

LEARNING UNCUT EPISODE 23

CREATING A ROCK STAR L&D BRAND – ALEXANDRA LEDERER

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

Michelle Ockers: and I'm Michelle Ockers.

Karen Moloney: Today we're talking to Alexandra Lederer, who's the L&D manager at Ovolo hotels. Welcome Alex.

Alex Lederer: Hello.

Karen Moloney: Ovolo hotels are a small boutique chain of hotels in Australia and Hong Kong and they're disrupting the hotel industry by doing things differently. Alex joined Ovolo in May 2017 with a blank sheet to create a new L&D function. I'm going to hand over to Michelle to find out what she did.

Michelle Ockers: Hey Alex, tell us a little bit about Ovolo, who they are and what they're trying to do in the hotel industry.

Alex Lederer: Sure. Well, first of all, thanks for having us and the opportunity to share our journey. We are a hotel chain which has been created by a visionary entrepreneur, Girish Jhunjhnuwala. He used to be a businessman in the trade of watches and he was not really happy with the experience he had when travelling as a businessman. One day he decided he's gonna create the hotel that he would have dreamt of staying in as a businessperson.

The way we do things is very much like treat others like you would like to be treated. We always have in mind when we are designing a guest experience or an employee experience, how we would have dreamed to receive it ourselves. This is how we do things at Ovolo. We have every [thing in the room is] free, free mini bar, free Wifi, free access to the happy hour, free lollies, free gimmicks. Because at the end of the day, why would you need to pay for water? Our owner always says our hotel room is not a convenience store. We do things very, very different to the rest of the hospitality industry. We love to just turn anything upside down on its head and make a journey fabulous, unconventional and not boring.

Michelle Ockers: Tell us a little bit about what's happening with growth of the organization size and the team, that sort of contextual information.

Alex Lederer: Sure. When I joined Ovolo, we were three hotels in Australia, two in Sydney and one in Melbourne. Originally the home of Ovolo is in Hong Kong. We had three hotels there at the time. We were six properties in Hong Kong and Australia. Then we had a very sudden growth whereby, in the beginning of this year, we acquired three new properties, more or less all at once. Two in Brisbane and one in Canberra and as well in the same year, we also, developed a new

business concept which is called Mojo Nomad in Hong Kong, which is revisiting the way that we look at backpacking. We're blending co-living and co-working spaces.

We also had opening of new, we call it F&B outlets, but say restaurants. Again, with very disruptive concepts. Really what happened in the context is we ended the year with three hotels and we started the year with six, so we doubled in the time of Christmas, which was our Christmas gift!

Michelle Ockers:

So there's a lot going on in the business and a lot of new kind of concepts, new approaches being introduced as well as growth, different lines of the business opening up. For you sitting there as the learning and development lead, what are some of the key business challenges or opportunities that means you have to be mindful of and work with?

Alex Lederer:

Sure. I think what's really interesting is you can consider that Ovolo we're still forming and storming phase. Because we're never happy with what we have or what we do, we always keep improving. For me what was really interesting is, at one stage it was many properties were already mature, but there was no L&D framework or just a few trending here and there, but not a systematic L&D framework or strategy. On the other hand then we were acquiring properties who would come from a totally different culture from other hotel brands, other massive groups which have very formal, I'm not going to say dinosaur, but very thorough L&D function. Mostly very top down actually in most cases or none at all because we were acquiring new property. For me the challenge was, okay, so first how you establish the base of a solid foundation to prepare for growth whilst at the same time we kind of already storming and forming and storming and trying to norm all of that. It was really interesting to have all these different properties at totally different maturity levels and have to tackle all of that.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, it sounds like really fluid and a real mixed bag from a culture perspective that you were trying to deal with there. You come in, new in the role, new function in Australia, so you kind of starting from scratch, but with all of these differences in backgrounds and expectations from the growing workforce. Where did you start? How do you get going in this situation?

Alex Lederer:

I think for me the thing too is I was new to the hospitality industry. I have no experience in the hospitality industry and I think this was kind of it was a massive, I'm grateful because it was a massive bet from Ovolo's side, but it also shows their way of looking for disruption. Because they thought that, well, if you hire someone, an L&D person from another hotel or hospitality industry, they're just going to do the things that are traditionally done in hospitality. They thought, well, let's just bring someone from outside of the industry to have a different outlook.

For me it was equally enriching because I must say that I always worked mostly in IT for the travel industry, IT for the reproduction, the health industry to say in a nutshell and very, very, very different type of workforce. I remember how

before I thought about, oh yeah, we've got quite a high turnover and when you're joining the world of hospitality, and I'm just gonna talk for ourselves and Australia. I'm not gonna generalize on the other hotels, but just for ourselves.

Our workforce mostly consists of people who are, how do I say, working holiday visa people who come to travel, so they come from overseas. They never worked in hospitality before. They just want to have a bit of money on the side, while as they traveling Australia. Before they do the firm work and they just here for a few months. On the other hand, our second type of people are people who are students who are just working on their diploma and then working in the hotel on the side.

Then for me, I thought, which was really interesting is well, I would say there's four categories. The first is like the working holiday, the transient workforce. Second one, are students, and the third one are actually very, very smart people who come to Australia, highly skilled but don't have the English and so end up working in housekeeping for example because they don't have the English. That's quite a challenge. The fourth category is people who are here for hospitality, trained by hospitality schools. They know the topic. What can you teach them in term of hospitality?

In terms of challenge for me, and then as well, the kind of job is for me, what I find, when you say VUCA, that was VUCA, that is highly volatile, unstable, uncertain, ambiguous type of environment. Because for me, I was not used to having so many people on shift, the shift being created only two weeks before. Then even when you try to go with like a traditional approach of scheduled training, last minute you can be kicked out because someone is renting the room, so you no longer have a room. It just requires a level of resilience and agility, which was an extreme learning for me and very enriching.

So how did I start? Basically I just sit down in the hotel, visit all our properties, realize that also, what's unique about us is that our tagline is every Ovolo is different, each time unique, each time delightful. What our owner, Girish Jhunjhnuwala suffered from when traveling as a businessman was that each time he would go in a different country staying in the same chain, it's the same hotel, it's the same logos, it's the same uniforms, it's the same decoration, the rooms look the same. You don't know if you're in New York and Singapore or in Paris, just your hotel just is the same.

We're fighting sameness, we're looking for uniqueness in everything we do. This is also really important when designing the L&D strategy. I gave it a name, basically I call it the loot bag approach. In our hotels, what we have as part of in your room is a loot bag. A loot bag is a bag of treats that we put for each of our guests. Now the way for me to explain this best to our stakeholders internally is to say, well, you know what? Our loot bag, in each room in each Ovolo hotel, we have a loot bag and it looks the same. It's got the same design and the same brand.

However, what's inside the loot bag differs if you're in Hong Kong, if you're in Sydney, if you're in Melbourne because, each person puts Tim Tams if you're in Australia and then some little Chinese Hong Kong treats when you're in Hong Kong. I say, well the L&D strategy is the loot bag approach. We're gonna try to create consistency but we really want to respect this uniqueness. That was the name of our strategy, the loot bag approach.

Michelle Ockers:

It's really interesting that balance between uniqueness but having some sort of strategy in something that's repeatable and manageable. One of the things you did in the midst of this, is you created a brand. I'm curious like you create a brand but the brand's go to accommodate both the uniqueness but kind of be something that people can relate to. The brand was for the whole of your L&D strategy function. Can you tell us a little bit about why you created a brand?

Alex Lederer:

Yes. Well, for me, I have a background in marketing and wherever I worked in L&D or knowledge management roles or more OD roles, I always thought that I always had a marketing approach to the way I work. Imagine that when you're a marketer and you're trying to market a product, something we start with an I for example, you're gonna look at, who's your customer base, who's your market, you're going to package it, you're gonna make it look sexy, you have a campaign, you brand it. You make it sweet, you launch it right a few weeks before Christmas, all those things.

For me, I always approached my internal functions as if I was a marketer and I've always used my marketing skills and hats for my internal projects. I think for me, what is always important is that people associate the learning with a brand rather than with a person. That for me is the first thing. I don't want the learning to be about Alex, because for many reasons I think it's for sustainability and also that the learning for me, the way I do it is very distributed engaging many stakeholders, a little bit like a dual organization like holacracy. It's not about me, it's not about a function, let's give it a brand so that it can continue even when I leave the organization for example.

Anyway, then for me it was about really looking and what is our culture? How do we define a role? What's our jargon? What are the things that we love? Obviously if you come to our hotels, you're going to see that our founder and owner, Girish Jhunjhnuwala loves music from the 80s. He loves the rockstar from the 80s. He is an art collector. All our properties have artwork, very quirky from the 80s. He's a fan of David Bowie. He's also a DJ. He puts together our own Ovolo playlist on Spotify that we play in our hotels. I went to his office in Hong Kong and in his board room, he's got electric guitar. Basically I thought okay, well, something we got to do is align to the rockstar theme.

Then I really worked with him directly 'cause he's an extremely visionary leader and he's really got a sense of packaging and an eye for beauty and I think, which is incredible. Worked with him actually closely indirect to say, "Hey Girish, we want to give a brand to L&D, these are a couple of suggestions for our brand." We had several ones, but it was all around the rock and roll, so it was all around

music from the 80s. We had ABC by The Jackson 5. We had, you name it. Start me up, whatever from the Rolling Stones. Anyway, that kind of thing.

Names from the 80s, 80s songs and then we came up with rock because we thought that rock is actually, we can use it really to say, "Hey, we're here to help you rock at your job. Rock as a leader." We came up, and Girish actually came up with the acronym ROCK and we decided to make it an acronym, which is the Rebels Own Knowledge and Creativity. Then from then on, that's it, it was started. I just took the program, took it off.

Karen Moloney:

We're going to dig a bit more into the program itself in a minute, but I'm still interested because it's quite common in our industry to be an L&D department of one. You were taken on to start this function, but you weren't given a team of people. Can you just talk about how you went about getting the project moving and who you involved?

Alex Lederer:

Yes, I started as a team of one, but then probably nine months into the job I managed to get someone in the team in Hong Kong. It's actually a team of two, one in Hong Kong, one in Australia. Then for me, so for the branding of ROCK, this is work I done myself with an external creative agency, which was amazing. Basically between the two of us, we worked together on all the visuals of the brand. That's one question.

The second question is more around how did I work around to get things done? Once I got kind of, well in parallel to doing that, for me, L&D has got two words, learning and development. Very often we only do the L because we just get external trainers to come in and that's it. That's the only thing that you do is just the learning. For me, what's really important I think is that, in my approach, I blend my experience as a knowledge manager and I have a massive tendency to look at what are the best practices, who are the experts, who is great at doing something, which is a little bit, it's knowledge management undercover.

But it's also looking at our rock stars, our superstar, our rising stars and those people who are like amazing, but for which we don't have a lot of career development for them. People come to me and say, "Oh Alex, your job is amazing, do you have a job for me in L&D?" I'm like, well, hang on, I have no budget so I can't hire you. I reproduced the framework to say, "Okay, so what are we going to do is we're gonna look at those people who are like our rock stars, make sure that we give them something for them to grow and to develop so that we can retain them so we can keep them engaged and retain them."

Then what I did, I created team ROCK and team rock being like one person from each property to join the team and be like the L&D function for that property, but more in a voluntary basis in really like kind of a holacracy style.

- Karen Moloney: Given that those people are not L&D trained, if you like, what needed to happen in terms of mindset shift really to get them on board with you and how you think in terms of L&D?
- Alex Lederer: I think it all starts with choosing the right people as always even internally. You just hire people with the mindset of, they were first really good at their job. They could take on more than they currently had and then they had this intrinsic passion to help others, to care about others, to share the knowledge. They were intrinsically motivated people. We went through an internal job posting and looking for volunteers. They were selected as well by their general managers and by myself of course.
- Alex Lederer: After the selection, what we did is we worked with a great partner to create a train the trainer program where we had everyone on board. This is just a little bit more traditional, train the trainer. Although it was awesome because we had an awesome facilitator, then basically after that it's a lot of coaching of them and keeping an eye and seeing how they go.
- Karen Moloney: Just thinking about sustainability for the organization, that approach is a good one I think in terms of, sort of disseminating the L&D responsibility and functionality out into the business. Was that a deliberate move on your part to be able to hand that over to the business? For the business to own it 'cause it's not the responsibility of L&D as such for people's learning and development, it's the business's responsibility.
- Alex Lederer: Exactly. Absolutely. For me, that's providing the D, the development and then from a very selfish personal notes for my own development, if I get stuck in doing everything well I don't develop. I always wanted to grow into more OD role, EVP, a holacracy, anything like that. I also needed to find resources when I didn't have budget, so I needed to find a smart way to just operate, so I could grow and do those other projects. For my own learning and my own development, I needed to empower more people. Create, I call it an army, create myself an army. Does that makes sense?
- Michelle Ockers: Mm-hmm.
- Alex Lederer: Then it's really interesting 'cause for me, I had my mentor back in France, and she always said to me, you know Alex, a team is like an elevator. If you rise, I rise with you. For me that's it. It's if I got these people to grow, I would grow with them, so we all grow together and we all learn and grow and develop together. For them in L&D space and for me in more OD highly strategic jobs.
- Karen Moloney: Because it's kind of win-win, win. It's great for the employees. It's really good for you 'cause it allows you freedom to move around in the business, but also business continuity for the organization as well. Like you said, you, you built this whole brand and you set this up because so it doesn't rely on Alex. It's team.

Alex Lederer: Exactly. For me, recently, I've been really interested in design thinking and we've been using design thinking to develop our EVP. But for me it's also, the best way. People on the ground have the answers. It's just a matter of asking them and giving them, like we talk autonomy, the mastery, autonomy and purpose. If you give them the autonomy, they have the mastery, most of the time they just a bit of coaching. Suddenly when you open up with trust and you trust them, you're surprised. For me, for example, with this team rock, so what I do is I kind of with team rock, they were responsible amongst other things of all our leadership training, which is pretty for long because it's a very important and strategic topic.

What I love is that each person just twisted it to their own style and came back to me and say, "Hey Alex, I was thinking of doing this, not that." They owned it and it just for me, it's so enriching. Instead of pushing down an approach, I feel so enriched by everyone I work with because they share the insights and like I said, it's win, win, win.

Karen Moloney: Yeah. That's awesome. Thinking about the work in practice now, digging a little bit into the detail, how does that team ROCK approach work in practice? What's a typical employee experience? If I've either joined the company or if I'm there and I'm going to go on a course or whatever it might be, what does that look like with your branding and the whole experience?

Alex Lederer: We really try to do, once we had defined the term ROCK, I thought, okay, let's really give this one like a massive, like, let's just do it all the way. Let's just go branding like all the way.

Karen Moloney: True rock star style.

Alex Lederer: Yeah, rockstar style all the way. Then I think what triggered and I must say it's a difficult ... Sorry, I have to say something first. I've been working in many organizations even though I had quite a lot of autonomy, I think I have never been working in an organization so creative and so disruptive and it was very, very uncomfortable. I think I told you that it was very uncomfortable journey. It took me awhile before I could really unleash and really dig so deep down.

Karen Moloney: It was uncomfortable being uncomfortable.

Alex Lederer: Yes, it was. Eventually one night, a sleepless night, I had an idea. Basically what happened is, we had a brand book released and we were okay, you have to teach your employees about the brand and everything. Initially I had put a workshop together. Then our owner says, Alex, this is boring. I'm like, okay, then I had to refer back to our own brand book and one of our pillar is FUN, Fabulous Unconventional Never boring. I thought, okay, so how am I going to make learning fabulous unconventional and not boring when it's like training about a brand book.

Then I thought again, okay, who are we ? What do we like? We like music, we love rockstar. There's music everywhere, electric guitars, again, our L&D program is called ROCK, what can I do? Then I thought, hang on, one night I got the idea, I'm like, you know what? Also, how can people remember brand pillars? It's like so hard to remember. I thought, well, the best way to remember something is to sing it. That's where it came up. I'm like, let's do our brand training in a karaoke.

The next day I called the owner and I'm like, so I'm actually thinking we going to go into karaoke bar and we're gonna like, pick a song. For each brand pillar, what songs does this make you think? What songs does it remind you? Then go ahead and sing it. Honestly, I was a bit scared to participate. He was like, yeah, okay. That's kind of how it all started. Whenever we had our first launch of our brand group, we had karaoke tours all over Australia and Hong Kong. People dressed up in karaoke and basically in 90 minutes, we would be quite serious about what our brand pillars are.

But then we would sing it. Then also then I'm really interested into neuroscience and neuro leadership and how you open up creativity and you let all the juices flowing is always by dancing and moving. I thought, well hang on, if you do a brainstorming after singing, surely you're better than brainstorming sitting in a boardroom.

Karen Moloney: Great idea.

Alex Lederer: That's what we did. Then the idea was to say, okay, so let's just sing the brand pillar, have lots of fun, wear crazy hats, have a bit of a pizza and a few beers, and now let's brainstorm. How are we going to bring those brand pillars to life? I think then for me afterwards, it opened my own Pandora box of creativity where then I'm like, okay, now I can do this rock and roll. What we did in the journey is, whenever every month we put together, instead of being a calendar, it's actually looks like a poster for a concert. You've got all those shows for the month.

We branded everything into like, "Hey, get a ticket to our show. This is the shows on tour. Our poster we worked to make it really look like a real poster, like a rockstar poster. Then it's not register for our training, but it's like get your ticket to the gig. When they do, we sent them our confirmation email. It really looks like a concert ticket. I even asked for the barcode on the side. Really looked like a concert ticket. Well, hopefully our training, our rockstar feeling, so our sessions are.

Each time we try to make it really, really different. Try to have little or no PowerPoints and in unusual settings. For example, we did a brainstorming for employee delight in a gym, which is an unconventional gym itself. Everyone in pink lycra.

- Karen Moloney: That's a picture to have in your head!
- Alex Lederer: I have pink lycra. Well, the dress code was pink lycra and happy socks. We had an award for the best lycra and happy socks. Basically each time, like how I'm going to make this not boring. Then some attendance list I was thinking, oh my God, attendance list is so boring. We turned it into sign your name in the hall of fame. With the Beatles photo signing autograph and even training certificate, so boring. How can we make not boring? I don't know, you know like when you're a fan of a rockstar, you've got like those badges, Bowie badges, Madonna badges.
- Our training certificate it looks like a badge. Like Bowie or whatever, David Bowie on it and it's part of the Fan Club. It's not certificate, it's called Fan Club. Anyway, really the idea was saying, okay, every little step of the learning journey, how are we going to make it fabulous, unconventional and not boring, which is very fun.
- Karen Moloney: It sounds like you're definitely doing that.
- Alex Lederer: Then the other thing we did was, so our leadership training rock as a leader. We got some help. This I mean, like everything it's always an idea never just comes along. It's always a mix of ideas from everywhere, discussion with people. I have so many people I want to acknowledged and thank for the journey. It's never just one person, it's always a massive team backstage.
- Karen Moloney: Sure.
- Alex Lederer: Also there was an idea from my partner, I must say my husband, sorry. The idea was like it's a rock guitar and rock guitar has six strings plus the tuner at the end of the electric guitar. What it is, is each string is a module, and each module is actually is a theme. We picked a rockstar song. We pick a rockstar and a song for each of the module. Then all the materials are rockstar and that's Kimmy. She's just amazing in the backend, in the background creating those things. For example, we start with 'Into the grove' by Madonna. Of course, 'cause it's about the kickoff of the project in the program and it's all about, 'Start with why' Simon Sinek, etc.
- Our second bite is 'Lean on me,' and it's all about trust because this song talks about trust and it goes on and on with 'Man in the mirror,' obviously from sir Michael Jackson. Talking about if you know yourself better than you're able to understand others and lead others better and on and it goes with rockstars. Each of our learning module, we picked a rockstar which we thought really personify the content that we are about to share. That's it. We just really take it all away.

Michelle Ockers: I just wanted to say I have never smiled so much in a conversation with another leading professional about their work. I think anyone who's listening to this now is going to be sitting there with a big smile on your face.

Alex Lederer: Thank you. I forgot to say then each of our training has a playlist of songs on Spotify. Actually when I did my conference a couple of weeks ago in Melbourne, I thought, how am I going to do a fabulous unconventional and not boring conference. I actually put together a playlist for my conference and it was like the 10 songs for you to just remember, like my conference was 10 songs. See it's kind of like sticking with me now.

Michelle Ockers: Look, I think the big challenge to all our listeners, in fact it's not even a hard challenge, just be inspired by this and take one idea one theme and do it because there were so many great creative ideas in here Alex. I think karaoke bars and jams around Australia, have got a whole new market.

Alex Lederer: Yeah, exactly.

Karen Moloney: I think it's awesome. Music is a massive part of my world. I always learn better when I have music in the background I think it just solidifies what learning should be about. It should be fun, it should be creative, it should inspire people. I find it incredibly inspiring. What were some of your biggest challenges throughout this process?

Alex Lederer For me, I think the biggest challenge is really the volatility of their environment. The issue still in attendance for example. The thing for me again, because I didn't work in hospitality before, so I think for me, for example, before even though I was working with shift workers in a fertility clinic with people on shift and the shift was still very much plan. If you were scheduling a training, say for like in two weeks' time 1:00 PM, most likely people are going to turn up because they were just scheduled accordingly.

For me, my biggest challenge, I find is more attendance to all those are our initiatives because even though you have people's scheduled, if you turn up for a coffee or for a drink, we're never going to turn you down. We're always gonna put our guest first. For me, really, really the biggest challenge is this, is the volatility of their environment. Where we are right now for next year is really, most of those things we've done was mostly face to face and like I said, it was the foundation. Now it's like it was a version 1.0 so now we're going to take it to 2.0 we have acquired an LMS.

We have acquired also, internal social media tool so that we can start blending our content and making sure that even though I'm not a fan of e-learning personally speaking, but then we can still have a blended solution, which we couldn't do last year 'cause we didn't have any systems to support it so that we can still bring like a just in time micro learning to those people who sometimes just can't attend. For me that was if not in terms of stakeholders, honestly

massive fans. Everyone is a massive fun and amazing support from the GMs, the people, the leadership team. It's really the nature of the business makes it. For me, it was my biggest challenge.

Karen Moloney: That's cool. Thinking about the practical side of things, we like to be practical on this podcast and help people try new things. I think there is so much in here, like Michelle said that people can tap into. I really hope it's got those creative cogs whirring. If anybody listening is keen to do more with creating L&D as a brand like this, what would be your takeaway tips to help them get started on that journey?

Alex Lederer: I think make it really your own, so never try to copy. I think for me it's all about trying to make something fit to your culture of your company. The biggest mistake is trying to do like copy, paste or copy, edit, paste. I think for me it's just create your own. Have a whole empathy for your organization. Really listen deeply to what makes your organization so unique, so special. What is so signature about you? What's unique about your people? What is just your culture? Then for me, I worked with their marketing team to make sure we aligned, so our external brand and our internal brand aligned still. We've got this consistency and just I think for me as always start small, try quickly, learn quickly, just give it a shot because it's not risky, there's no risk. It's just fun. It's just about if you don't feel excited, just don't do it. Like, for me, I just couldn't stop doing it. It just kept coming at night and day if it's not like that, just it's you haven't found it.

Michelle Ockers: One final question for you. Could you share with us the biggest thing you do for your own professional development?

Alex Lederer: Well actually, the biggest thing I do for my own professional development started really, really become interested in design thinking and working designing the employee journey around design thinking. I think that's, for me it's been a massive learning and trying to really accept to be uncomfortable and get over my ego and learn and grow.

Michelle Ockers: Just do it. I love the tip about being uncomfortable because it reminds us of what it's like for other people whose learning we're supporting as well. It can be very uncomfortable and if you're not feeling that edge, then maybe you're not putting yourself out there and not in terms of your growth.

Alex Lederer: I agree.

Karen Moloney: We'll put a link to your LinkedIn profile if anybody wants to get in touch with you to find out more about this project. I'm sure you're going to be inundated with LinkedIn requests!

Alex Lederer: Happy to chat!

- Karen Moloney: Thank you so much, Alex, for taking the time to share this with us today. I think it's been one of the most fun episodes we've done so far.
- Michelle Ockers: I think it was fabulous, unconventional and never boring!
- Alex Lederer: Thank you for having us. Thank you so much.
- Michelle Ockers: You're welcome.