

**LEARNING UNCUT EPISODE 4:  
RE-THINKING CUSTOMER SERVICE LEARNING – DENISE MYERSON**

KAREN MOLONEY: Hi everybody and welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut. I'm Karen Moloney.

MICHELLE OCKERS: And I'm Michelle Ockers.

KAREN MOLONEY: And, today we're talking to Denise Meyerson who's the founder and CEO of the Focused Learning Group. Welcome Denise.

DENISE MYERSON: Thank you and great to be on.

KAREN MOLONEY: We're excited about this one. You've got a great story to tell us today about the use of gamification and improvisation to turn around a significant business challenge. Can you tell us about the situation the client was in when they approached you for help?

DENISE MYERSON: Okay, I think the clients had reached the end of their tether. I think that's the right way of saying it and I'm sure that people listening won't be unfamiliar with some of the challenges they were facing. It was a situation where they had a 60% turnover of staff, sales were down, people weren't talking to each other, just you get that general feeling in the team without even having to do a climate survey, that people aren't happy.

When they went into look at various things in their suggestion box, you know, companies put up. A suggestion box is a great way of, they think, of getting good ideas in. They found that they were old tomato sauce sachets, and some serviette, and people's

KAREN MOLONEY: That's not constructive!

DENISE MYERSON: Exactly.

MICHELLE OCKERS: It's feedback of a sort though isn't it?

KAREN MOLONEY: It is.

DENISE MYERSON: It is, precisely.

KAREN MOLONEY: Not the kind you really want though.

DENISE MYERSON: No, so when we approached them I think they had reached the point of having tried a lot of different things. They're trying through restructure to refocus on roles and it's not to say they hadn't done any training at all because they do have quite a good customer service training program so the team members do go through that as well so it's not as though they're just throwing people cold

out onto the floor and hoping that they cope. They had tried various initiatives which obviously hadn't led to the kind of outcomes that they needed as a business.

MICHELLE OCKERS: This is, I think you've alluded to, this was a sales environment.

DENISE MYERSON: Yes, retail, look, we know retail isn't exactly doing very well at the moment but nonetheless it didn't have to be as bad as it was and where they're based is also highly competitive environment with their competitor almost staring directly at them every day which I find quite disconcerting because as we know in learning and development not all providers are that friendly towards each other which

KAREN MOLONEY: No!

DENISE MYERSON: Yeah, which in a way is good because you want the feeling of competition but having, but you can imagine, sitting in an office and looking right at your competitor every single day is quite confronting.

MICHELLE OCKERS: Yeah, so apart from the obvious indicators you talked about from things you can look, see, feel, touch going on around you to indicate that there were some challenges in this environment, being a sales environment there would be some metrics that you could be tracking as well and I understand the impact the approaches that you used were quite rapid and quite substantial so I think before we get into what did you do, it's worth sharing this upfront so the listeners understand how powerful this change was and it'll prick their attention I think. What was the situation 120 days after the gamified approach was launched?

DENISE MYERSON: After it was launched and thanks for jumping straight to the outcome because I agree with you that it was so impactful, is that sales targets that hadn't been achieved in the past two years were suddenly being achieved and stretch targets that hadn't been achieved or hadn't even been dreamt of were being hit so for the first time you started seeing this immense turnaround in a business that previously just had been at the lower end of the scale and really struggling along to achieve the numbers and as we know in retail, the numbers are everything.

KAREN MOLONEY: So thinking about the actual solution, can you just give us an overview of the solution that you implemented and the kinds of activities that you were using with the team?

DENISE MYERSON: What was interesting is that we approached the learning and development manager who had been working in the business for quite a while, really experienced, and she's so open to new and different ways of doing things. She still needed to convince, as we all are very familiar with, other people and other stakeholders, but I think because what we were suggesting was quite radical and because it hadn't been tried before she maybe approached it with a little bit

of trepidation, which you can't blame her for and I think when the operations and the management team saw this as being something different, let's give it a go, it's not as though it's going to break any kind of budget. It's worth having a try so right from the work go, when you've got buying from the senior management team, when there's a bit of excitement of "let's try something different, let's go at it in a different way", that already creates the right kind of context for something like this to work because what we were suggesting to them was that we go very much into a gamified approach and that we use tools and techniques that hadn't been tried in the business previously.

That sounds nice and easy to say it on a podcast. When you're actually in the situation and you actually have to implement something very different you can imagine it's not as peachy and rosy as we're describing it right now.

KAREN MOLONEY: No, and I assume a big part of that, I mean, obviously prior to this program, like you say, people have been used to L&D rolling out learning to them. It's like "come on a customer service training program where we tell you how to behave." This is quite a different approach so can you just talk us about the process you went through for up-skilling and kind of tooling up the managers and leaders to be able to actually run the program?

DENISE MYERSON: What the program is based off is that instead of the Training or the HR people always coming in to deliver sessions, the team leaders, the supervisors themselves, were going to become, I wouldn't say fully-fledged, Certificate IV, trained facilitators but they would be able to facilitate very basic types of games, activities, interactive exercises with their teams. For example, at the start of a shift, or during the quiet time in a shift, or at the end of a shift, they would suddenly be a whole range of what we called 'What the Duck' activities so it was originally based off Lego and using the infamous or famous Lego duck as a metaphor for how they feel today, what their goal is for today and a whole range of different activities but all of them simple, all of them with very detailed instructions and all of them that an untrained facilitator could run, and brief, and debrief.

MICHELLE OCKERS: Right.

DENISE MYERSON: We created a large toolkit, in fact I'm on the way to the client shortly because I'm sure they need more to top up the toolkit, that had every single possible resource that they needed in order to be able to deliver these very short activities which are all based around creating energy in the team, giving people a bit of passion, making their body language happy. We all know that if we've got a great start to the day and there's been a bit of movement, and something really exciting we're more likely to go out onto the sales floor and demonstrate that to customers without being told to do that.

The managers themselves became role models of these activities which included quite a bit of improvisation. I wish I did have the video on now. If you could picture someone picking up an imaginary Samurai sword, holding it over

their heads and throwing it to somebody else across the room and then that person catching it and slaying somebody who's standing next to them and you can see that it's active, it's fun, it's different, it's giving people an idea of you can use your body, you can have natural warmth. You too can be a leader and you can think on your feet. You don't have to wait for instructions.

KAREN MOLONEY: Yeah, how did the, because this all again is quite a different thing for the managers in terms of them being responsible for running these things, how was that received? How did they feel about being in that position?

DENISE MYERSON: When they saw that their senior managers were doing it as well, it does make a difference, and possibly because they had tried so many other ways of doing this and it hadn't worked, there was a very strong openness to giving it a go so maybe they don't brief and maybe they don't brief each activity precisely. It doesn't really matter and the team itself is now so used to these things happening our challenge right now is how do we integrate this and make this part of business as usual and also keep it new and refresh.

KAREN MOLONEY: Yes, that was one of my questions actually - how do you keep the activities fresh when you're doing these on such a regular basis? Is there a process for that or are we still working that out?

DENISE MYERSON: We're working that out and we're just inventing them as we go and you know what? The team leaders are inventing their own now so once they got the feel of it they start creating their own. They developed a fabulous one which I mean I just absolutely love if I could just quickly share that.

It was coming towards Chinese New Year. They wanted something different so they just opened up the suggestion box again which was overflowing with ideas, had a competition, who's got the best idea of what we should do for Chinese New Year. They came up with these great ideas around dragons, and violinists, and I don't know what, it was all, and they chose some winning ideas, awarded prizes and then because everyone had contributed to these ideas, they were so happy to carry their power. Sales, to quote them, that day were astronomical. Competitors even came across to see what was going on, forgot to man their own store. It was...

KAREN MOLONEY: Oh my gosh! So let's leap back to the, just thinking about like that so up skilling the managers because we talked about the toolkits and things that you prepared for them and I think the nice thing about this solution is that it's a simple one. Like you say, you don't need a Cert IV in facilitation to be able to actually run these things. What was the process for actually doing that? Was that something that you guys sort of did train the trainer type things? Did the kits come with an instruction manual? How did that work?

DENISE MYERSON: Both, and what was fascinating to me is because I've run train the trainer for so many years, I always assume you're going to be training someone who will in

turn train and yet you can do train the team leader just as effectively because people, if it's simple and if there are the instructions, and if they practice this a little bit and get a bit of feedback and build their confidence they are up and on their way. We're not talking about facilitating some huge conflicts, management situations. We're just talking about really simple stuff. Some of the things are so simple it's just throwing balloons up in the air and some of them are more detailed with holding roses and handing out potatoes, that's the only thing that doesn't come in the kit.

KAREN MOLONEY: Need fresh potatoes obviously.

DENISE MYERSON: Yes.

KAREN MOLONEY: How and where do they run these activities? A lot of this obviously is about employee energy, and morale, and performance, and things like that so are the activities run in response to different conditions, or a schedule, or is it at the start of every shift? How does that work?

DENISE MYERSON: It's normally at the start of a shift and it could be something really simple or it could just be one of the bigger activities which are being saved for occasions like Valentine's Day or when a particular project has concluded but some of the others you can just do standing up in a circle. Anyone can find a space for a circle and people standing up. It's not as though it's ultra-sophisticated although we do give them all the different tools and some of it just revolves around product knowledge because the greater your product knowledge, obviously, the more you'll tend to sell. So it could be quizzes, it could be who's got the answers, or go to some kind of a crossword puzzle together. You can go and find the ingredients so it's a bit of a treasure hunt during the day to list all the ingredients of some of the items that are on sale so instead of just saying "Here's a list of all the things you have to memorise about this product", it's transformed into a game.

KAREN MOLONEY: Okay, that's really cool. Just thinking, well, we've touched briefly on the idea about, you know, keeping activities fresh. I'm just thinking with something like this which is really high energy, is there a danger that the novelty could wear off at some point because we see everybody's quite engaged with this way of doing things right now but do you think that's sustainable long-term?

DENISE MYERSON: This certainly could be. I think though when it becomes so much part of business as usual it becomes embedded into the culture so that's what people anticipate is going to happen at the start of the shift and I think that if it doesn't happen that's when they'll be feeling short changed. There's so many ways of twisting the one activity and even asking people within the team to develop their own and not just the team leader, that if 'that's just how we work around here' I don't think it will ever go sterile.

KAREN MOLONEY: Okay, thank you.

DENISE MYERSON: As we know there's a never-ending supply of activities.

KAREN MOLONEY: Yeah, especially with us creative heads!

MICHELLE OCKERS: Yeah, Denise, you just used a term then that really peaked my interest and that is the "that's just how we work around here" and as you've been talking about the energy levels, the freshness of reasoning these activities it made me wonder what impact this has ahead on just the general climate and the way people are interacting, the way they're working whether there's some sort of spillover effect there and whether it's shifting things on a day-to-day basis?

DENISE MYERSON: Yes, at the moment it's anecdotal evidence because they haven't conducted their next climate survey so you'll find people saying things like "Oh my gosh, I've had the best day here. I don't even want to go home." Whereas, before it was 5:01 and out the door so there's definitely that kind of shift; "I feel like this is more my home. I feel like I belong here. I can notice the changes. I can see that you care about me" so that type of feedback is coming through quite strongly and eventually it will come the point where it will need to be demonstrated in a formal survey as well.

MICHELLE OCKERS: Yeah and with success of the program I understand there's talk of the company rolling it globally.

DENISE MYERSON: Please!

MICHELLE OCKERS: Yeah, is that the case?

DENISE MYERSON: We'd love it. It would be really exciting for us if there were others. It's being rolled out slowly as they go but if we could get this into other places, wow, we'd really be over the moon. Great case study.

MICHELLE OCKERS: When you talk about rolling it out to different countries are you envisioning there'd be any cross-cultural challenges that you would have to address and how they could be handled?

DENISE MYERSON: That's a bridge. Maybe I'll be asking your listeners for some help.

KAREN MOLONEY: We have a fabulous community. I'm sure they can help.

DENISE MYERSON: Sure, because they are challenges. We've trained previously in various Asian countries and it is different. I mean, we've used our Lego Serious Play methodology there and it is a bit different in terms of who speaks, when they speak, how they speak, and that we would certainly need to be very sensitive to that.

MICHELLE OCKERS: Yes, I'm even imagining, within Australia for instance, I'm thinking about some of the groups I've worked with before, engineers for instance, people

maintaining aircraft, maintaining production equipment, very different in terms of the characteristics and the environment they work in versus a retail or sales environment. Do you think that this approach, this gamified approach, could translate well into those kind of contexts or do you think it might need to be adjusted?

DENISE MYERSON: Look, I'm hoping that there won't be too much adjustment. Our experience has been that when we've delivered, facilitated sessions using the Lego Serious Play methodology, this has made absolutely no difference. It made no difference if the person was in an industrial kind of environment, whether they were the Chairman of the Board. People got involved and started through the play. I think the play is where, you know, it's a great leveler because your hands are moving, your mouth is moving, you're telling stories. You're getting on with things and I think that's what, no matter what culture you're from and even different levels of disability we've even seen in these sessions, just they get into it because you start getting into flow so although this sounds very much just fun, fun, fun and play it's certainly based off some substantial research and theory around why play is so good and why it moves people into flow so well and the more they're in flow, obviously, the more engaged they feel.

MICHELLE OCKERS: Yeah and it sounds like we need to make sure here that we're not letting our own assumptions about people get in the way of things

DENISE MYERSON: 100% because I've certainly seen and I've seen engineers stand up and do the most incredible improvisations. I don't want to say that they would be totally engaged when I've seen with my own eyes them being completely involved.

KAREN MOLONEY: Okay, so Denise, in regards to trends in L&D, you commented in preparation for today's discussion that you're seeing improvisation coming up recently at a lot of conferences. Can you just give us maybe what you're seeing and why you think it's being talked about?

DENISE MYERSON: It's just quite amazing I must say because I attended a conference earlier this year in Atlanta and on the main stage they had a whole improvisation happening showing us the front end of a production and then the back end. We then went into a smaller workshop where we workshopped through improvisation and on the main stage within the expo area there was a whole other kind of improvisation happening so if you didn't notice that improvisation was a key theme in this training conference you would seriously need to have had your head in the sand. I think that one of the reasons that this is becoming a lot more prevalent is because we need leaders and we need people within our teams that can think on their feet that can be adaptable. We hear "You've gotta be adaptable. You've gotta be resilient. You need to be flexible. You've gotta be agile" but how and the how is through improvisation.

KAREN MOLONEY: Yes, and the how is a big reason why we're doing these podcasts to help people actually start doing something. It's not just about "this is what we should be doing." It's the, "this is how". Okay, so if people are interested in finding out

more about improvisation as a tool for learning. Are there any resources that you can suggest for them to follow-up with?

DENISE MYERSON: You know, I'm sure that if they go to those places that train theater sports they would be able to gain some skills there but I must say I haven't really found anyone in Australia. We were trained by a dear friend, Russ Schoen from FourSight and so, in fact he's coming to Australia in a couple of weeks, that he's really quite a guru in the sense of placing this into an organisational context, not just for fun or for an audience.

KAREN MOLONEY: Okay, that's really useful and it's another one of those things again, isn't it? It's about a theme that's coming up a lot in the podcast when we're talking to people is around looking outside of L&D for inspiration.

DENISE MYERSON: Exactly, love that, yeah.

KAREN MOLONEY: That's a great one. I think, so to wrap up. Can you share with us what the biggest thing is that you do for your own, professional development?

DENISE MYERSON: Wow, I travel the world. For me, I try to find conferences that don't cost an arm and a leg. Could be going and attending summits, workshops, learning events. I try to do at least one innovation conference a year. That is what keeps me going and gives me the inspiration for some of the ideas that start emerging.

KAREN MOLONEY: Awesome, thank you. If anybody wants to get in touch with you to find out more about this project, or your thoughts on improvisation, what's the best way for them to do that? Would it be LinkedIn or Twitter?

DENISE MYERSON: Yeah, LinkedIn would be fabulous or even an email. I can certainly, or our website

KAREN MOLONEY: We'll pop a link to your LinkedIn profile on your website so people can have a look.

DENISE MYERSON: That's great.

KAREN MOLONEY: Actually just before we go, I'm really intrigued by this idea of improvisation because I'm not a very spontaneous person. Is there a way we can do a quick exercise just to give people an idea of one of those kinds of activities?

DENISE MYERSON: Absolutely, so what we're going to do is do one called Swedish Storytelling.

KAREN MOLONEY: Okay.

DENISE MYERSON: You can imagine that normally it would go around a lightly larger group but we'll just do it as the two of us so what happens is I say a word then you say the next one so that it starts forming a sentence.

KAREN MOLONEY: Okay.

DENISE MYERSON: I'll start off by saying Karen, and then you give the next word.

KAREN MOLONEY: Is.

DENISE MYERSON: A.

KAREN MOLONEY: Podcast.

DENISE MYERSON: Expert.

KAREN MOLONEY: Hopefully.

DENISE MYERSON: She.

KAREN MOLONEY: Is.

DENISE MYERSON: Going.

KAREN MOLONEY: To.

DENISE MYERSON: Learn.

KAREN MOLONEY: So much.

DENISE MYERSON: From her audience, and so on it goes but it really, that's a really basic one just to get people going and you have a good laugh if they dry up and somebody else chips in but it's very much around the principles of 'yes and', and giving a gift to someone so that they can continue and not take them down a dead end.

KAREN MOLONEY: That's awesome, thank you for that and thank you for everything that you shared with us in this session today.

DENISE MYERSON: Great, thank you.

KAREN MOLONEY: It's lots of interesting stuff to follow-up with there but yeah, appreciate your time Denise, thank you.

DENISE MYERSON: Thank you.