



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.

Hello, this is Michelle.

Welcome to this episode of the Learning Uncut Emergent series. This is the 11th episode in the series. Our guests are a mix of learning and development leaders working inside organisations and those who support a range of L&D teams or are from other areas of business or domains. We've sought to get a mix of voices involved in the discussion of current shifts in the business environment and how L&D can be relevant and effective. If you've listened to earlier episodes you may be picking up on some themes. One that I have noticed is about decluttering – how can L&D adopt a minimalist approach, figuring out what is really creating value and letting go of anything that isn't.

Laura, Shannon and I have started a conversation on LinkedIn about the messages and themes we've picked up in Emergent. We invite you to join this conversation using the hashtag #LearningUncut.

We have another 6 guest episodes to record. Then we're inviting you to join a very special series of online events – no, it's not a series of webinars or a conference. It's a collective sense-making process which will consist of a weekly online conversation where we explore a series of business challenges as a way of identifying practical actions that learning professionals and learning teams can take to best support their organisations. If you're keen to emerge as relevant and effective from the current period of disruption join in the Emergent conversations.

Keep an eye out on LinkedIn and Twitter where Shannon, Laura and I are all posting about how you can take part in this very special sense-making activity.

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome back to the next in our emerging series where we're exploring shifts in business right now, and how learning and development tend to become more useful, can prepare for an emerging future to help organizations to adapt and support people through this time of change and beyond. We've got a super interesting topic today. My guests today are John Stepper, the author of Working Out Loud, who has been working on spreading working out loud for a number of years now and Katharina Krentz, the corporate HR transformation and collaboration crew at Bosch and the founder of Connecting Humans. Welcome John and welcome Katharina.

John Stepper:

Well thank you. It's nice to see you again.

Michelle Ockers:

Learning Uncut Emergent Series
John Stepper & Katharina Krentz
Working Out Loud

It's lovely to see you too, John. I think some of the history of how Working Out Loud connects people around the world is embedded in the story of how the three of us know each other from the US, Germany and here in Australia as well and I'm sure some of that will weave into the discussion today. I was really keen. I've been keen to do an episode about Working Out Loud for some time for the learning uncut podcast, but I was especially keen right now when we're going through this period where the pandemic has had a global impact, it's still ongoing. We're not sure how much longer it's going to be causing significant shifts in our life and what the long-term impact will be, but the fact that it is global, it's highlighted this interconnection we have as humans everywhere. The slogans, we're all in this together, which is quite common, just highlights that yet work doesn't always feel like an experience. It promotes connection and belonging.

John Stepper:

Right.

Michelle Ockers:

I think there's lots of analysis around that and Deloitte Human Capital Trends report from early 2020, for instance, which I'll put in the show notes, talks about the challenge of remaining distinctly human in a technology driven world and how organizations are grappling with that importance of purpose and potential to fuse people in technology. I'm wondering if organizational responses to the pandemic are getting the balance right between technology and between people and my own experience of Working Out Loud and the way it's described on your website, workingoutloud.com is that it's an approach that which humanizes work, which I think is something that is becoming very evident that we need to address.

Michelle Ockers:

The people and organizations are grappling with right now and I'm really curious for learning and development professionals to have the opportunity to become more familiar with the approach and to explore how it might be used effectively as part of an organization's learning and development strategy. There is a little bit of context, so before we kind of get into the meat of that discussion, having set it up, perhaps we can start with you Katharina. If you can give us a little insight into what the change and disruption has meant for you and in your work over the last few months.

Katharina Krentz:

At Bosch and as many German company, this pandemic really hit us very, very hard. I guess, the experiences are worldwide everywhere, the same so for everybody who is possible to work at home, people should stay of course at home. The interesting thing around that is that for me personally, I experienced this pandemic as a big booster for digitalization and transformation, because of course we need to self-organise our own work. We need to organize the teamwork and for a lot of us, we need to experience how to lead virtual and remote working teams. Yes, we had a big hub in technology, like you said before, but at the same time, we exactly experience that as more digital gaps as more human it gets as well, because thanks to video conferencing systems, it is possible that you now like here in the setting around us, you can see my office, you can see my private house, you can see my situation.

Katharina Krentz:

It might be that the doorbell rings that children are coming through the video screen, the dog is barking. You see a bit more of the people than you see an office and that's the interesting

Learning Uncut Emergent Series
John Stepper & Katharina Krentz
Working Out Loud

thing that we all experienced. It is a wonderful time to reflect, to come down, to really take care of yourself and to really take care of others, to experience how they live, what their situation is and how it feels for everybody involved.

Michelle Ockers:

There's an irony in that, isn't there? In that we're spending less time physically together with our work colleagues, but in some ways we're getting a more intimate understanding of each other through communicating, connecting, and working in these different ways.

Katharina Krentz:

Exactly. What we saw that is that people experienced with working out loud, they manage it much better than others because for us it's totally known to connect virtually, meeting John. Okay, this year is difficult, but also the last years it's... Now just to click to New York, not a flight, not a holiday. It's just a click and it made us so much easier to connect to others and I guess the [inaudible 00:05:54] people worldwide, they are so used to video conferencing systems to use social media, to connect to foreigners, to strangers, to support each other and to really listen to each other. That it was really, really helpful for people experienced in working out loud, thanks to John.

Michelle Ockers:

John, how about you with the work you do? What has the change and disruption meant for you? How's it impacted you in the last few months? No trips to Germany, obviously to see Katharina.

John Stepper:

No trips to Germany. I miss the food. I miss my friends. I miss the Deutsche Bahn train. There's a little cartoon that made its way on LinkedIn about who's leading your digital transformation in your company, and it's not the CEO or chief digital officer it's COVID-19. It's funny because it's true. That has accelerated companies acceptance that we need to do something to help employees connect and collaborate and so they're just more open to it. I don't want to convince them, so for my work in particular, which while Working Out Loud has been free on the internet, our business is serving customers, companies who want to spread it and in a supported way. There's a lot more activity for people saying, look, we need to try something that traditional L and D kind of offerings or workshops, et cetera, are either we can't do or they're not enough.

John Stepper:

There's just a lot more interest in what we do, which is great, but I'm mindful. I live in New York city as we walk around, not everybody has the luxury of working from home. Not everybody, it's kind of a high-class problem to feel human on Zoom, but at least for those who can, we can help them have a better experience.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Have you had more inquiries coming in, more organizations wanting to speak with you and engage you on Working Out Loud in the last six months?

John Stepper:

100%. Part of that is COVID-19, part of that is... Katharina was a pioneer, so you started in 2016, Michelle that's when I think we first met and Katharina, might've been the first one to see, how would we do this in a company? In those years, we've learned a lot thanks to her

Learning Uncut Emergent Series
John Stepper & Katharina Krentz
Working Out Loud

and then the people that followed her. Now it's clear what we would do and how other companies can do it more quickly.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, so there's been an acceleration effect.

John Stepper:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

John, you developed the approach to Working Out Loud when you were working at Deutsche Bank, I think around 10 years ago now. Was it that long ago?

John Stepper:

Yeah. Yeah. That's when it started. I think my first blog post about it, might've been 2011, 2012, something like that.

Michelle Ockers:

What is Working Out Loud and why does the world need it? What problem were you trying to solve when you came up with this idea? What's the trigger?

John Stepper:

Your audience will be like, well, that sounds nice. What the hell is it?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

John Stepper:

Okay. The short version is, I was in technology. I had introduced an enterprise social network into this big bank, and I thought that was going to be the key. That was 2011. I quickly saw that people didn't really care about the technology, but it was necessary, but not sufficient. What else would you do? If you were busy and distracted and it was a series of experiments over years and like, how would you help people to experience the benefits that I was experiencing? With the Katharina or that you were experiencing, right? We knew that these tools, the public ones, but also social Intranets could earn us access to resources and other people and opportunities.

John Stepper:

We knew that they could shape our reputation. We knew they can help us make our work better because we get feedback on it, et cetera, et cetera. 99% of people didn't know and so over the course of the following years, up until I wrote the book in 2015, I kept experimenting. I started to coach people and finally developed a peer support method, a peer coaching method. You meet for an hour a week for 12 weeks in you're Working Out Loud circle. Week by week by week, you practice interacting with other people related to a goal that you care about, so you build your network and you practice developing a sense of relatedness with other people in a purposeful way.

John Stepper:

Learning Uncut Emergent Series John Stepper & Katharina Krentz Working Out Loud

You can do that in person, but you could do it on Zoom. You could do it on the internet. You could do it asynchronously, right? All different contributions over the 12 weeks and by the end, you've got a bigger network. You feel more empowered and then hopefully you tell your friends that they should join a circle too.

Michelle Ockers:

Katharina, do you recall when you first heard about Working Out Loud? How and what attracted you to it? How you got started with it?

Katharina Krentz:

I heard about it 2012, taking care exactly of the same topics like John did, but more from a community perspective. We introduced a social network at Bosch in 2012 and we cared about how to make teams work globally distributed. My topic was, how to bring topics to this platform and how to enable teams to work there. I did a lot around community management, community building and growth and yeah. Community topics, but I never focused on individuals. What I experienced is that if one person is willing to change the way he or she works, but the team not it's difficult on such a platform. I did a lot of research taking care of the enabling of community managers and searching for things which might help.

Katharina Krentz:

I read the blog post, the famous one from Bryce Williams, 2010. When do we start to Work Out Loud? That was the first time I heard about this term and then I did a lot of research around because this description of what Bryce described as narrating your work and observable work was exactly what I tried to enable or involve and enabling for the community managers. Then I stumbled upon John and his blog and I started to follow him. Then in May 2015 I got an invitation from Deutsche Bank here in Frankfurt, from people from the enterprise 2.0 movement, who invited me to a meeting where John Stepper will introduce his book and the method. I was like, Oh, I heard about that before. Oh, there is a book. Oh, there is a method. Interesting. I joined the meeting.

Katharina Krentz:

So I heard about the term before. I read some blog posts from John before, but we first met in this meeting at Deutsche Bank Frankfurt in May 2015. It was fun. He was explaining this method and I was like, What! I don't get it. I'm out on my own. That was really the kick-off for doing some self experiments to better understand why there is now a method and how the method works because working in circles, that we weren't familiar with that concept. Learning in a self-organized informal way. No. Yeah, I've never heard about that before. It's quite a ride.

Michelle Ockers:

I think you've both touched on issues, which are fairly common in organizations. I expect that many learning and development professionals have come across. One is around technology being rolled out, particularly around collaboration technologies, but nobody really knowing how to make the most out of them and how to really get value out of them effectively, either inside or outside an organization. The technology itself isn't sufficient, there's something more that people need. Katharina, you've talked about process being part of that, but there's also mindset, which I'll touch on in a moment. The other thing you talked about Katharina, is community management. I know many organizations, learning and development professionals get involved in trying to set up and organize communities and it can be really hard to get people to engage and to have them work effectively and deliver great value for the individual or the organization.

Learning Uncut Emergent Series
John Stepper & Katharina Krentz
Working Out Loud

John Stepper:

People just don't do what you tell them to do. It's very frustrating.

Michelle Ockers:

They can't be controlled.

Katharina Krentz:

Why shouldn't they? Knowledge is power, why should they share it?

Michelle Ockers:

Perhaps because they haven't had the experience of the power of sharing their knowledge because they haven't come across Working Out Loud, but you know what first attracted me to Working Out Loud and I actually heard about it in a Twitter chat with you, John in 2014, I think. I read your draft book before it was published.

John Stepper:

Oh, that's right. You're in the acknowledgments.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Yeah. The thing that really turned me on to your approach was that one of the elements is to engage with generosity and to look at how you can build relationships through contribution, which is such an inverse for many people's experience of building a network and the approach many people think about, well, it's about what can I get out of the network rather than what can I contribute? I think Katharina to your point, it is about process. It is about skills and it's also about this mindset shift.

John Stepper:

None of these ideas are new. Dale wrote about leading with generosity, certainly Keith Ferrazzi has three books now that talks about it. I think what was missing, if I contributed in anything, it is, can we tap into an employee's intrinsic motivation to do something? They're not doing IT training because Michelle Ockers told them to, or they're not going to a community because Katharina Krentz has been cheerleading for the community. It is selfish in the sense that I'm doing this for me, for goal that I choose about something I care about, but in the service of that goal, I'm taking these steps that also help other people that are about giving and receiving both in the circle and with my network and that it took me a long time to get this balance, right. That's been baked into these 12 weekly guides, this kind of balance between I'm pursuing my goal, but I'm doing so in a way that's good for me, good for other people and good for this company.

Michelle Ockers:

Let's talk about that good for this company for a moment then Katharina. Working Out Loud has been adopted widely at Bosch over the years, since at that insightful session you went to where John presented at Deutsche Bank. What difference has it made for the organization and for the people who work there. You can either talk in kind of generalities and business benefits or in some stories which really illustrate some of the benefits for both the organization and the people working within Bosch.

Katharina Krentz:

I guess, first of all, maybe the status quo we reached out to more than 6,000 people in 52 countries with more than 900 circles at the moment. This is not because I'm such a good

Learning Uncut Emergent Series John Stepper & Katharina Krentz Working Out Loud

marketer, it's more because almost 100% of people joining, Working Out Loud circles and getting some value out of that, recommend the method to others. This is how it spreads. Of course it needs a tip. There was a tipping point and we need a critical mass to really keep going, but now it's growing and it's constantly growing without doing anything more. At the moment, or it is a really strategic anchor topic now in corporate HR and it's part of the learning portfolio, so it's part of the Bosch Training Academy. It's part of the Bosch learning company initiative. It's part of the onboarding and it's well known in female empowerment, diversity programs, and latest also in the combination with mindfulness.

Katharina Krentz:

This basic method was the basis for a mindfulness program in Bosch. Working Out Loud is now well anchored and it will not go away anymore. Why it is like that? It's because it's a great part of the enabling portfolio on how to network, how to work in remote teams, how to work virtually, digitally, how you want to call it. It makes diversity experienceable. It helps with intercultural change and exchange. It helps with personal development and growth. It's a great tool to learn how to give and seek feedback and do self-reflection. We have found out that this method helps with 12 very specific use cases. It has been the biggest grassroots movement, Bosch [inaudible 00:20:10] Yeah, this has now stopped, but we still keep it alive as an initiative because I guess it's one of the first programs we had which is a voluntary offer to the people to learn and develop on their own and to do that in a very self-responsible way.

Katharina Krentz:

It's possible to do that during working hours. It's possible to do that with a private and very personal goal, so the goal you choose to work on in the 12 weeks, it's not necessary that you work on a business goal because for Bosch is mainly important that the skills and the mindset is built, and this is I guess what we have reached. Not for everybody, but for a lot of people and if we keep going, I guess it will show its impact on the cultural change and the digital transformation of Bosch. This is what we got out of that. Now it's not possible to really measure heart KPIs, key performance indicators, just because it's still a learning growth and development program. It's difficult to say what you really get out of that because it depends on the goal you choose. It depends on the other four people in your circle. It depends if you participate once, twice, three times.

Katharina Krentz:

It depends on your personal situation, the knowledge you had before. So it's very difficult to say what you get out of that, but what we see is that networking increases. We see that there is a big awareness that you can professionally learn how to network and that this is not a talent. The program focuses on individuals. This is something large organizations normally don't offer because it's simply too expensive and difficult to scale, but in this case, because you don't need a trainer or coach or business mentor, you just need people who spread it. Experienced people who support others. It is possible to scale this over country borders and make it available for everybody who wants to do something for himself.

Michelle Ockers:

How did it get started though? It's reached a tipping point now. Just talk us through some of the key stages and sort of who was involved. How did you demonstrate the value of it to the point where it could be scaled up and it's now embedded so much in some of those key 12 use cases and in your HR processes?

John Stepper:



Learning Uncut Emergent Series
John Stepper & Katharina Krentz
Working Out Loud

Before she tells you that story, I think the shift that she experienced from grassroots organic movement to something that was institutionalized, that's what L and D people are interested in.

Michelle Ockers:

Well, I was going to make the linkage back to learning culture and this whole thing around, it's voluntary. We want to build people's skills to learn in a self-directed way.

John Stepper:

Right. I'll let her tell her story, but

Michelle Ockers:

I think we need to circle back to that because I think it's important and it's really powerful for learning and development professionals to look at it as a way of helping to build learning culture.

John Stepper:

Right, right, right. Katharina how'd you do it?

Katharina Krentz:

Yeah. Very roughly what we did, so it started with this very first meeting with a self-experienced in getting to know this method. We then started with pilots. We set up 10 pilot soft goals. I asked my own network to join and I asked people who are early adopters for new technologies and methods, but as well, some critical people who normally don't join the new topics in the first step so to have balance in the participants. That was interesting because we gathered feedback from these 10 soft goals to see what we get out of that. Based on this first feedback, it was successful enough to invite John in November 2015 to our very first Working Out Loud conference, where we bothered him quite hard to do.

Katharina Krentz:

We talked to different audiences to test the target groups. We let them talk to leaders. We let them talk to young people. We let them talk to the mixed audience to see how they or from what they get convinced and then we started with the participants of this very first conference to set up new circles.

Michelle Ockers:

Can I just ask a question there, Katharina, what did you find from that little testing about the three audiences and what kind of messages resonated and with whom?

Katharina Krentz:

What resonated, I guess, with most of the people was this you get value out of being visible without being too present. It was like John explained before, it was the deep connection with content related work we all do and getting this out. It's not about Katharina, it's about the job I'm doing and making others aware of what I do and getting value out of this connection. It's a door to new opportunities. It's a door to new network contact partners. I guess what triggered the most of us, these five elements are not new, but the combination is new and the learning method. Five people learning journey, small, safe place to experience in own pace with the own topics. That was the interesting part. For the leaders, of course, the opportunity to see that it's possible to also build leadership skills in this very safe space.

Learning Uncut Emergent Series John Stepper & Katharina Krentz Working Out Loud

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you. What happened after John came out and you did this testing, you'd sort of spoken to a number of people in the organization at this point, done some circles. Where did you go next?

Katharina Krentz:

I set up a community to make all information available at one place in our social intranet. I set up the very first cooperation team because work as that moment, it was too difficult to do everything on my own. I then changed my job. I changed my position, because I needed for my own, a safe place and space where I can go on with Working Out Loud and the job I was doing before wasn't that Working Out Loud friendly. I call it like that. Then with the team, we started with five people in the team. We were able to do some more really marketing and communication activities, and it was possible to reach out to the Bosch learning company initiative. This is the interesting part, our training centre and its business model, simply didn't fit to Working Out Loud because Working Out Loud is free of charge, but it needs a lot of organizations set up these circles, bring together five people, offer the circle guides, make them available also in mother language and adopt them to Bosch needs and the Bosch language, which is very, very technology driven and engineering. German engineering driven.

Katharina Krentz:

With this team, it was possible to do the work, to set up a structure where we organize these circles and then to find a business model with the Bosch learning company initiative, which allowed us to have a training program free of charge, but with costs for structure and organization and done it. Yeah, we got the CHRO, Christoph Kubel as a sponsor for this grassroots movement, which was very important because before that, it wasn't clear if we are really allowed to do that during working hours and with a personal private goal, but when you have the top of HR saying, Hey, he recommends this program and Bosch wants the skills, so whatever is helpful to build these skills is recommended that helped us a lot.

Katharina Krentz:

After that, I guess all the other steps were very small. We brought it to the onboarding program. We partnered with the corporate IT to enable this tool set technology focus. We partnered with HR to get a good environment and partner for this personal development things so that the skill set and as well we partnered with the transformation team for the mindset thing, because we see enabling is always done successful if you enable mindset, tool set, skill set in the same time based on practice. Practice during the job you do. Then we became part of the corporate, IOT department. We build a business model of Working Out Loud to refinance our own activities and we partnered with big other companies and build this community of practice with eight other big corporates, to spread the word here in Germany, and to make it also with John together, even better for German engineers. To get the message and get value out of this program.

Michelle Ockers:

You've actually taken it from this grassroots movement to something you brought out in the organization and then cross industry in Germany. It really scaled right up beyond the organizational boundaries as well. Right?

Katharina Krentz:

Yeah. There was just a practical idea because I started spreading it in Bosch and that wasn't easy in the beginning because people told me no, don't do that Working Out Loud, it's for

Learning Uncut Emergent Series
John Stepper & Katharina Krentz
Working Out Loud

private people using social media, you cannot bring this to a big corporate. John and me were clear that it might be an interesting use case, so we give it a try, but it was really difficult doing that. It took one year after other companies started doing the same, even if I talked about it, again and again and again in my networks, but it simply wasn't enough. I worked. Yeah. I put some effort in bringing other corporates on this path to also secure that what we are doing is the right thing to do, because if it's only for Bosch interests, then something is wrong. Working Out Loud is a very general approach which should bring or make work more human. It should work for everybody, not only for Bosch. I was like, Oh, maybe I did something wrong, but then when the other corporates joined in, it was clear it works for all of us.

Michelle Ockers:

It creates more social proof, right? If you can work with other organisations.

John Stepper:

It's tough to be first. But she did. That was heroic. Then she spread it to another big eight mega firms in Germany. That whole story and journey she described has been condensed. If you are the chief learning officer at Merck for example, you may not have been in a circle, but you've seen enough of it that you say, Oh, well, I know I've got to shift my learning portfolio to something that's more self-directed, experiential, social particularly now, but even before then. Let's see, so we'll get learning and we'll get Working Out Loud because these are scalable things that fit nicely into that strategy and then she'll just take pages from Katharina's playbook that says, onboarding, great use case. People need to know how to navigate the company. Oh, talent development, makes sense. Diversity, makes sense, so all of what she had struggled through has been condensed to say people try it and if they like it, great, we'll have a supported program that can be integrated in what we already do and we'll have internal people who can support it in a distributed way.

Michelle Ockers:

The rest of us if we want to introduce Working Out Loud in the organization don't necessarily need to go through the steps in quite the hard way that Katharina did-

John Stepper:

Exactly the point that I was trying to make.

Michelle Ockers:

We've got something already there to model off, right?

John Stepper:

Yeah. In fact, now things have moved on, right? It's 2020, so now there are coaches and so you could say, Oh, gee, I'd like to try it, but I'm not Katharina Krentz, right? What do I do? Well, you could hire a coach and the coach would just start up a program for you or train your people internally. Or you could just do what she did. You have people register to a website, they form a few circles, so they could kind of kick the tires. They could test it themselves. Once you're ready to institutionalize it or at least do it in a more formal way, then there's plenty of support now that she never had. She had to make all of that up on her own, which is why she's got her own chapter in the book. I mean, it's amazing what she did.

Michelle Ockers:

Learning Uncut Emergent Series
John Stepper & Katharina Krentz
Working Out Loud

Yeah. The impact that Working Out Loud has had for Bosch, John, have you seen that replicated in other organizations? What does it take to kind of get those benefits?

John Stepper:

I've seen... They're still number one in terms of scale, because they've been doing this for so long. I've seen that same pattern of grassroots got a few dozen people. They seem to like it, let's take a next step and then ultimately where people go and there are a number of companies now that do this, they integrated into programs. That normalizes it, that's a big deal. Is it volunteer, kind of something weird that I never heard of for early adopters or is it work? They integrated into programs. They train internal mentors, so it's not another program for HR to deal with. It was busy, L and D busy. We have these people who've been through circles. I got to do more and they can support and spread in a distributed way. Then finally, some people will buy a license and they'll customize the materials so that they integrate all their links, all their examples and it looks and feels and smells like an internal program.

John Stepper:

That pattern, those three things, programs, mentors and customized materials. We've seen that play out over and over again. Yeah, so that's how they get to 1,000, 2,000 people.

Michelle Ockers:

Can you talk to me a little bit more about the role of the mentors? What are they doing in this whole process?

John Stepper:

Katharina again, made this up together with [inaudible 00:35:45] this idea. Simply put, these are people who have been through a circle and they get some extra training so that they can support and spread circles in their location, division, department. Imagine you're a new circle, you're five employees, self-organized, self-managing like it's pretty new as much as we like it. It's new. Your mentor is there just like secure attachment. They are there if and when you need help, they're not part of your circle, very lightweight. They help you get started. They can answer questions along the way and they also lead by their personal example, right? Oh, I'm a mentor here, so what that enables you to do... I just talked to one yesterday. She was trained at [inaudible 01:02:16]. She went back to Bangalore. She spins up 50 more women in circles as part of their diversity movement. HR in Germany doesn't do anything. They don't have to, because they've got this network of people kind of doing the work, it's lightweight, but they're doing it in a way that makes the employees feel supported and it's a nice balance.

Michelle Ockers:

Learning and development professionals love to facilitate stuff. They love to control things to make them work, but this sounds like their role would be quite different. Katharina you talked a fair bit about logistics and helping to organize people into circles and so on. John, I know that you don't need a trained facilitator as such. You can run a circle and I've been in several circles where nobody is a trained facilitator, that the guides provide you with everything you need from week one through to week 12. All of the activities on that you can still facilitate without anyone having to be a skilled facilitator. What is the role of learning and development professionals, if someone's interested in introducing this? You talked about programs. When he programs as learning and development professionals, we think we're in there structuring things and making things happen. Let's explore what would an L and D professional do during a circle?

Learning Uncut Emergent Series
John Stepper & Katharina Krentz
Working Out Loud

John Stepper:

Katharina mentioned a few of these things, and I think they're important and it's not hands on kind of program management, but it is important. For example, this chief learning officer, she has to influence the owner of the onboarding program to try this. She has to work with the works council to make sure that it's framed properly so that they support it. She has to include in people's personal development programs so that the mentors don't get grief from their boss that they have this extra 2% task or 5% task. I'd say, those are structural things that senior L and D people can do and are good at. What they don't have to do is the heavy lifting of supervising some program or being in a room running a workshop.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, it does, so if you've got limited capacity in your learning and development team, this is something that you can scale up quite readily.

John Stepper:

Everybody I talked to has the same stuff. The same challenges of, we don't have any people, our budgets particularly now are under siege. We needed to be scalable and relatively inexpensive. This is one way to do that.

Michelle Ockers:

What are the biggest challenges that people in organizations have, who want to introduce the approach? They're trying to get it going. What are the common blockages or challenges that they might have that they're going to need to work their way through potentially? What advice would you give them for addressing those?

John Stepper:

I'll give you one and Katharina, you pick one. The top one is people are busy and distracted, so the idea that you're going to give them one more hour of anything is hard for people to deal with and so that's why organic grassroots things can hit a glass ceiling because there's only so many people that are going to raise their hand for an extra hour of anything. The way around that again, is to institutionalize it. If it's part of the orientation program, it's not an extra hour, it's part of the orientation program. If it's part of the talent management program so that beyond the workshop, you've got continuity and connectivity with managers over 12 weeks. It's part of the talent management, it's in your calendar. Nobody questions it and so I guess I'd say the biggest challenge is simply a logistical one and Katharina and then others that follow her figured out, Oh, here's a bag of tricks that help us solve that. That help us weave it into the normal calendar so that people just do it as in the course of their day. Katharina, what would you say?

John Stepper:

Besides logistics, what's one of your biggest kind of obstacles?

Katharina Krentz:

Yeah. It's kind of setting the environment. To set up the structure which is needed, so how did the circles form? Where do they meet? Which technology is used? This can be orchestrated and also set by the L and D. If there is a team to support the spreading, if there is a team willing to work as mentor, of course, they need some resource and this can also be done by the L and D people. I guess most important is what we see as the big change we all face thanks to the pandemic and we are all talking about this virtual world. The world will stay like that. It's not possible for us anymore to plan 20, 30 years upfront, but to stay agile

Learning Uncut Emergent Series John Stepper & Katharina Krentz Working Out Loud

and this is something what we are working with. Having an agile mindset and an agile learning portfolio and agile trainings in place.

Katharina Krentz:

That's so helpful to better get prepared for the future, so we are talking of a 70%, 20%, 10% training portfolio. Only 10% is typical classroom. 20% is online virtual training with webinars and trainers around, but 70% is this informal learning while working. Learning with reverse mentors, mentors, coaches, learning by doing things and having here a portfolio which includes Working Out Loud, Working Out Loud for leaders, Working Out Loud for mindfulness, Working Out Loud for diversity is so helpful as part of the portfolio to really show that organizations are willing to trust people.

Katharina Krentz:

To build up the skills they need in the moment they need it. To really take care of topics which are important for them and trust that these topics are also good for the company and to then as well, make this change in being more open, being more connected. Yeah, trusting more and making work more human and L and D while now making Working Out Loud available and supporting such programs can really show that they care and can show that they take it serious. Not only offering Working Out Loud, but as well doing and living, Working Out Loud.

John Stepper:

Just a quick comment about that, because this is something that I find L and D people like, and I certainly like it this way, which is, because we talked a lot about programs and onboarding and all of that. What about everybody else? How many people are in your high performance, high potential group? What's nice about the way that this has worked out, it's very democratic. I'm the chief learning officer and sure maybe I've got a more high touch version of this for new joiners, but I put the guides on my intranet and like, oh, anybody who wants to do it, there they are. You could form your own circle. You could form a circle with somebody in another company if you want and that's different. That's like we're here to help everybody. Yes, some people may get more attention than others, but this is open to everybody and that's not a normal L and D thing. I love that we're able to do that inside big corporations, kind of democratize access to development and peer coaching.

Katharina Krentz:

It's enabling for the shift coming from Taylorism to more organic network, connected, collaboration. The interesting part is that, I guess lots of us have experienced and have been socialized with this, what we call the fixed mindset. My boss knows what to do. My boss knows what is best for me and now we see exactly the opposite. I need to care. I need to show intrinsic motivation. I need to open up and to somehow organize myself, but how to learn that? We all see that it cannot be told to people we are not yet in this metrics area where you wear a hat and you upload a new mindset. We need to kind of experience how it feels to work differently, learn differently, communicate differently. This method is so extraordinary because it offers this safe space and it's a learning by doing program, which is where you don't need any knowledge upfront and before where you just can join, the barriers are so low.

Michelle Ockers:

The idea of the safety of the space is really important. There's a lot of talk around psychological safety and how critical that is for improving performance and improving collaboration for that as something that's critical for leaders to understand how to generate a

Learning Uncut Emergent Series
John Stepper & Katharina Krentz
Working Out Loud

safe spaces. What is it about Working Out Loud and I guess in particularly Working Out Loud circles, that creates that sense of safety? I'm happy for either of you to answer that.

Katharina Krentz:

It builds so quickly. You have five people and the best case is you don't know the other four, but based on the exercise which you do in week zero for preparation and week one, two, and three, you build up trust very, very quickly by finding things you have in common with the others. It's not about that much I like you. I don't like you, or, Oh, you have this position. It's just about finding things you share and all five share the interest in Working Out Loud and the interest in change. This is so powerful and so easy because it's personal, but not too personal. It works so quickly that you build up trust within week two and three and then in week five, the favourite week for everybody, you really make a deep dive and kind of a soul striptease on who you are, what drives you, what motivates you? Then you again, find things to share and things you can use to support and help others. This creates a safe space.

Katharina Krentz:

The interesting thing is, we are working so much with changing how teams work, but if I don't feel safe in my team, I will not open up, but in a circle with four strangers, I will open up and then it's possible to really talk about mindset and to really talk about self-reflection and feedback and then you can bring this experience back to your own team.

Michelle Ockers:

Is there anything you would add to that, John?

John Stepper:

Two minor points that, because she said it beautifully, but these circles are... Diverse circles are better for that reason to preserve that sense of not competing for status or whatever else we do at work. The other is that this is something we haven't said, these are opt in. We never force people to join one, so you're there because you chose to be there, so even when it's offered as part of a program, it's an offer. You don't have to do it. Then within the guides, we emphasize this is a confidential thing, so you can choose whatever you want. There's no status report to your boss. There's no oversight again, because there's no trainer in the room and at first some people look around like, who's telling me what to do.

John Stepper:

I mean, developing a sense of agency at work. Even if we say we want it, who's going to do that. Who's going to be the first person and then they get shocked, right? This gives them a chance in this confidential, safe space to take these little steps at crafting their job, reaching out, sharing something on the intranet. It's little steps along the way and over time, they develop a sense of confidence, of self-efficacy, of self-determination and that's the feeling that we're going for, right? That's what taps into these big three intrinsic motivators of control, competence, connection. That's what we want. You have that and the ability to navigate the company, to find people and resources you need, that's a superpower, but you can't teach it to people. You have to create a space where they can experience it over time till it becomes a habit and a set of skills, and that's what we tried to do.

Michelle Ockers:

It's interesting that by creating that safe, inner circle that builds up during that 12 weeks, it actually makes you more courageous and confident in reaching out to form new relationships, right? There's an irony in that, but that's like your safe base to be able to go out into the world.

Learning Uncut Emergent Series John Stepper & Katharina Krentz Working Out Loud

John Stepper:

Exactly. You do it in a small way for the people where it's easier and then gradually opening up, Katharina has this beautiful example of when people do multiple circles, the first one might be in person, in whatever native language they have. Second one would be across location because it's kind of more interesting and then the third one might be across company. You can almost feel people opening up, making their world bigger or being more comfortable with a bigger world and I think that's great.

Michelle Ockers:

Katharina told some of the story around how circles have spread beyond just Bosch and there's some industry wide collaboration going on around Working Out Loud in Germany, which points to the potential for Working Out Loud, to make a difference at an industry of society level at a much bigger level than just an organization. It's from individual right up to, who knows where the limits are to what Working Out Loud to contribute to. Have you got any examples either of you that illustrate this kind of bigger potential for Working Out Loud in a world that desperately needs more human connection?

John Stepper:

Katha does, you go first.

Katharina Krentz:

I'm invited to a European conference to talk about exactly this because, and this is what we see. We see so many global problems and it's simply not possible that one genius finds the solution. It's more, and this is how we see innovation. How is innovation happening? In most cases, and this is more than 90%. Innovation is when a diverse team comes together to improve something, what is already existing and match their ideas with customer needs. You bring together diverse people with totally different problems, solution strategies, and this is how it works. This is where Working Out Loud enables. It brings you to or it makes you aware that you can learn to identify and find people out there to reach out to them and build relationships, build on trust to really co-create and co-innovate. We are all talking about ecosystems which need to be built because one company cannot survive on its own.

Katharina Krentz:

This is from a company perspective, so interesting... How should we partner with other companies with start-ups, with universities, how to do that? It's not because, Hey, we are Bosch. It's because of, Hey, there's John and Katharina and Michelle and we trust these people. All about human connections, it's all about human relationships and how to build these based on openness and trust. Here Working Out Loud can be a big enabler. I think when we talk about global climate issues, stuff like that, it allows you to bring together people who are intrinsically motivated like the greeter tune bird movement. It makes it so easy to connect and to say, or to show people, Hey, you can learn how to connect. Even for me as a more introvert person and this is why I started to spread Working Out Loud. It was this aha moment. Oh, I can learn that, it's not a talent. Oh my goodness. Then I can do that. I guess this-

John Stepper:

I was going to say, I think that's the... If I'm in the audience, I'm thinking, man, what is this Working Out Loud thing. It can do anything. It's like a Swiss army knife. The reason for this is what you're just describing. It's this feeling of any individual realizes that there's more that

Learning Uncut Emergent Series
John Stepper & Katharina Krentz
Working Out Loud

they can offer and that it may not be for everyone, but there are other people out there for whom their contribution matters. There were two quick quotes that one, just this morning, these people, I don't know, but they were commented on LinkedIn. One's from Maria who said that her circle turned just me into us and because it was in response to us and them and the organization. She said, it feels great to collaborate with these other people. It's that feeling that has spread Working Out Loud.

John Stepper:

There wasn't the marketing budget. There's not some machine out there that's rolling this out. It's people tapping into that feeling. A gentleman in India described it as, it was for the future leader inside you. It allowed you to dare to let that out because it was that safe space with small steps week by week by week. For me, the biggest contribution won't be that we help Bosch or that we helped Merck or these other companies. I think that's great and that gives us access to millions of people. The biggest contribution is that we give people almost the permission, the freedom, the skills that they could stand up a bit taller and make more of what they have to offer. With that, you can apply that to all sorts of use cases, female empowerment, jobs seekers, disadvantaged people earning access that they wouldn't have otherwise. I'm looking forward to working on this for the rest of my life.

Michelle Ockers:

Inspiring. Thank you. I will say personally, I think when I discovered Working Out Loud back in 2014, 2015, and I think about how my life has shifted, I credit it with radically transforming how I learn and how I work and the path my career has taken. Thank you to both of you for the work you've done and being part of that community.

John Stepper:

Thank you.

Michelle Ockers:

I'll hold myself up as a personal use case.

John Stepper:

Well, you have a global audience, right? Which is which when you worked in a job, I mean, you were well-respected, but it's certainly different and larger and more global audience than you might've imagined.

Michelle Ockers:

I love the idea. You just don't know where it's going to lead.

John Stepper:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

That's beautiful. Advice to learning professionals, this is our time where we pull it all together and we give some advice to learning professionals. If they're interested in Working Out Loud, which they should be after listening to this episode. What should they stop, start and accelerating. Katharina, if we can start with you, what would you recommend to learning professionals around what they should stop, start and accelerate if Working Out Loud is something they're curious about?

Learning Uncut Emergent Series
John Stepper & Katharina Krentz
Working Out Loud

Katharina Krentz:

My main stop is, you cannot offer for everything training which fits to the audience outside, so please open up and give the people tools and methods where they can learn what they need in the moment they need it. If it's informal learning methods like Working Out Loud, please go for that. Please don't be afraid that this business model cannibalizes your other business models. Start, orchestrate change and really support change on a personal, on team and leader level. Accelerate, it's part of this. Be part of the change, be part of the development journeys of people and orchestrate this offer to people to learn and develop and to come from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you. John, your turn, stop, start and accelerate for learning and development.

John Stepper:

I'm sort of not an L and D person, but here's what I would... I don't mean to give advice, but here's what I think makes sense that, stop is stop relying on the traditional learning methods. We have the same playbook we've had for a very long time, and it appears to me and L and D and certainly in human resources. I would really time out on that and do what the Merck CLO has done, which is really shift the portfolio. Start means to me, really start doing more pilots with this experiential learning, like creating spaces for people to learn. Spaces meaning formats, environments, et cetera, where they could learn skills related to the job in an intrinsically motivated way. In a nice self-directed, self-managed way. That's a new thing.

John Stepper:

That's much more difficult, but also more interesting than offering courses. Then accelerate, I'd accelerate this shift towards more people in the company participating in the L and D. They may not have that title, but like Katharina has a Working Out Loud team and Working Out Loud mentors. That's the way it should be, learning isn't the purview of the L and D department. There's so much talent. I would quickly accelerate the involvement of other people in delivering learning and I think that goes back to that second point. They could participate in this experiential formats, Working Out Loud is just one example.

Michelle Ockers:

Great. Thank you so much. It's been such a delight to speak with you today, John and Katharina. If people are interested in following up, getting in touch with both of you, we'll include links to your LinkedIn profiles in the show notes, as well as websites, and some other resources that have been mentioned today, if people would like to take a deeper dive. Thank you so much to both of you.

John Stepper:

It was so nice to see you again. This is really a delight. Thanks very much. Thank you, Katharina too. You were great.

Katharina Krentz:

Oh, thanks to you. That was really an interesting hour. Thanks for the invitation.

**Learning Uncut Emergent Series
John Stepper & Katharina Krentz
Working Out Loud**