



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:

When Michelle, Shannon and I discussed how we might help L&D emerge stronger through this podcast series, we knew we wanted to tackle tough issues in conversation with smart people. But we also knew that talking is just not enough, we need to act. And that's why we're planning an interactive event with our listeners later on in the year to help us reflect, act and change so that we can emerge stronger together. So watch out for details and please join us

Laura Overton:

I'd like to welcome you all to another edition of the Emergent Theories of the Learning Uncut podcast. I am genuinely so excited today to be able to welcome Seb Tindall who is Head of Learning and Development from Vitality here in the UK. Hi, Seb.

Seb Tindall:

Hi, Laura, thanks for having me.

Laura Overton:

Lovely to have you on here. And I'd like to welcome Michelle Ockers who is the host of the Learning Uncut podcast series and Michelle, it's a real privilege to be able to get your expertise rather than just you be asking the questions. I'm going to flip it a little bit this morning, so welcome.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you, Laura.

Laura Overton:

It's great. So, this Emergent series is all about how do we help learning and development professionals think about how they emerge from the disruption in a stronger and more vibrant space. So before we do that, let's take a quick look with you guys. What has this disruption meant to you in the last few months? Seb tell us a little bit more about what your world's been like.

Seb Tindall:

So, I think it's not the answer you're looking for but it is the honest answer. It hasn't changed that much. So, I think when we first went into lockdown, my team had 33 learning projects due to deploy over a three-month period of time. We actually ended up delivering 50 because Vitality, as a business, where I work, had to change its proposition over night to be able to allow people to become healthier in their homes. And it was a conference call at five o'clock on a Friday night saying, "Monday morning, this stuff needs to go out. And by the way, most of your people are asleep. How do you do it?"

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Seb Tindall:

So if anything, it's increased the workload through, probably accelerated some of the things we were working on for two years prior. So I actually think, I feel right now we are in a better position than we would have been without some of the experience of lockdown over the last three months.

Laura Overton:

Yeah, thank you so much for that. It's great to hear that some of the things that you've been putting in place before are working and enabling you to be able to work through this. This is brilliant news, thanks Seb. Michelle, what about you? You've been talking to a lot of people and you're experiencing some pretty interesting things lately.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, absolutely. So I have done a lot of deep listening and I had changed part of my business processes now and embedded a lot more listening in my processes. And of course the podcast is a great start for listening. But I've been doing a lot more small group sessions. And people have been very open to getting together to learn from each other, to hear what other people are doing because I work independently with a range of organizations and I feel like a lot of organizations have caught up with me. There are a lot of the things I've been working on, perhaps not with as many organizations around learning transformation, around capability building, people have gone, "Oh, yes. Now we get it. We get why that stuff is important." So I have been doing a lot more work around in-house development and delivery work for clients because they realized they don't need me in a classroom. They don't need me physically on site. I've been doing a lot more virtually. More recently, strategic work has picked up and I'm currently engaged on learning strategy updates with two government clients which includes capability building for their learning and development teams as part of the transformation. And there is a whole stack of other bits and pieces I've been working on, including my own program in response to some of the deep listening I've done which is the first time I, as an independent, have done a fully online program instead of face to face workshops. So it's been a very vibrant period for me as well, very engaged period.

Laura Overton:

That's brilliant. And it's really exciting to actually see how the work that we've been doing as a community is paying dividends in this new world. But also, Michelle, the challenges, those of us who've been working particularly in digitally enabled learning for quite some time, we're still facing those challenges, we still have to do quite a lot of our work face to face. And getting those new skills and capabilities and enhancing and honing those skills has been so important and I really recognize that in my own world as well. And that's why we want to, in this episode, to look at skills, capability of learning and development. In my previous life, I was always talking about as learning professionals, we need to put the seatbelt on first, fasten your seatbelt first before we fasten other people's. We're so busy giving our lives to building up the skills and the ability to change and adapt to the organizations that we work with but we rarely do it really for ourselves. So, that's what this session is going to be about today. How do we look at those skills?

Laura Overton:

So at the very highest level, Seb, I know we've shared a speaking platform before. I know the skill of L&D is really important to you. And maybe as part of your transition into the disruption, at the highest level, tell me a little bit more about your views on this.

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Seb Tindall:

So, I think probably four years ago, I was completely lost on this subject. I think I've spent so long working with traditional experts that you start to become a little bit indoctrinated in the way that it used to be. And when I first moved to Vitality, truth be told, it was a bit of an emerging brand so we were struggling to attract people from an L&D background into some of the roles and we had to recruit pretty quickly. The team started pretty much from scratch to the point where now, we've got 15 L&D consultants and 13 of those have come from non-L&D backgrounds. That experience of watching and working with those people has completely changed my perception of what L&D capability is and we've taken people from some very interesting backgrounds, some people who were data scientists, some people who were YouTubers and actually making a decent living from YouTube. And I think all of that stuff has really worked to defuse some kind of expertise skill set into a team and me thinking that's actually really useful, I would never would have thought of that. And there is a couple of bits where it's working with data scientists for example. They will really explain to you actually it's not an arcane science. It's not incredibly difficult to understand and to take portions of these disciplines and almost put them into an L&D consultancy approach just means that there is that commonality of language. You can communicate with these departments, why would we go and get data from our stakeholders? Let's go and get it from a data science department. They are far better to give it to us than anyone else.

Seb Tindall:

Why would we talk to you about how well a process is designed using something we've invented? We go straight to CX (customer experience) team, get a heuristic assessment and we'll tell you if it's a complicated thing to learn or not. And then you make the choice, make it easier or train people and that's hard and some people will get it wrong. And that's your choice. I think we've spent about four, or I personally have spent that four-year period embedding myself in all of these different functions that formulate part of especially change programs. And taking bits that I like and using that to put into our process to the point where it's become, I hate to call it, a Frankenstein. But I think some people might look at it from a traditional L&D background and think, "You've completely lost your mind." And sometimes I probably agree with them. But these steps for me have always flushed out good quality conversations where individuals who are not from L&D background can pick up the process and say, "Yeah, that absolutely makes sense and it gets us where we need to be." So I think that, for me, almost typifies the journey of just real exploration around specialist departments to take things that can help us for future.

Laura Overton:

And I love that that you're building up skill and capabilities through collaboration and Michelle, I know that's also massively important for you because you did a major project on capability of learning and development, didn't you? So give us a flavour from your perspective as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, a lot of what Seb's talking about are skill sets that actually are now absolutely necessary for a contemporary learning and development team. But they are not part necessarily of what we would call that traditional skill set. So in 2018, I led the refresh of a capability map for Learning and Development. I was engaged by the Learning and Performance Institute to do that.

Michelle Ockers:

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And there a lot of skills in that that you probably wouldn't think of as traditional L&D and when we think of traditional, I think we still think a lot about facilitating learning. And that learning has to be something that you have someone convening sessions, controlling the flow of the learning, following session plans or designing and developing content for people to go through in a certain set order. But, that particular capability map, we didn't shift a lot of the skills. We didn't remove skills so much as we did add a couple of skills. So we added a skill set around managing learning technologies or managing technologies for learning because we can use technologies that are operational technologies as well. They don't have to be dedicated learning technologies. But we really strengthened deep and enhanced the descriptions around skills such as, to Seb's point, data analytics, skills related particularly to performance and impact, evaluation, performance consulting, skills that get us closer to the business. And also skills around supporting learning in the flow of work rather than facilitating learning. So it's a much broader skill set and there's a lot more specialism available now to learning professionals. I think anyone who is working as a one person L&D team or in a small team would struggle to have all of those skills. And I don't think that's the expectation. The strategy Seb has used where you find those skills either by insourcing skills, bringing people with non-L&D backgrounds, with skills like the videography skill for instance if that's a big part of your strategy or the data analytic skill, if you can't find that elsewhere in your organization, you reach out and build your network. So I think it's more about working in a network either with internal partners or also with external partners who have something you don't have that they can bring to the table. And just being quite flexible in how you pull together the skill set you need for the job at hand, starting from that very solid basis of a good solid understanding of what the business need really is.

Laura Overton:

Yeah, and I think that's so important is the purpose of where you start and I remember when I was doing my work with the research program over that 14 years where I met both of you when I was doing some of that work, I found that the skills issue was always something that was discussed by learning and development. There was always a hunger that we needed more performance consulting skills, we needed more skills about supporting the individual in the flow of work. We needed more skills about designing experiences and how to do this in an agile way. We needed more skills on analysing, we needed more business acumen as well. And I know these were also themes that were picked up by the LPI Capability map. L&D strategies, marketing and communications as well, how do we design, how do we develop, how do we facilitate virtually? All of these things. And yet, Towards Maturity /Emerald Works Skills map showed up very few teams were building these skills or bringing them in. And Seb, it's very interesting that you had also come at this from a different perspective as well about what are those skills that we can bring in from outside. So we've had a good map. I guess my point is, we've had a good map of skills for our organization that's been really looked at for quite some time. What is your opinion, would you say, have been some of the most critical skills that have been needed in the last few months? Seb, what are the things that have meant that you've been carrying on so well? What are those critical skills that have worked for you?

Seb Tindall:

I think not to sound like a cliché but I think probably three years ago, we were asked to submit an L&D dashboard that says, "This goes to the exec and what have you been doing and tell us how impactful you have been." And what I submitted was rubbish. It was awful.

And actually, I went on to Gartner, and you can actually take sanitized versions from some big businesses and what they've actually been doing. And in reality, it's all the same. It's all

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output, learning hours delivered. And you might get some satisfaction. And I'm not here to bash anybody because I was doing exactly the same thing three years ago. But there was kind of a seminal moment for me to say, "I handed that over through gritted teeth," and I just thought, "That's not good enough." So I went away and I think the reality is that there is a combination between a capability map that's created by L&D professionals for L&D professionals which is incredibly valuable, the work that Michelle consulted on is really good.

Seb Tindall:

But then there is also an element where you have to go to businesses and say, "What do you need us to be? What do we have to be for you?" And the reality in Vitality is that they want things quicker. Every time, every minute that somebody is away from their role learning something, they're not doing their job. And that can be quantified. There is a pounds and pence figure based on it. So now, we redefined just to report purely on learning efficacy. And my role is, and the stats that I present are based on I want to reduce the number of training minutes per project down, ideally to zero. All I'm going to monitor then is, retrospectively, did you feel you're prepared to do your role? I'll supplement that with performance stats. And did you know where to find what you needed to if you were unsure about something? That's what we're bothered about. And the reality for us is, starting to have that commercial conversation to say, "We don't want to go and train people. We don't want to sit in a classroom for six hours." You think we do, but we actually don't. And you also don't. So that's a commonality.

Laura Overton:

So, Seb, a question I have then is what are the specific skills that are allowing you and your team to be able to do that?

Seb Tindall:

So, I think that's the ... I guess, in a clunky way, that's where I'm coming to is they are the buttons that we're trying to push. We're trying to reduce training right down. So I think what we started to do at that juncture is, trying to become workflow experts at that point. And that's when we started to take people from the operation to say how do you do your job and become that more capable of assessing the pain points in the day to day role. I think it was really interesting because what we're saying to people is, "If you're conducting your role and you forgot how to do this, where would you look?" And almost beginning an ergonomic assessment of saying ... The L&D professional is very good at saying, "We should put that here on a SharePoint site." No, you don't do that. You ask people where they would look for it and then you put it there. And actually, by disseminating some of those things and giving a true analysis of the workflow, what we're trying to do is trying to say, "Well, if we understand the job, we know what you're going to struggle with and we know where to put things." And that's going to remove the weight on any learning change program.

Seb Tindall:

So I think for us, that was probably the step. And then we started to realize that we were slightly underprepared for some of these conversations because there were people out there who assessed the quality of processes. There were people out there who are SharePoint experts and they are very good at creating this. There are marketing teams who are really good at creating Slick, job aides and guides that are clickable that do the work for you. And there were CX experts that understand, well, you train people to do this and actually, the customer satisfaction was really, really strong. So, actually, what did you do? And we started to pick apart from that point all of those different skills, they all hinged off that one experience of saying, "Let's sit with people when they're doing their job," that we realized all

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of those things around it had to also be collected to not fumble through this process and actually to use tried and tested methods to assess all of those things.

Michelle Ockers:

So, can I have a crack at dissecting the skills I heard Sebastian talk about there, Laura?

Seb Tindall:

Please.

Laura Overton:

That was exactly what I was going to ask you. Michelle, what do you make of some of those skills? What's resonating with you?

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So, first of all, there is a strategy piece and that's developing learning strategy which starts with understanding your business, starts with understanding what's happening in your business and your business strategy and being able to align your approach, not just solution by solution but your overall approach to what's happening in your business. I heard a performance consulting skill there. Actually going out into the business, having a look at what is happening in the workplace, what is happening with performance, being able to analyse what are the root causes that might be getting in the way of people improving performance. I certainly heard some skills around curation and managing technology and performance support, potentially mixed in together there. Because performance support, managing technology and curation are not just about creating resources but enabling people to access those resources easily. So they are some of the key skills I heard there as well as that whole skill set about supporting learning in the flow of work. And there is different skills if you looked at the capability map. There is different skills in there. What I would say is there is no standard recipe. So the skill set required team by team, although you're probably going to need a little bit of all of the 25 skills in that capability map, it's going to vary, depending on your organizational context and your strategy. And I know, Sebastian, you guys have done a lot of great work around resources and creating of resources and making resources available. Another organization might go down a path where they're doing a lot of community of practice work and collaborative learning. So they might need to emphasize slightly different skill sets. Part of the skill here is knowing enough to know who you need to engage when. So when do we need to go to our operational excellence or our process improvement team? When do we need to go to marketing and engage them on something? When is it right to go to CX? So a lot of that is just general business awareness and knowing enough about the strategy that you need to put in place to know what skills do you need to access and do we need to build them ourselves, do we need to buy them in? Do we need to source them in house? And just one aside, this idea, Seb, that you're out in the workplace, I've got this idea, I want someone to do a hit squad. And what I mean by a hit squad, I want them to stop delivering learning, at least one week a quarter and send people on the learning team out into the workplace to just look at how people solve problems, how they access resources, what the friction points and solve as many of those friction points as they can in a week. I think you will add more value than a week of designing and delivering formal courses. So I'm up for that challenge. If anyone wants to contact me and we have a talk about how to do that, I want to do that with a team.

Laura Overton :

You want to live experimental learning for yourself, don't you?

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Michelle Ockers:

Yes.

Laura Overton:

So, I'll tell you what, it's really interesting hearing what you're saying is about creating great foundations and certainly, all my research working in high-performing learning organizations is about understanding what you're trying to achieve in the organization and the individual first and then everything rolls out from there. And yet, in this COVID environment, Michelle, people have come to you, "Oh, I need this." You did your first disruption series, Learning Uncut Disruption series. These were not the topics that people wanted in learning and development. There is a mismatch here. Tell us about what people seem to be looking for versus what you've just described.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. I think we're still quite hung up on facilitation and content. And I think there's different time horizons if you want to talk about where people have been looking and what sort of things they've been doing during this, it's now almost four months, five months since COVID hit. There was the immediate response where a lot of people turned to curating digital content to maybe facilitating short online sessions to help people across the organization to make the adaption to remote learning and in some cases, rapidly converting critical content to digital. And there's some interesting research which Fosway did which, Laura, we can put in the show notes which shows the big push to digital content. But I think people are now sitting back and saying, "Okay, we're in this middle period. We don't know how long we are going to be in this period where offices are off limits, where certainly going back to classrooms, if indeed we ever go back to classrooms, is going to be an option." So it's now about how do we consolidate gains and how do we keep going with the shift in learning strategy and in our approaches.

Michelle Ockers:

So what people are now starting to think about, I believe, is approaches beyond just content and really thinking hard, it's such a great opportunity to do a spring clean, right? To look at what do we want to stop doing? What courses, what approaches are no longer relevant because the business need isn't there. So now is the time to be doing that strategy work and a performance consulting work and drawing up your skill set there. What do we want to continue with but maybe in a different format? And what do we want to do that we haven't done before because the barriers to innovation are lower. So it's an amazing time to actually accelerate building your skill set to align with what you need in your organization to create a strategy that works in the new environment.

Laura Overton:

I think it's really powerful and I want to touch on this and get your views, Seb. Michelle also talked there about skills that maybe we don't need anymore. And I know that you have been out listening, you've been talking to the learning community, you've been listening to the learning community, comparing it with your experience internally within Vitality. What skills do you think we're still trying to hold on to that you think we need to let go of, that are perhaps redundant in this new world? Come on, be honest, it's just the three of us. Just tell me what you think.

Seb Tindall:

I mean, I have attended so many different seminars over the last couple of months and L&D is the most self-critical industry I've ever witnessed. I think the reality is if anything like this is

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going to bring us together, it should do. And Michelle hinted towards it before about just sharing the best practice for individuals. But what I've seen is a real resistance now to anybody who believes that they should have been furloughed or made redundant. L&D is a very, very precarious role and it always will be because learning is not work-based activity. People do it at home, they will do it at home. And the notion of saying that in order to learn anything, you have to go into a workplace is fundamentally broken. So I think people have to start to understand that you have to prove your worth every single month. And I went to another seminar, it shall remain nameless. But they sort of said, "Look, now more than ever, L&D professionals should start evaluating their work, improving their worth." If you weren't doing that already then what were you doing? You were lucky to still be in a job. I think the reality now is if people are going to start thinking far more commercially and you see your department as year by year business, you will survive far better and far longer irrespective there being a situation like this.

Seb Tindall:

And I had to have a couple of harsh conversations with individuals because I put something on LinkedIn a couple of months ago that said, "Look, we've essentially got a digital learning strategy. It's not binary, we don't force ourselves down that path. But because of the speed of change, we find ourselves living in that place. So if you need some help, you come and let me know." And a couple of big businesses reached out and sort of said, "We've cancelled everything, we only do classroom training." And the reality of that conversation is if you are a business and you sell one product, you are already precarious. You do not know when something is going to happen. And I guess it can be something internally, it can be disruption from tech, it can be anything. This has proven that if you don't see yourself as a viable business with multiple strategies for different scenarios, you will not survive. And who knows? In 12 months' time, my team might not survive. But what we're trying to do is see ourselves. And you can see the history and people not learning from history. And not to use too cliched an example but Blockbuster killed Netflix by sending DVDs to your house. If it was trying to still do that it wouldn't exist either. And the absolute transformation that's occurred over that three-month period is they've tried to become unrecognizable.

Seb Tindall:

Don't wait for disruption to happen at that point. You should essentially try and be a technophile every single month to understand how that should inform your strategy. And I think for me, it's more an entitlement that everyone should have in an L&D department and if you don't, you're ignorant. I disagree. Quite often, L&D is an epicurean endeavour because you can do it yourself. We just have to be far better at helping people learn than they are helping themselves to learn. I think having that realization will really push a lot of L&D departments forward so they focus on efficacy rather than output.

Laura Overton:

I think that's so interesting because I may be making an assumption here but possibly reading between the lines, you are saying that some of our traditional focus on let's evaluate what we have just done, that potentially is not as useful a skill as understanding the situation that we are going to be working in in the first place. So that potentially could be a little bit more redundant because if we're always trying to prove our worth vs looking to experiment and find new ways of adding that value then that skill might actually even hold us back. Do you think, Michelle, there are any skills that you've seen that the industry just wants to hold on to because that's what we've been an expert in in the past, that's what's defined us. Do you see us holding on to stuff that perhaps we shouldn't in this new world?

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Michelle Ockers (29:03):

Look, so there is the obvious one. Let's just tackle the elephant in the room about classroom trainers. And some people, that's all they know, that's all they've done and some teams I work with, there are people in the teams that have been classroom trainers their whole career. And they're struggling to understand how they can stay relevant which they perfectly well can. There are ways of bridging that skill set, building on that skill set and enriching those roles if you still need people to do training as if we can talk about that. I don't like talking about training, I prefer to talk about facilitating and enabling. But there is ways of taking that skill set and converting it. And I know we're not really focused so much on mindset here but that's partly a mindset challenge. I want to pick up on what you just said about evaluation, Laura and use it as an example of what I think is happening with the skill sets. It's not necessarily that skill sets are being made redundant. But it's the detail of how we do things and the kind of approaches we use that need to be refined.

Michelle Ockers:

So if you talk about evaluation, I think evaluation is still tremendously important. We still need to be able to understand the impact of our work which is what evaluation is all about. But to Seb's point, it's not about putting together charts around learning activity. It's about being able to bookend the process we've gone through with what we did upfront with our performance consulting. They're like opposite ends of understanding what's the business need, where do we need to focus, how will we know if we've made a difference to something that matters to the business and then evaluating and using your data analytics at the backend of your process to make those linkages back. Design is another great example. We've seen more and more human-centered design and co-creation as part of design approaches. Now, we're almost, I think, at the tipping point with those that they are the norm rather than something new and fresh and innovative. But 10 years ago, they weren't. So I think it's how we do things that is shifting and this idea of borrowing from other domains and taking great ideas and approaches from other domains and incorporating them or working with people from other domains to improve the quality, the output, the effect and impact of what we do.

Laura Overton:

That's absolutely fascinating to hear some of those views. And I think one of the things that struck me when I've been looking at this is that often when we become an 'expert', particularly when we've had an amazing program, we created incredible experiences or amazing UX, we had incredible results with that in terms of output, that in itself restricts us in this new world as well.

There was an economist, Thorstein Veblen, who introduced this concept of trained incapacity. Particularly people who are very, very successful in their roles can't see the change that is coming up all around them. It blindsides them. And often very, very successful people are in that space.

Laura Overton:

And I think sometimes, we can either be really self-critical, Seb, as you just mentioned earlier or we can be very over confident and it's our ability to be able to change. And I think when we're looking at L&D capabilities, it's not just about the skills, is it? It's also about the capacity and the environment that we have in order to deliver those skills. Some people's times are reduced, we haven't got location anymore. So our capacity potentially is being restricted in some ways and equally, it's being increased in others because of the virtual environment. And I'm just wondering whether the constraints on our environments right now, do you think that they have made a difference to the skills that are surfacing, the skills that are needed or the skills that are important? Michelle.

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Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, yes is the short answer for obvious reasons because some of the approaches that we've used for delivering learning in the past, and I'm talking about the recent past, are no longer available to us. And Laura, I suspect you'd be familiar with the last Emerald Works Research Report which of course Towards Maturity has been renamed, they're part of Emerald Works now. The last benchmark report showing that 55% of learning delivery in organizations were still happening in classrooms at the start of 2020 which is mind blowing.

Laura Overton:

It might be slightly different this year!

Michelle Ockers:

I think it's going to be a lot different this year. But, again, it's not all about just going to virtual classrooms and going to content. And I'll give you two examples. Seb was saying earlier, his strategy hasn't had to change much and they were really well positioned because they'd already thought through with smart digital strategy for dealing with the impact of COVID. Two great examples which people can find out more about in Learning Uncut Episodes. Deciem is one great example where they had a very strong digital strategy with a focus on connection and community. And Reece who are an Australian-based plumbing retail chain. And they did a lot of work last year, using a human-centered design approach to really rethink their strategy and to adopt a very strong digital approach which emphasizes self-direction and a really broad range of learning experiences supported by digital, not just content. Content's only 25% of their digital strategy.

Michelle Ockers (34:56):

And again, talking to Gareth Killeen from Reece whose catchup episode, his What Happened Next episode is out on the 11th of August, they barely noticed any difference because they were so well positioned with what they'd already done. But not all organizations have been. Between Seb's organization and those two, that's an example of one type of organization that was well positioned because they made changes before it was absolutely essential and they had no option but to make change. I think there was a second type of organization or learning and development function who had been chipping away at change for some time, trying to build a skill set, trying to get engagement to shift strategy and have struggled a bit with it. They've kind of gone, "Fantastic, now the barriers have dropped, our stakeholders are more open, we can get on with changes." But because they haven't had that opportunity to learn through experience and get the capability and skill set in place, they are playing catch up now to build the skill set that they need to do the work, they can progress with shifting strategy.

Michelle Ockers:

And then there's the third group who were just completely blindsided and were very stuck and I think have spent a lot of time trying to figure out what do we do? We're just maybe starting to look for an opportunity to build some skills and to make some changes now. And some of them, honestly, I think are still struggling. So I hope that answers your question, Laura. That was a bit of a long-winded approach.

Laura Overton:

No, it does, absolutely because the whole concept of capability, I love this definition, 'it's the power to generate an outcome with the capacity and the skill and ability that's available to you'. And I think, Seb, that is something that you've been talking about. Let's focus on the outcome and let's harness the environments around us. And some are and some aren't,

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Michelle, as you just mentioned. Let's harness that environment around us to build capability and accelerate capability within our teams.

Laura Overton:

Seb, you talked a little bit about how you've done that with your team. Your journey, you haven't just been building up knowledge, you've been doing stuff, haven't you? You've been building your muscle in this area as well and I just wonder if you've got any practical advice for our learning leaders and practitioners out there about how do we build that capability, the power to use these skills to drive outcomes?

Seb Tindall:

Yeah, it's probably worth me saying that we weren't preparing for a pandemic and there were certainly times when I was sitting there, thinking, "We've delivered 30 digital projects in a row. That's probably wrong. That is too far in one direction." So I certainly don't want to sit here and say that we've been the perfect case study over the last six months. But I do feel that talking about and starting with those metrics that we discussed around effectiveness over input, what we've challenged our T&D specialists is almost have a federal model and say, "Your responsibility is you have those KPIs, you have to drive the minutes down and you have to drive the retrospective output up. So go and find value within our business because when we sit down at the end of a month, you're going to have to prove that you have contributed to our departments or KPIs." And it was really uncomfortable to begin with. But what I found was that people would come back with the inspiration. They would sit in front of me and they have done things that I would have never thought of in a million years and I remember there is someone in my team who was fresh out of college, he'd been working in our contact centre for about a year and I was talking through this approach. And I said, "Go away and find some value. I'll give you some projects but first, I just want to see what you do for a month."

Seb Tindall:

And he'd gone into our phone team and he'd said this has been a problem for such a period of time, we weren't telling the customer about this particular thing. So I just changed the message, the automated message on the system.

And I was like, "That's not our job, mate, what are you doing?" And he said, "Well, yeah, but that was the project I was working on and it's fixed the problem." And I just went, "Okay. That's not bad."

And I started to realize that as long as you're controlled in sending people off to go and find value and push the right metrics, people will do far better things than I could ever think of in my head and all you got to do is try and formulate it into some form of best practice approach that you can almost franchise out to new starters. It becomes really inspirational.

Seb Tindall:

I remember it, it really helped me getting my head around it because I spent a week with our phone team and a lot of our staff are based on the phone, based in South Africa and based in the UK. And we realized that you could make the phone system just ask someone a quick question and they can answer it and then you would get the results instantly to the point where I can sort of sit in a meeting and they'll say, "Our staff don't know about this." And I can say, "Well, you can put your money where your mouth is. If you give me 100 quid, we'll email everyone and say, 'Win an Amazon voucher if you get this right and drawn out of a hat.'"

Seb Tindall:



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They answer the question and by the end of the meeting, I can tell you if your staff actually know that or not. But I think some of these things are purely from experimentation and saying to people, "As long as you drive the right metrics, the way in which you do it is completely up to you." We'll always sense check but all these people from different backgrounds have got so many different ideas that their DNA will be woven through our team approach for prosperity because they deserve the credit for it and they thought of it and I would never have done it. So I think to be honest with you, that federal model for us has done wonders.

Laura Overton:

And I think what it also does is my colleague Jos Arets talks about success actually breeds motivation. If someone is successful in a particular job and that success that your individuals have by looking at a different example or a different fix to the problem that's been identified, that then inspires other people to be able to do things as well. Michelle, have you got a quick example of how we can perhaps start to build that capability muscle as well?

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. And it's about seeing our role more broadly. I come from a military background. So I had 16 years in the Air force at the start of my career. And when we talked about military capability, it meant something very different to how we use it in learning and development. And I was perplexed for several years after moving from the military into commercial organizations and people kept talking about, "I'm a capability manager." And I'm like, "Well, you look like you're just doing training or designing courses." Capability is about, as Seb says, about an outcome. In the military, it's about being able to project a force to do a certain type of mission. So it's not just about people and skills. It's about equipment, it's about process, it's much broader. So, my sort of takeout from that is to be able to work in this more integrated way and not lock ourselves into looking for learning solutions to fix problems or to improve performance and getting really good at building relationships across the business with other people who might think you're treading on their toes. And I've seen this happen.

Michelle Ockers:

It's happening less with OD teams because there has been some infighting, I've seen in big organizations between OD teams who want to own culture building for instance or talent management and then there's all these fights between who owns what leadership development programs. But they are so tightly bound. Operational effectiveness or continuous improvement teams. You run a risk of then saying, "Well, that performance consulting workshop you ran, that looks a lot like our process improvement workshops. You shouldn't have done that." So I think it's about getting really tightly integrated across your organization. That was something certainly when I worked at Coca Cola Amatil, I did a lot of work with the operational effectiveness team and we went in together to look at problems together to do the performance consulting piece and then decided what role, if any, the learning team had as part of the fix on that or whether someone else needed to go and do something first.

Laura Overton:

I think that's such a good example of actually breaking down the silos and we can emerge stronger as a learning function, recognizing that COVID has taken away quite a lot of silos from us. And that gives us an opportunity to be able to work in new and fresh ways. But it does also require a skill, certainly in the experience that I've seen working through with the Tulsa team. We all are still navigating quite a complex environment. And that requires perhaps a little bit of system, a bit of methodology that is needed there. And Seb, you're building that and you're sharing that, you've just described that.

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Laura Overton:

And certainly, we found by working with organizations, when you have a systematic approach to uncovering the requirements and to be able to architect the right types of performance solutions, rather than learning first solutions.

Michelle Ockers:

It's all about change at the end of the day which is something-

Laura Overton:

And it's also about creating common language and Seb, you mentioned this before about starting to share common language and having a system and a process to be able to do that.

Laura Overton (45:16):

This conversation could go on, I know, forever. But, I'm sure it will on social media. But, to close off, what would your recommendation, Seb, be for us as an industry. We've been asking all of our guests, what would you recommend that we stop as L&D, start and accelerate in this space?

Seb Tindall:

I think there is some great professionals out there that I've worked with. I honestly think stop thinking that L&D is required by every business. I think it's a bit of a mistake but it's also a seminal moment for us to say, "People will endure without L&D departments." The ones that have made L&D departments redundant will not necessarily go under. So, you have to take what you can from that scenario. I think in terms of starting, I think experimentation, for me, with other departments is a fantastic thing to do. Because of the great minds here, you have unique access to all of the support functions and when you're in a project, you're quite often where the rubber meets the road. You're there to deliver that change. You can use and you can take lots of different things of all those individuals that are helping in that project. It's really helped us and the best things that I've implemented in terms of L&D, I'll be quite open with it, I've probably stolen them at some juncture from other departments.

Seb Tindall:

So, start doing that now, I think. And in terms of acceleration. I honestly feel, and I'm not saying I'm perfect in this place, but start seeing your own department as a business. And I think that it sounds like a really cliché thing to say and we could hark back to the example, but if you're selling one product and that's all you're selling, that leaves you in a very precarious position. And if you start to really diversify your product offering, you're going to make yourself far more able to deal with some of the disruptions that have been happening over the last few months. And I genuinely hope that most L&D departments survive because with the great minds in the industry, I think they probably are going to do some fantastic things and hopefully, they're willing to share them. But I think for me it's that commercial attitude.

Laura Overton (47:28):

Thank you. And Michelle, stop, start and accelerate?

Michelle Ockers:

So, I think in terms of stop, stop holding on to control of learning, find ways to enable rather than having to put you in the middle of it because it's going to increase your capacity and

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ability to make an impact, no end. If you can focus your efforts in the right way and help other people to get on with the learning, even without you if you're not needed, and stop limiting our view of what's possible and the aspirations to make big shifts in how we work. I think in terms of start, something we didn't talk a lot about but starting to adopt more continuous learning approaches for our own development, especially building and engaging with an external network online. I know that for those of us who are probably most of our listeners are people who are engaged with external networks but still, in many of the big organizations in particular that I work with, people don't spend enough time looking outside of their own organizational boundaries or outside of the L&D domain to learn more about approaches that could work, practices, case studies, examples.

Michelle Ockers:

So start getting out, looking out and discovering more about what's out there that you could adapt. And I think in terms of accelerate, two things. One is accelerate how you're creating strong partnerships, both across the organization and externally with providers and partners. And also accelerate building and effectively blending skills to do with digital and technology as well as human-centered design. So it's not just about the tech. So that would be my ... I probably got six in there rather than three, Laura, but there you go.

Laura Overton:

No, it's your podcast, Michelle. I guess you can have as many as you like.

Seb Tindall:

You can do what you want.

Laura Overton:

But, guys, thank you so much. So practical, so powerful, and showing us that learning is critical for us to come out of this new disruption environment. Whether we're a department or not, it doesn't give us any excuse not to build our own strength, our own capabilities and look to how we add value back into the organization and you've inspired us as an audience of listeners today to do that. And I just want to, on their behalf, say thank you to you guys.

Seb Tindall:

Thank you.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you, Laura.

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