itself. And it's in so much so, it's not about learning, it's learning to do something. And if the conversation particularly with key stakeholders can be around the something that learning is achieving, that makes for a very different conversation. And I think to some of the recent ones, the learning hours and things is an interesting measure of progress, but it's what that's getting to. And when you then get the conversation around skills and particularly skills that align to delivering against the company strategy, and then looking at, okay, to deliver strategy X, we need capability around this, which means we need these skills. This is where we are. This is how we've been progressing on those skills. This is how we compare against industry or against benchmark or against peers, that then starts to become a very valuable conversation. And then, if we're not where we need to be, what do we then need to do to help people learn, but to learn to build that skill so that we then can deliver whatever business objectives we have, where we need people with that skill in order to be able to do it. So I think remembering it's the meanness of the end, not the end itself is a helpful reflection.

Nigel Paine:

Let me just say, Simon said at the beginning about moving from 14 LMSs to one. Now, Simon never once said, "Oh, as soon as we have one LMS, all our problems were solved." That's just a stepping stone. It's a means to an end-

Simon Brown:

Exactly.

Nigel Paine:

... just as learning is. So you've got to focus on the ends, not on the means. People get hung up on the means.

Laura Overton:

We've definitely seen that even in the conversations of these Emergent podcasts. We've been really seeing how learning leaders who are being shaken by this change are starting to move not just from, what are the programs and the products that we are developing, whether they're micro or gamified or online or virtual, whatever it is. There seems to be a shift. Jos Arets has talked about this, and Sarah Lindsell from PwC, Rachel from Hilti. Talking more about the processes by which we support value creation in the organization and in shifting from looking at just our products to help an organization to learn, but the processes that we use in order to stimulate new conversations, stimulate new expectations, stimulate new connections. I think Jos talks about it as becoming a value creator to a look at this context of wider organizational learning.

Laura Overton:

And I think possibly, we've flagged another thing that is holding us back is our preconceived ideas of how much we can contribute. Beth Hall from Cotton On Group in Australia talked about culture. They have a culture of becoming ever better at retail organization. And their view is everyone owns the culture and everything we do on a daily basis, either deposits into the culture bank or takes away from it. And I'm just really interested in what you think we as learning professionals can deposit into the learning culture back of the organization. What's

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some specific practical things that we can do to contribute to the way that the organization becomes more curious and learns more? Simon, what's your take?

Simon Brown:

So, I think for this, it starts with what you're trying to achieve as a learning organization. So, what is the overall goal? And if I go back now February 2019 presented in front of our exec committee around a proposal to go big on learning as we called it. And this was a five-year strategy of where we wanted to take learning. And there were two dimensions to the argument I made. So first one was around, as a company, if we want to have the best people and attract and retain those people, we need to get great at learning. And from internal crowd source events, from focus groups, from lots of external research and learning and development is either number one or very high up on the reason people join companies and the reason people stay with companies. So if we want the best talent, we need to get great at learning. That was argument one. And then argument two is to deliver against the Novartis strategy. We need to have the right capabilities.

Simon Brown:

Many of those capability areas are new, whether that's data in digital, whether that's around operational excellence, etc. We need to be building the skills to be successful there. When you throw in then the research from the likes of Gartner around the third of people having learned new to world skills in the last three years, 20% of the skills that we have expiring in the next three years, there's this constant turnover that is getting faster and faster around skills, and therefore we need to get great at learning. So I guess our reason for being is around attract and retain the best people and build the capabilities that the company needs to deliver on the strategy. And when you referenced my boss, Steven Baert earlier, so he's our chief people and organization officer. So we recently renamed from HR to people in organization. And on one hand, you say, okay, it's a name change.

Simon Brown:

What's in a name? But actually, that's a really powerful reflection when we look into that, because what we're saying is there are two stakeholders that we support. One is our people, and one is the organization. And historically, it's been one stakeholder which is the organization. So we invest our learning dollars in what the organization needs, which may be that around the business strategy side. We don't invest in what our people need or our people want which actually ties to the attraction and retention piece. So when you step back and say, actually, we've got those two stakeholders now, often it's almost a Venn diagram that often the needs of the organization and the needs of the people are the same. But sometimes, there's things that actually we need to support our people and it doesn't directly support the organization, but it's the right thing to do.

Simon Brown:

And I think having that lens of, we're there to support the development needs of our people, their own career aspirations, and what they want to learn about, as well as building the key capabilities that drives the business strategy. That was almost a sort of enlightening moment for when we said that, "Actually now, it's clear what we're there." And that there are certain things where we can channel it around our people that doesn't directly support the organization but it attracts and retains great people. And therefore, it's the right thing to do. That was a really helpful way of looking at it. And that then contributes to the company culture to come back to your question.

Laura Overton:



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Yeah. And Nigel, I'm conscious of the time here. But the issue safety has come up a lot in many aspects of this conversation we've had so far, the psychological safety, the permission aspect of culture. Do you think there's something as learning professionals that we can do to influence that, either for ourselves as a community of learning professionals to bolster up our own courage and confidence, or is there anything that we can do to actually support the organization? That's a very specific question, but I think it's really important for us to address that. I feel that we've got an 'in' there.

Nigel Paine:

I think so. But the only way it's going to be an 'in' is if you stop narrowly boxing yourself into a learning corner and see the whole organizational development frame as being relevant for you. So I think psychological safety is absolutely critical. This is why the key in my model is trust. Number one is trust. If you don't trust people... If I don't trust Simon and I certainly don't trust the chief executive of Novartis, I would share nothing. I would be curious about nothing. I'd be busy protecting my own back. It's only with trust that you open up and you start to share. So I think if you can encourage and build trust and encourage people to believe in themselves as learners.

Nigel Paine:

And that sounds so glib, but it's actually quite profound. But people right to the very senior levels have an image of themselves which is scary when they step outside their little circle of expertise. "I might be found wanting. I might be seen as stupid." All of that has to be taken away. And if you can see that as part of the learning brief, you end up making big steps towards psychological safety. And therefore, Amy Edmondson says that psychological safety is the very first step to engagement. Not the last thing in the route but the very first step to engagement. And I have to say, I think she's absolutely spot on.

Laura Overton:

Yeah, absolutely. And we've certainly seen that in the work that we're doing with a couple organizations as well is how you build that. Now, I know that there are a lot of people who will say, "It's too big for me to even think about this. I'm a victim of culture," versus as someone who can actually influence culture. Are there areas where we can start to measure this kind of cultural shift towards becoming a more curious, more learning, more innovative, more sharing, more collaborative environment?

Nigel Paine:

Yeah, I think the first thing is you've got to look the organization squarely between the eyes. So many people begin to stare at the organization, don't like what they see. So they look away and pretend everything's fine. You absolutely have to know how much trust there is, how engaged people feel, whether they feel empowered a little or a lot, and what they think about the leadership of the organization. And if you don't register where there are big blockages that you have to remove, you're not going anywhere. So yes, I think that ability to stare at the organization in the face is fundamental, and anyone can do that. This is not difficult. Michelle Ockers and I developed a little instrument, and it's basically something like 28 questions. And that gives you at least an overview of where the challenges lie and where you're successful. You don't need to know where are things going wrong, you need to know where things are going right so that you can boost them.

Laura Overton:

This conversation is complicated. It's complex, but it's so essential for releasing energy into the organization. And I really believe we've got an opportunity to do that. I'd love to continue

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it. We can't. Let's close. Can I just ask you both, Simon, in the light of your experiences, what would you recommend to our listeners today to stop, to start, and to accelerate when it comes to this big complex world of culture?

Simon Brown:

Yeah, I think probably stop searching for perfection, that good enough is good enough. And that releases a whole load of pressure in the system just to create some space. I think start probably around using data. So I think it creates a whole different level of credibility when there's data to back up the things that one is saying. Even if the data tells you that you're not doing a good job or there's more to do or things aren't having the impact, just the fact that there is data and you can then collectively look at the data and figure out what you do to move forward. And I think in terms of accelerating, how to support the needs of the business. So aligning into the strategic goals of the business, whether that'd be responding to pandemic, whether that'd be the greater business goals. What's the role that the learning team can do in order to be able to support that and accelerate that?

Laura Overton:

Brilliant, thank you. And Nigel,

Nigel Paine:

I agree with those. There are three really good ones. My alternatives, complimentary ones, would be to stop taking orders. I think the worst thing is where people tell learning people what everyone needs when they have no idea what they're talking about, and that is being accepted without pushback. So pushback on that. But not only stop taking orders, stop giving orders, telling people what they ought to have. Therefore, you should start engaging with the bigger business challenges. Understand the nature of your business. Understand what drives your company and what keeps the CEO awake at night. And then accelerate, listening, and engaging. Listen to what is really going on. Understand, take the polls, be at the heart of what is going on inside the organization at the moment.

Laura Overton:

Thank you so much. And we've got plenty of opportunity to explore and experiment on all of those areas. So on behalf of the listeners, can I just thank you both for sharing your thoughts, your ideas, and your practical suggestions for helping us emerge stronger from the pandemic. Thank you both so much.

Simon Brown:

Thank you for having us. Yeah.

Nigel Paine:

Yeah. Thank you, Laura. It's a pleasure talking to you and talking to you, Simon.

Simon Brown:

Likewise, Nigel. Thank you.

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