LEARNING UNCUT EPISODE 33:
ENABLING PERFORMANCE THROUGH DELIBERATELY DIFFERENT L&D – BETH HALL

Michelle Ockers: Welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut, I'm Michelle Ockers.

Karen Moloney: And I'm Karen Moloney.

Michelle Ockers: And today, we're talking to Beth Hall from Cotton on Group. I saw Beth present at the recent Australian Workplace Learning Conference about the 'deliberately different' approach, that were her words, 'deliberately different approach' to performance and learning at Cotton on Group. Today we're going to dig into what's different and how it works, so welcome, Beth.

Beth Hall: Thank you very much, great to be here, ladies.

Michelle Ockers: Absolute pleasure to have you. Can you please introduce us to Cotton on Group - a little bit about who you are and what you do and who you're doing it for?

Beth Hall: Sure, Cotton on Group is a privately owned business that work out of Geelong in Victoria. We operate retail businesses across seven brands, so you'll know some of our brands, Cotton on, Cotton On Body, Kids, Typo, Factorie, Supré, Rubi and we're in 17 countries across the globe and we have over 20,000 amazing team members that work across our retail business, our distribution centres and in our support centre developing and creating great products.

Michelle Ockers: That's a great Australian business success story, if nothing else, Beth.

Beth Hall: Yes, definitely.

Michelle Ockers: The approach, we want to talk briefly about the approach that your organisation takes to learning. But firstly, what shaped that approach? You know, many things would shape the approach an organisation takes to learning, be it the industry, the type of jobs, the nature of the people who work in the organization, or other factors. Can you please give us a sense of whatever aspects have had the most bearing on the approach to learning at Cotton On?

Beth Hall: Sure, I think the reality is that any winning learning culture comes from an amazing company culture, and we're still privately owned. Our owner is still in the business every day, and he's built and incredible culture that is based on a willingness to fail, a willingness to give things a go, a real energy around rolling up our sleeves and working together to be able to find a solve and deal with anything that comes our way. Our learning culture, therefore shadows that.

                    One of our values is "ever better," which is essentially about continuous improvement and about no matter what it is that we do, we always strive to be better next time. As a value we have... Again, it's a company value, not a learning culture value, is around personal leadership. It's really about taking

charge of your own development, taking charge of your own career, and really owning it. So we're here as a business to facilitate your growth and your career, but the reality is you own your growth and your career. With that kind of feel, is we're taking the culture approach that we have in the business, you know, we talk about fail often, but fail well.

So, if we're going to fail, then we're going to actually have that autopsy, without blame and understand what happened and why it happened in order for us to learn from it, to therefore pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off and go again. So, in terms of the response to your question of where does that great learning culture comes, it comes from our amazing company culture, and we just basically leverage off that to make sure that learning's happening in the right way and in a safe environment where people can grow and develop.

Michelle Ockers: Many people are going to be pretty envious at this stage when you're describing the kind of leadership and organisational culture that you've got to work in, but you've still got to work at it, right, from a learning perspective? It's not that you can just walk in and it's set and forget. So you've got Cotton on Group University, which either you or I may refer to as COG Uni at some point. Can you tell us a little bit about the role of the Uni and your team?

Beth Hall: Yes, definitely, so to your point, culture is something that we work on every day. We talk to our team about everybody is the CEO of culture, and you all own culture, because every behaviour and every interaction, everything that you do on a daily basis, either puts deposits into our culture bank account, or it takes its toll. So, when it comes to Uni as well, in our learning culture, we're really there to facilitate our teams to elevate their critical thinking. We're there to take them places, but they're the ones in the driving seat.

So, learning happens everywhere. It doesn't happen with a team in Geelong, supporting the people in Brazil. We just facilitate the people in Brazil to ask great questions of themselves and ask great questions of others and we give them performance tools to be able to solve business problems. So our role is to enable performance as opposed to learning. I actually want to move away from the term learning altogether to be honest, because the reality is that learning without doing something with that learning is just reading a book and taking no action.

Really, we're about performance and providing performance tools and enabling our leaders and our team members across the globe to elevate their thinking, be curious and try something differently.

Michelle Ockers: Yes, Beth, emphasis on performance, I think comes through loud and strong when you talk about the role of your team in the organisation. One of the things you actually do that is quite different from many learning teams is you've got this strong focus on performance and as part of that, you work a lot with business metrics. You've got an eye on business metrics on an ongoing basis.

Can you tell us about the kind of data that you look at and how you actually use it?

Beth Hall: Yes, sure, and look, I think I ruffled a few feathers at AITD (*Learning Uncut note – Beth is referring to her presentation at the Australian Workplace Learning Conference*), where I said we don't care for learning data, and the reason being is that we care about "so what?" Like what's the performance? When I first joined the group I was having a conversation with one of our leaders and I was saying, "We had this completed, and we had this many people at workshops" and I'm giving him all of this metrics and proof points that, "Hey, we're doing a great job" and he said, "Well, I'm not seeing it out in stores, and I'm not seeing this and I'm not seeing that." He's very much a case of, "So what, Beth? If you can't show me what the output looks like in terms of performance, then what's the point in this conversation?"

So when we think about Uni, and what programs and academies we run, we have business metrics that we look to, to determine whether that program or academy is being successful or not. So, within our induction program, we look at our first year success rate. So, yes, there's an element of recruitment decisions that's associated with that, but equally, if you don't set them up for success in their first three months, then they're not attached to the organisation and they don't stay. So our first year success is the business metric for induction.

When we think about our leadership academy, we know that our leadership academy is delivering to the business when we have ready leaders for internal succession. We look at our internal succession rate and how many times we have to hire outside of the organization for our leadership roles to tell us whether we're growing our own leadership talent or not. We also look at our engagement results across the business. So, a lot of engagement is who I work for, so if we have amazing leaders that create awesome cultures, for our people to perform, then our engagement results will reflect that.

When we look at things like our retail academy, the business metric will be looking at is things like average spend, so are they helping our customers to buy? We also look at our net promoter score, so are customers having a great experience, but are they promoting it to their friends and family? Because if they are, that means that we're delivering great service, and we're delivering great service because or team members are skilled to be able to support the customer.

When we look at fashion academy, which is all of our product roles and our support centre roles, the designer make the product, we'd be looking at things like how often are we recalling products? Because if we're recalling products form our stores, its because they haven't been developed properly, or they are not compliant. That's a skill issue, that's a knowledge issue, so our fashion academy and whether our fashion academy is being successful is how many recalls are we having, what are sales like? If we're selling through our products, it means the customer loves it, if the customer loves it, it means that our

product teams got it right, so we would look at those kinds of measures to ascertain whether that academy is seeing an ROI.

The last program we have is our wellness program, which we're really passionate about, it covers not only the wellness of team members as the whole person, but also it covers mindfulness and their space to perform, and it also covers mental health and creating a psychologically safe environment for our teams. So with wellness, we'd be looking at thing like absenteeism, we'd be looking at things like holiday balance. If we've got a high holiday balance and people aren't taking leaves, we know they're not well, which means we're not in a position where that program is actually making a difference to the business.

So everything we do has to tie back to some form of business success measure, otherwise we challenge ourselves in Uni to go, "Well, why are we doing this? Are we just talking to ourselves, like, is this just something that we want to do, or is it actually solving a business problem?"

Michelle Ockers: Yes, so I got the sense when you were speaking that there's a lot of monitoring, or evaluating the outcomes of what you're doing by using business data. What about in the front end of the process and figuring out where to focus your attention, how do you use data for what many would call the analysis phase?

Beth Hall: Yes, we call it discovery. And in discovery really, we're looking at a wide range of inputs. So we're looking at how the business is performing, from all the business metrics any organization would look at, we're also looking at qualitative data, too. What is the customer telling us, because when we think customer, for Uni, our customer is our team members. So what are they telling us, what are they struggling with, what are their pain points? What's keeping the C-Suite up at night is the qualitative input.

And also we look to industry, so we really want to make sure that we're the disruptors when it comes to learning, to the followers.   We're constantly looking at the Deloitte change reports and any kind of concept. We often look at things outside of the learning industry, to be honest, and we're looking at what technology startups are doing and how they're thinking differently about the way they support people to perform better. Football is always something that we look at, too. We love the Geelong cups and we're associated with that company, so we're always looking at what are they doing around performance and how can we learn from that. So the inputs in our discovery is what do we do, is varying, depending on what it is. Mental health work was an external thing that was really the nudge for us to go, "Hey, this is actually a country issue, this is a global issue, like we need to get ahead of this" as opposed to an internal metric that told us we needed to work on mental health.

Michelle Ockers: Yes, so you're looking quite broadly in discovery, you're looking kind of globally, you're looking at social trends, you're looking at what's happening in your industry, in learning and development, in other domains and then within your

	business as well to decide what sort of areas to focus on solving problems and improving performance for.
Beth Hall:	Yes, definitely. We're looking at the lives of our team members, so our team members are our customers, what is going on in their life, what do they need? We look at different generations across our workforce, what are the different needs of them. What are the problems they're trying to solve? Because they're very, very different, especially across our different retail, distribution and support centres - they all need something different from us. So like you would determine to sell a product and what customers are coming into your retail store to sell a product, it's exactly the same for learning - what is our customer wanting, what are their skill gaps? Not just looking at them and what they're telling us internally, but looking at what's going on outside.
Michelle Ockers:	At the conference, you spoke about three ways of learning, you spoke about experience, connections and programs, is that based on the 70:20:10 framework and you're just kind of finding other the language for it? Or is that something different than experience, connections and programs?
Beth Hall:	We look to 70:20:10 as a theoretical concept that, whilst we believe it, in the fact that we believe that you learn more through experience than you do through a formal program, we believe that 70:20:10 happens at the same time. So, learning and work is one. Learning is not something separate or isolated or something to be done in a quarantine. So if we're in a workshop environment, we're going to use experience and connections and the formal program structure to solve a business problem. The experience is we're going to solve it it the moment, and we're going to do something because we're about performance, not just about learning. The connection is the people I'm in the room with, and the program is the tool, or the concept, or the theory that has been provided to help shape people's thinking to solve that problem, so in that sense, yes, 70:20:10 and the split is just our play on the language, but we don't believe they operate in isolation, we think they happen all at the same time.
Michelle Ockers:	I understand, we're going to talk specifically about the leadership academy as an example of what these ways of learning look like in practice and how you draw on all of them simultaneously to solve problems. I'm going to hand over to Karen to explore these with you, and what I want to do is just for the sake of the listeners, cue the listeners to a couple of things to look out for in the discussion. The first is this flexibility that although there's some pre-defined structures by the academy, it's really applied very flexible and it's very focused on solving problems. The second is the emphasis on conversation over content, so Karen, over to you.
Karen Moloney:	Thanks, Michelle, so just starting, I think probably with the structure of the leadership academy, Beth. So there's five stages in that leadership journey, can you talk us through what they are and what's covered at each stage?

Beth Hall:	Sure, so we had some awesome org psychs come in and work with the business to really unpack and understand what makes our leaders so awesome, because ultimately they have created this incredible culture of the group. They determined there were basically 24 competencies, 24 unique attributes, competencies, ways of working that our leaders had. We had a really good foundation when it came to creating the leadership academy, because of the work that these external org psychs have done for us. When we started to look at those competencies, we didn't realize the word competency didn't sound cool enough for COG, so we called them creds, the COG creds. So we've woven those COG creds into stages, if you'd like, at that point in your career would you really need that cred, because at the first things-
Karen Moloney:	Sorry, just to make sure that I know, because at the Cotton On guys, you are too cool for school, and you do have all of your jargon. Can I make sure – is it creds, credentials, or credits?
Beth Hall:	Yes, but we would never use the full word.
Karen Moloney:	Of course not.
Beth Hall:	It's short for credentials. So within those different stages, we've attributed different creds to them. So we basically said, you know, when you join us in your induction, the creds that are important at that stage are your ethical smarts, your ability to collaborate, the basic creds that would allow you to align with the business and you know, a call to champions, cred is in induction is like how do you align with our values and how do you live the CEO of culture. Then, once you finished your three month induction, you would move into lead and manage self, where there's a few more creds that are around your drive for results, your personal effectiveness. As a single contributor, how are you ultimately delivering in your role? Then, when you get some direct reports and you start to deliver results to others, you'd move into lead and manage others, so you'd come across things around developing people being a need for you there and then lead and managed teams is where you are in a team or function where you really try to pull a group together to deliver results. So, you'd have things around delivering the vision, you'd have things around implementing across the business, things around managing change. So really based on what it is that you're expected to do in terms of performances, these are the creds that you'll need. That said, we're not structured to say you start here, and you do these six and then you move on to this, and then you move on to this.

Karen Moloney:	That was going to be my next question, actually, is the path, how you actually move through those levels, yes.
Beth Hall:	Yes, so it really depends on, again, what we're trying to solve for. So if you've just taken over a new project and you're a single contributor, but you need to influence people across the business to be able to deliver on your project, then you're actually in the creds in lead and manage teams, which is around impact and influence. We wouldn't say, "Hey, you're not managing a team, therefore you don't get to access that learning." Anybody gets to access all learning and it's available for everybody online.
Karen Moloney:	Sorry, I'm sorry I keep coming up with-
Beth Hall:	No, go for it.
Karen Moloney:	So, in terms of that, is that really self-directed, in terms of the individual saying, "Okay, I'm taking on this project, I don't feel like I'm fully equipped to do that, I'm going to jump into the academy" or do they talk to somebody? Like what are the triggers that are going to keep people kind of coming back to the academy?
Beth Hall:	It's a real mixture, so all content is are available to everybody online, so go hard, treat yourself, go check out what your manager is doing, what your boss' boss is doing, so it's full transparency. But then we work with different business functions, brands or countries to solve particular problems. When we do that, we would look at their entire leadership team and we go, "Okay, where are the gaps within the leadership team, where are the gaps within the entire function or brand, what are the creds that we take from the toolbox to solve that particular business problem?"
	We do go down to the individual, too, it's not just a team program. But we do like to make sure that we don't just focus on individuals, because ultimately, creating a bunch of highly skilled performers, as individuals that don't work as a team is not going to work, because, as you know, it's the team that drives the results. So we look at the collective, as opposed to the individual often, to make sure that we've got the right mix and that everybody else is working together towards the same goal.
Karen Moloney:	Yes, and moving on to that, the idea of content, and we've already touched a little bit about conversation over content, can you just explain a bit more about that concept and how it dictates the nature of the content that you've created for the academy?
Beth Hall:	Sure, so like back in the day, I was an instructional designer, so I made a living on creating content that basically told people what to do. Whilst that's great in some areas, if you're doing a degree, it's really important that you have that content to be able to understand how do you write your thesis or pass your exams, when it comes to the context of Cotton on Group, we actually don't

want to tell people what to do. We have the concept of freedom within a framework, and it's like we'll give you the framework, and we'll give you the context that you need to operate within, but actually we hired you because you're good at what you do, or we hired you because we really like your cultural alignment, and we've given you enough info to be able to navigate it and figure out what to do.

Therefore, we have the same approach to learning whereby we go, "Okay, we need to solve this problem of managing change, and our team members aren't responding the way we thought we would, and it's a challenge for us." We go, "Okay, great, this is the content of our manage chain." There's three stages, stage one, as leader, you need to champion the change, like what does that look like? Champion the change means you need to be building resilience, you need to be making sure that you've got trust, you need to be making sure that you're communicating not only what is changing, but what's not changing. Then, stage two is you need to lead the transition, to help people move from the old ways of working to the new ways of working, of the old ways of thinking to the new ways of thinking and like, how do you do that? You do that through coaching and through feedback and support. Then the final stage is you need to make it stick, so you need to reinforce when things are going well, you need to recognize the team, celebrate the wins, you need to make sure that you've got business as usual happening as quickly as possible.

So that's the content we would give around managed change. Now, for some people, they go, "Wow, like what about Kotter's eight steps of change, and what about... " People go on courses for weeks to learn about change," and we go, "Yes, but there's enough context there, now let's talk about doing it, now let's actually create the communication plan, let's actually determine the sequence in which we communicate the change. Now let's work on what we're saying, when we're saying who we're saying it to. Now let's brainstorm all the things that are going to go wrong, all the things that are going to happen throughout that transition period that we can pre-empt and figure out how as a manger we can navigate through it."

We still leverage things like Kubler-Ross's emotions of change and talk to leaders about, "Hey, you might have a team member in denial." While some people are adopting it straightaway, there might be people that are not quite there, and how do you navigate that differently, and we're not trying to oversimplify it, but equally, we're not trying to give them all the theory in the world as to how to manage change without actually doing performance rather than learning. In that two-hour session, let's not talk about the theory of change, let's actually work through the change you are about to execute and solve everything in this room so that it goes as best as it can.

Karen Moloney: So, in terms of your facilitators working with people - so they are in it. You've mentioned the two hour session, you're been not in a room delivering the theory and all of the, "You should do this, and you should do that", you're

actually working with your team on a specific problem and providing them with resources and tools, etcetera, to solve that problem, is that right?

Beth Hall: Yes, definitely. An example is the other week I was in a session, and I'd just delivered manage change to a leadership team in New Zealand, and the leadership team came out, and they said, "This is great, we need to take this, and we now need to deliver this to another group in the retail department." So I said, "What for?" And they said, "Well, they're managing change." I was like, "Well, are they, or are they the recipients of change? Because you're making the change, which is why we've just come up with this plan of how we're going to talk to them about the change and execute on it, so why are we now training them on how to manage change?" And they were like, "Well, how do we get them to think differently and be receptive to change?"

So I'm like, "Okay, that's a totally different problem to managing change." So in order for them to be receptive to change, we actually need to talk about curiosity, so why don't we think about the growth mindset being a conversation you have to them and leading into the change, so they are going in there with a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset that when they do come across barriers, they know how to tackle it by not saying what was or what is, but changing their frame of reference to be, "Well, what if? What if I do it this way? Or what if I do it that way?"

Really, we've diagnosed problems in the moment to be all that's going to get the right thing from our toolbox, and then, when we get the right thing from our toolbox, it's, "Okay, how does this now apply to this problem?" not, "Let me tell you the theory of growth mindset", it's, "Let's apply growth mindset to the problem we're solving right now."

Karen Moloney: Perfect, and what does that toolbox look like?

Beth Hall: So, for each cred, we have a, "This is the COG way." So we have a framework, like the example I just talked you through with manage change, where we go, "This is the COG way of doing this" and then we have a supporting video that explains that, so for those people interacting with it in the digital world they can get the context behind that one-pager, because sometimes when you look at a one-pager it's down to the interpreter to ascertain what it means, so the video just supports them in understanding that framework.

Then, we have a series of tools. We have a rule in COG Uni that we can only have 20% learning and 80% has to be performance tools. The only reason we allow for 20% learning is for the induction, to kind of have a coaching tool, or performance tool around something you have zero knowledge on - it doesn't work.

So those tools, really, they're almost like templates they can use in order to navigate whatever it is that they're working through. So, if I refer back to the

example of manage change, the template would be seen like which stage of change are your team members at? What are you going to do to move them through their next stage in order to adopt the change? There's a tool around, "These are your three stages of change, write your action plan to champion the change, write your action plan to lead the transition, when do you expect the transition to be finished, what does a successful transition look like for you, what will you see, what will you hear, how will your people feel?" So they're really clear as to what they're going to do, but also how do they know if they're on track, and then how are you going to make it stick? Like, what are the key actions that you're going to do and how do you know when you're done?

So it's really about helping them apply the framework that we've given them to their situation, not telling them how to do it, but guiding them and enabling them to do it.

Karen Moloney: So, I think we've sort of tapped into a lot of the ingredients of the academy and what's making it successful, would you be able to give us just an example of one sort of end to end case, from start to finish where somebody's had a problem and they've used the academy and then seen some results at the other end?

Beth Hall: Yes, sure, so an example maybe is we had a general manager move their remit, and they moved into a new business unit that had quite a bit of restructure happen within that department

With the new general manger coming in, the problem they we're trying to solve is we've got a bunch of people that are now making decisions that they previously weren't, because they were given direction, and they were executors, so there was a leadership gap there. We also have a few new faces at the leadership table that means that the team needs to almost reset because while several members of the team are still there, they've got new players there, so we need to rethink about the way we connect this team.

It was also the time when we were delivering a new strategy, just because of the time of year, we always refresh and re-look at our strategies, so it's like, "Okay, so we've got several things that we need to do here, first of all is we need to take this bunch of talented individuals and turn them into a team, and then we need to very quickly get them to position where they're driving results to deliver on this new strategy, even though they haven't spent much time together being a team, yet."

So there was lots of different interventions and ways that we supported them, so we did Myers Briggs, so we helped them understand that the way they approach things is different to other people. Not that any of them is wrong, like we embrace the individual, and you'd be you, but equally, we need to understand where somebody else was coming from. So, to reduce any conflict that would occur, let's actually start by getting to know each other a little bit better. We then started to form some agreements as to how do we collaborate, how do we communicate, what does it look like based on our preferences, but

also based on what's the most efficient way of working and getting that speed to trust and speed to relationship?

We did silly things, like we've introduced playing Uno within their meetings to get a bit of competition, but also to make sure they knew that relationship and connection and culture was not just about work, it was also about them interacting. We looked at their wellness, and we took them on various different retreats throughout the year to make sure that they were getting that space to lead, getting that mindfulness, that decision making, their leadership, that they were having that time away together as a team to really make sure that they were aligned as a first team.

Then we started to work with their teams that reported to them, to start to really have that language socialised around, "This is the way we do things within this brand, because we've got a new leadership team." Within that, that was regular workshops that we had every month with the team, covering things like collaboration, communication, decision making, judgements, things that allowed them to have speed to performance as a team and allowed them also to deliver on the strategy alongside it. Even with the initial leadership team, we actually had a session just on strategy delivery, like how do you take this strategy you've just been handed and turn that into operational tactics that you're going to deploy as a team?

Michelle Ockers: So, if you had to give somebody one tip to get them started with taking a more performance focused approach to learning, Beth, where would you suggest they start, what's that key tip you'd give them?

Beth Hall: Ask, don't tell.

Michelle Ockers: Beautifully succinct, very good.

Beth Hall: Learning teams love to tell people what to do.

Michelle Ockers: Yes, ask. We have one final question that we like to ask all of our guests, and this is a new one, for any regular listeners, we've changed our final question. Beth, can you share with us one resource that you find valuable for your own professional development?

Beth Hall: Just one? I don't know if I can do just one. I follow Arun (Pradhan) and everything he says is theoretically why I do and then I say to him, "I did it." So, I'm currently figuring how to do nudges.

Michelle Ockers: Okay.

Beth Hall: Because that's his latest.

Michelle Ockers: Yes, we've been talking a lot about that. That's Arun Pradhan. We'll put a link to his LinkedIn profile in the show notes, along with a link, Beth, to your LinkedIn profile, so if anyone wants to get in touch with you to explore anything from the podcast, they are able to do it that way. So, Beth, thanks so much for sharing your work and insights with us, that's been really fascinating and deeply inspiring for our listeners.

Beth Hall: No worries, thanks so much for having me, girls.

Karen Moloney: Thanks, Beth.

Michelle Ockers: Absolute pleasure. And to our listeners, if you are finding Learning Uncut valuable and at the time of recording this would just hit 10,000 downloads, so we've got some bit of evidence to suggest that people are finding it valuable, can you please take a moment to rate the podcast and leave us a comment, so we can keep getting Learning Uncut and the stories that our guest are sharing into the ears of as many people as possible? Thank you.