

**LEARNING UNCUT EPISODE 15:  
BUILDING A COACHING CULTURE – BRUCE LOVE**

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

Karen Moloney: And, I'm Karen Moloney.

Michelle Ockers: Today, we're talking to Bruce Love about his work to build a coaching culture. Welcome, Bruce.

Bruce Love: Hello. Lovely to be here.

Michelle Ockers: It's nice to have you here. Bruce, you work as a Capability Manager in a contact center setting in the aviation industry. Can you please briefly describe the business setting that you work in?

Bruce Love: Yeah, sure. It's a global contact center business, so we have sites around the globe, four of them, five actually. It's gone through a massive transformation. I've been with the organization for about three and a half years. Probably, in terms of front-line numbers, we're probably getting close to just over 1,000.

Michelle Ockers: Before we dive in, I'd like to help set the scene for our listeners. Of course, I've been fortunate to do some strategic work with your organization in the past the 12 months, Bruce. As part of this work, we used a tool from Towards Maturity at your called the Learning Landscape Audit. What that did was it allowed us to gather data via survey on how people in different parts of the organization learn. One of the aspects it explored is how leaders support the development of people in their teams, so it gathered input on this information from leaders, and it also gathered input on the same question from people on their teams and compared what the two groups said.

What this data told us was that there was something really special happening in the contact centers. What really stood out was the very high level of agreement between leaders and team members in the contact centers that their development was being really well supported by the leaders. I'm sharing this upfront as it's actually very unusual to see such a high level of engagement of leaders with development of their people. I think our listeners are going to be really interested in hearing about how you achieved this. Bruce, what was your reaction when you saw this data in the Learning Landscape?

Bruce Love: It was twofold. I was, of course, really thrilled because in some ways I guess it supported the strategy that we were trying to implement around learning, but I was also surprised, I have to say, at that high level. I felt it would be good, but I didn't realize it would be quite so good, so it was a pleasant surprise.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, absolutely. It's always nice to get some data to support that you're on the right track with something. It's interesting, you talked before that you'd been

with the organization three and a half years now, so I guess it was about two and a half years when we did the Learning Landscape, but at that point, it was very different from the feedback gathered through an engagement survey when you first joined the department. In terms of setting the scene, what was happening with people's development at the time that you took on your role with the contact centers?

Bruce Love:

I did a couple of things. Obviously, looking at the engagement survey results at the time of joining the organization, but I also did what I always do when I go into an organization and that is, go around to the frontline and spend some time with them and spend time with the frontline leaders. It was very evident, very quickly for me, that the business unit was very much in a training culture. They were verbatim comments in the engagement survey at the time that said, I haven't been in a training room, so I'm not learning. That's just like, can you hear that? That's my heart crying. That just really, it does, it actually upsets me. This idea that unless we're in a training room, and they even called it a classroom, which is something that really irks me, and unless there's a facilitator, unless they've got a workbook, unless there's a PowerPoint, they're not learning. It was very much a training culture mentality.

The wonderful thing for me was that I'd kind of been given this blank sheet of paper and asked, look, it's not working for us, what can you do? What can we do? How do we go about changing it? So for me it was about three things. It was about, firstly, really defining what is performance because when I went and spoke to the frontline and I asked them, can you tell me about your performance last week, last month? The best answer I got was really just these individuals reciting their KPIs, their score sheet, and at worst, just kind of blank looks.

There was not real vocabulary around, how do I talk about performance? It was about really defining what performance is. It was about setting a vision because, obviously, I can't create a learning culture. I can only create, I guess, the environment and the vision to move from a training culture to a learning culture, and then it's really the act of the people in there to create the culture. I really needed that learning culture to be supported by a really robust coaching culture.

Michelle Ockers:

Bruce, you said you wanted to create an environment where a learning culture could be built and that part of this was to support a robust coaching culture. What, in your mind, did a coaching culture look like? What were you trying to create?

Bruce Love:

Okay. When I went around and spoke to the frontline and the frontline leaders, they would talk a lot about coaching conversations. I was quite intrigued by this notion of coaching conversations, so I asked, what are these coaching conversations? Again, there was this kind of inability to really define what they were meaning by that, so I sat in on a few of them and watched a few. For me, there wasn't a lot of coaching happening. There was a lot of people being told

that their performance wasn't up to measure and that they needed to change their performance, and maybe they needed to go back and revisit this piece of training or that piece of training. I really struggled with the idea that was firmly embedded in their mind. They believed that they had a coaching culture, and it was supported by these coaching conversations.

For me, a coaching culture, I mean, I have to go back. I have to give you some context. Is that okay if I kind of go back into my history?

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, please do.

Bruce Love: All right. I come from the arts world. So for 20 odd years I was an actor, a writer. I say that slightly uncomfortably. I'm a storyteller. I feel very comfortable with that. I was asked in the '90s if I would start teaching drama, which was confronting for me, but I decided to do it. A little later, I was asked if I would start coaching.

Now, as an actor, I had been coached, but I'd been the coaching counterpart. I'd never been the coach. And so when I was asked to start coaching, I thought, well, I don't know even know really the role of a coach. That kind of links back in, as an actor, we were always encouraged. One of the first stages when you're cast in a play, you have to do script analysis. One of the things that we were always encouraged to do, particularly if you're working on classic plays, whether it be Shakespeare or some ancient Greek text, is that you really need to understand the aetiology of words. You need to understand where they came from, what they meant, how they evolved.

And so, when I looked at the aetiology of the English term coach, it was a fascinating story for me. I'm going to put it out there and apologize, I'm not sure I pronounce this correctly and I've yet to meet a Hungarian who can tell me, so if anyone can, I'd be fascinated.

Back in the 1300s, there were horse drawn carts and these carts transported goods, agricultural goods, cloth, between towns, but in a little Hungarian town called Kocs, an unknown inventor, I guess, or builder, built the first, what we would consider to be a coach, moving people with much more comfort and nice padded seats. This new invention, this kocsi, it was called after the town where it had been where it was built, moved through Germany, and Italy, and up through France, and eventually, made its way to England where there were these coaches and that was the English term for it.

Now, you've got these people movers, and it's called a coach, taking someone from where they are to where they want to be. It wasn't until like the early 1800s that the coach word is used for the first time at Oxford University. It's actually Oxford University slang. It was used to describe a tutor who carried a student through an exam. I thought that was really interesting. Again, it's this idea of transporting someone from where they are to where they want to be.

Then, it was a few years later that they moved into the sporting arena, and coaches, which is often what we think about when we think about coach, football coach, soccer coach. And so for me, it's always been this idea of transporting someone from where they are to where they want to be.

I built that view of what coaching is. For me, coaching is really about unlocking potential, and removing any interference that's stopping that individual from reaching their full potential. So performance, in a corporate sense, should be a person's potential minus any interferences that's stopping them from reaching it.

Michelle Ockers: Thank you so much for sharing that. I think it gives us a really good perspective of where you're coming from with the way you approach coaching. I want to move a little bit into conditions for coaching next. Shortly after you joined the contact centers, there was a restructuring. You talked a little bit about the amount of transformation that's gone on in that area. Could you tell us how the restructure helped create the conditions to help build a coaching culture?

Bruce Love: As I said, I was given a blank sheet. The decision was made that, firstly, teams would have a dedicated team leader who actually worked with them. In the older structure, I may have been a frontline consultant, but I may not have seen my supervisor for weeks on end because they're on a different roster, a line to me. Rostering needed to be changed. The whole operation needed to be changed. In terms of structure, what we did is we created teams of 15, a maximum of 15 consultants. They would be supported by a team coach, a dedicated person to look after their development, and a team leader, and the whole management structure, there was a new structure around the operational managers, and then the site managers.

There was this completely new structure from contact centers manager right down to consultant. All those positions had to be reapplied for, so there was an opportunity to create new position description and there was a whole recruitment process. I was really fortunate enough to be part of the recruitment process for the operational managers, the team leaders, and the team coaches. That meant that I was actually able to contribute to the format of the recruitment for these people and really helped design the recruitment process. That was really helpful.

That also gave me the ability, from a learning perspective, to kind of really empower my team to ensure that we built learning programs then that cascaded, so whatever the ops managers were training in was cascaded down to the team leaders, but contextualized for them, and again, cascaded, contextualized for the team coaches. There was kind of like this through line in terms of capabilities, roles, and responsibilities.

The other thing that I was able to do was also get each level above to actually provide with the support of myself and the L&D team to actually provide that

training, or that coaching, or whatever the elements of each learning program were. It was really an exciting opportunity.

Karen Moloney: What sort of mindset and behaviors are conducive to coaching and how do you draw those out in the recruitment process?

Bruce Love: I really wanted these people to be really approachable and compassionate. I want them to be able to build trust. I wanted them to be great communicators, be very self aware, so good emotional intelligence, be very empathetic. Also, I wanted them, and I got a lot of, I remember there being quite a few raised eyebrows when I said wanted them to be really charismatic. I think charisma is a kind of underutilized attribute that people have. For me, charisma is not what we might think of when we first think about charisma. We often think about quite extroverted, quite confident, quite loud people, but in fact charisma is the ability to be able to make someone else feel really special. The reason we like to be around charismatic people is because they make us feel like, for the moment that we're interacting with them, we are the most important person in the world and their full attention is on us. I think that what's creates charismatic people, and so I wanted charisma.

We were able to build quite a robust recruitment process. What we did is we created a persona. Each applicant, if they got to a certain stage of the recruitment process, would get this character description. It was a consultant that had a long tenure, they'd been a great performer in the past, easily meeting their KPIs, but now in the last few months their performance was down, they were spiraling.

Because, what I was really interested in, and this goes back, if I can link this back to this idea about performance. I very hopefully, openly stole a performance model from the sporting world that talks about six key components to performance, and that's a contextual component to performance, a technical component to performance, a tactical component, a mental, emotional, and physical. And I love that. I think it's really interesting.

Because, if you think about, back to how I described this character that they were going to be doing, a role play, and actually play through a coaching session, this person was already a great performer, had been a great performer, had met KPIs, had all the capabilities in place, but suddenly now their performance was dropping. I've been asked more time than I care to think about or remember, can we just do another refresher on customer service, or sales, or whatever the case may be? It's like, why would we be doing that? The person was achieving it six months ago. Something in their life has changed that is affecting their performance, but it's really easier for the corporate world just to kind of go back to that technical component. Is it a system or a workflow? No, it's something else. It's something else in their life.

Bruce Love: So I was hoping, I was looking for those roles, those attributes. I was looking for people who would use really powerful questioning, and kind of interrogate, and

get down because it was there for them. I was looking for those people who were asking questions, and say, what's changed? What's happening?

Once we chose those coaches, and we took them through quite an intense program, as I explained to them, it's not about trying to turn you all into psychologists, but it's about you being curious. It's about you being approachable. It's about you building that trust. It's about you being charismatic, so that people will talk to you.

The sporting world and the art world use extrinsic and intrinsic coaching and that fits really, really well. I feel that within the corporate world, again, a very big statement, it's very generalize, I accept that, but I think we tend to extrinsically coach. Look at an external benchmark, assess the person's performance against the benchmark, and then try to close the gap with stuff that really is kind of just like retraining. That's not really coaching, not to its full extent.

Karen Moloney: In terms of the actual programs, once you've gone through that recruitment process and identified your charismatic coaches, those successful recruits were engaged in the program to learn about coaching theory and developing those coaching skills. Can you just talk through a bit more about the actual program and how your background influenced the format and content about program?

Bruce Love: As I said, it was quite an intense program. It's probably about a two week program, but not all at once. I also believe, in that kind of Sara Lee cake model - layer upon layer upon layer- getting into a training room, have some robust conversation, facilitate some real good conflict thinking model discussions, land at a point, go out and start embedding that stuff, start practicing it, come back, reflect, tell what's worked for you, what hasn't worked, and then move on to kind of the next stage of the program.

It was really about presenting some frameworks to them that I felt helped me, and I certainly hoped would help them. The organization I worked for uses GROW, which I think pretty much every organization I've ever worked for uses GROW. I love the GROW model. I think it can sometimes be looked at as a little bit simplistically. For me, the G, obviously, is about the goal, but I like to think of it as, it's the opportunity to kind of explore the art of possibility. What is this goal? If it's a pretty, mundane, boring goal, I'm not really interested, but if we can use it to explore that kind of art of possibility and where could we go to, I think it's really exciting.

Karen Moloney: Absolutely.

Bruce Love: For me, the Reality is really about just maybe trying to, it is about trying to build that self-awareness in the coaching counterpart, that they understand, I guess, a deeper understanding of their own performance, and the context of their performance, and the results of their performance.

I've got two performance formulas that I love to use when I'm trying to coach coaches. One is part of the organization I'm working at now. I work for Coca-Cola Amatil and saw within my first week there, I saw this great little kind of simple flowchart and it was mindset. Mindset gives you your behavior, your behaviors provide your results. It really resonated with me.

If a person believes something to be true, then for them in that moment, it is true. If you apply that to that kind of nice little corporate flowchart about your mindset will give you your behaviors, which will provide your results. It's actually the same thing. Whatever you believe, whatever your mindset is, will dictate your behaviors, and ultimately, it is your behaviors that give you your results.

I think I mentioned the other one before and that is, that your performance in any endeavor should equal your potential minus interference. It was about saying, we want to understand the reality. So going back to the GROW model, the R, we need to understand the reality because we need to get to really the root cause of the interference because, that for me, is the coach's job, particularly when you're working in that intrinsic framework and that is to identify and then help guide the coaching counterpart to remove that interference to allow them to reach their potential, which then, of course, should equal their performance.

And, Options is really about considering that full range and really looking at it from very different perspectives, and not being scared of being creative. And then the W, the Will, are they emotionally engaged to really drive this kind of responsibility and accountability to change and to understand these new learnings. It was about really redefining the GROW model and not seeing it quite so simple.

It's just providing them with these kind of, I guess, frameworks. I'm a big fan of framework, or model, but they're only as good as what you put into it. It's about just really encouraging them to try these things, and then my team and I would spend a lot of time watching them delivering coaching sessions.

Karen Moloney: That's my next question. You're basically saying that once they were out on the job, you coached all these great people and they've gone through this program, that they're armed with all the tools. What happened when they were out on the job? What did you observe happening in the real world and how did you support them?

Bruce Love: We would spend quite a bit of time, keeping in mind that the ops managers had been through the same program. They were then expected to ensure that they were providing those coaching sessions to the team leaders. The team leaders had been through the program. They're expected to provide those coaching sessions to the team coaches, and the team coaches then, because they had the largest number, they were supporting 15 consultants. That's a pretty big deal. It was about all of us. That slow build up, that cascade that I like to talk about. I

think it's really important in terms of learning and providing, I guess, that environment. There has been times, absolutely as I said, nothings perfect, nothing is frozen, there's been times when the process has stopped, for whatever reason, the ops managers just haven't been able to provide the same kind of level of coaching to team coaches, and then suddenly you see it. It stops working with the team coaches and then suddenly the team coaches are not, so it's about the whole organization being engaged and that buy-in from everyone.

So with the support of my team and themselves, we were able to provide some really strong side-by-side coaching for the coaches. But, as is always my goal when I go into an organization, my question is how can I make myself redundant? Because I don't really, if it's working correctly, I don't really have to be there nor do my team. We really, hopefully, consulted occasionally when they've run into a problem. Really, I mean that sincerely. I don't think L&D team should be neck-deep in a business unit. They should be self sufficient.

Michelle Ockers: How long did it take to embed coaching into the organization? You said it was working to a level where you could see results and actually step out. What were the key changes that were encountered?

Bruce Love: I would say that we're still building it. It's a work in progress, but we have seen results. I mean, I don't have all the metrics here in front of me, but I can tell you, I remember in my first few months looking up at the wall boards, which basically had kind of your premium, and your priority customers, and your general customers. I would look up there and I would see wait times of two, three hours. I would kind of look around and say to people, is it just me or is anyone else concerned about those wait times?

Now, we are performing incredibly well. It's really worth noting, I think that at the time, as a customer, you had three options to contact the organization. One, was a phone, two, was email, and three was a fax. I don't think it's unfair to say the contacts in the business was really probably 15, 20 years behind the times. Now, we have word chat, messaging, social media. Along with everything else, the frontline have had to learn all these new technologies and we've had to constantly evolve the context in the business, even in the three and a half years I've been there, based on where the demand of the customer are because that really ultimately what we're there to serve.

There have been times when the coaching is not the key focus. It's in new technology. That's why I say, it really is an ongoing process. I felt really comfortable about, even six months, we were starting to see really positive results in terms of operational measures. But I love the stuff where you hear about the consultants say, wow, for the first time in a long time, and these people have very long tenure, some of them, like some people have been there 20, 30 years, and they'd say, for the first time in years, I feel like someone actually cares about the job that I'm doing, and actually is interested in what I'm doing. For me, that's as important as any kind of operational metrics.

Michelle Ockers: Bruce, building a coaching culture is obviously not something that we expect people to be able to just walk away and do after listening to this podcast. There's a lot of rich ideas and approaches that you've talked about with us, but if anyone is thinking about getting started with this approach, what are your tips for them to take some initial steps to get started, or even to review where their existing coaching practice are at in order to make more effective?

Bruce Love: I would say first of all, just go and spend time with the frontline and the frontline leaders. Look at what they're doing and just be honest. It's not a bad thing to say, we don't have a coaching culture or our coaching culture is a bit crap. There's nothing wrong with say that. Then, that's a great place to start. Really, just go and honestly look at what's happening, and spend time with them, understand, talk to them, ask them. Ask the frontline person in any kind of industry that's customer based, because these people are the key to a success, in my view.

You can even do it on a more micro level and talk about maybe just your team, have you actually defined what performance is? Is performance really just a set of KPIs or is it, and if you decide that's it, that's fine. At least you're all now talking the same language. So, define what performance is. Really have a look and see whether you're either in a learning culture or a training culture because I think they are two very different things. If you have aspirations to move into a learning, because perhaps you are in a training culture, you are going to need that coaching culture to support it. For me, it's just about going and just being really honest and having a look.

The vision that I put forward for a learning culture was very simple because I'm a simple sort of guy. That is that, I wanted every single person in our business unit, no matter whether you're the head of, or a new frontline agent, to see that every interaction was an opportunity to learn and to teach one another. I didn't care whether that interaction was with a customer, a direct report, a manager, a stakeholder, a two up manager, it didn't matter, but, every interaction that you had was an opportunity, every single day to learn and to teach one another.

Michelle Ockers: Absolutely. I think you've just redefined continuous learning for us, along with a few other ideas and concepts, like performance and charisma. Bruce, clearly supporting other people in their own development is very important to you. It's one of the things that makes you tick. We just hear it come through when we talk to you. We've already heard a little bit about the influence of your early experience in the arts on how you work now. Thinking about your own professional development and how you continue to get better at your work now, could you share with us the biggest thing you do right now for your own professional development?

Bruce Love: Yeah. I read, a lot. I've had no formal training in learning. I don't have a degree in adult learning. It has all been from my own experience. I guess, like everything in life, that has pros and cons. I've made a lot of assumptions based

on my own experience, which have become, I guess, my values and my beliefs. I look for people who inspire me, and I read as much as I can.

I'm really, really fortunate and I'm incredibly grateful. My partner and I have, a couple of years ago, have been able to, with a lot of planning, but we're able to get a little holiday weekender down at in the Jervis Bay area. We go down there and that is my time where I just try to read, and read, and read. Of course, more recently, podcasting. Seriously, there's some podcasts and I love just being able to sit out the back, and put in the earphones, and just listen.

For me, it's about, and I'll read, and I'll listen, and I'll do it with a really open mind, but if feel that if it doesn't inspire me or it doesn't align to my beliefs, I'm not closed off to it, I just don't waste time. If something isn't inspiring me in the first chapter or I don't feel aligned to it, I won't waste time on it. But, the minute I find something that just aligns, because you know I've always trusted it, even back when I was an actor. If I hear, read, or see something and on some level I kind of feel like I knew it, I just either didn't have the ability or there's something in my consciousness that didn't allow me, but I feel like I know it, and I just really trust that and believe it.

It might sound a bit simplistic, but I just do a lot of reading. I just read, and read, and read. I love it. Not just L&D, but also I still read lots of books on art and acting.

Michelle Ockers: Fantastic. We'll get some recommendations from you after the session and put some links in the show notes for people who are interested in some of the things that you've read or listened to recently that you have really thought valuable. Speaking of links, we're going to include a link to your LinkedIn profile in the show notes, if anyone would like to get in touch with you to find out more about the topics we've discussed in today's episode. Bruce, thank you for sharing some of your stories, your insights, and perspectives, and your work.

Bruce Love: Oh, thank you so much. I really appreciate it and I'm so grateful for the opportunity.

Karen Moloney: Thanks, Bruce.

Bruce Love: Thanks, Karen.