LEARNING UNCUT EPISODE 25: SHAPING CULTURE THROUGH COACHING – DAVID KEEGAN

Karen Moloney: Welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut. I'm Karen Moloney.

Michelle Ockers: And I'm Michelle Ockers.

Karen Moloney: And today we're talking to David Keegan, who's the founder and CEO of HOST International; an NGO supporting refugees in their host communities to develop and implement their own practical solutions to their circumstances.

Welcome David.

David Keegan: Thank you for having me.

Karen Moloney: Thank you for being here. We might start with the strategic angle to this story, so I'll hand you over to Michelle to kick off.

Michelle Ockers: Thanks Karen. There's a couple of really interesting firsts in today's story for the Learning Uncut podcast. David, you are the first person we've spoken to from the non-government, or NGO sector, and you're also the first business leader joining us without a background as a learning professional, so thank you in particular for being able to share your story and perspectives as a leader with our listeners. I think it's going to be a real interest to them.

David Keegan: No problem.

Michelle Ockers: Let's start by introducing listeners to HOST International. Could you please give us a brief overview of who HOST is, of what you do, and how you do it?

David Keegan: Sure. HOST International is an Australian not-for-profit that's working in six different countries with refugees that are essentially on the journey towards protection somewhere else. Our job is to try and support refugees to achieve a better life outcome through principles of humanity, hope and dignity.

We do that through very practical ways, such as helping refugees to find employment, to cope while they're waiting for re-settlement options, and we also work with communities that refugees find themselves in to help them have the capacity to support refugees.

So we're very much about trying to innovate and create solutions for refugees while they're on their way towards something better.

Michelle Ockers: That sounds like a pretty big scope, when you think about the range of needs you're trying to meet there, across the refugees, as well as supporting communities. What kind of people are in your teams? What kind of skills do you need to bring to bear and what kind of roles do you have in your teams?

David Keegan:	We primarily recruit social workers, or welfare workers of different types, but we work with an interesting model, where we have a number of locally engaged staff in different countries that we work in, so there might be local staff that may not have qualifications, we also employ refugees in some circumstances, to work with their own community and to help with various tasks.
	We also have a number of administrative staff that you would have in any business, that help run the organisation here in Sydney, but also on site with keeping things ticking along.
Michelle Ockers:	How many sites, and what kind of geography are people spread across?
David Keegan:	At the moment, we're primarily based in South East Asia, and in Australia and New Zealand, so we have staff in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, New Zealand, we have a project in Nauru as well, and we also work in the Pacific, and we also have some work here in Australia, so it's quite a diverse operating environment.
	Some in developing countries with very limited resources, some here in Australia with all the things that you have here.
Michelle Ockers:	Really diverse and complex, in a lot of ways, complex set of needs you're trying to meet, and range of people that you're working with.
	I understand that the initial set-up period for HOST was very brief? I think I heard around four weeks. When did you set up, and where did the idea come from, and why such a rapid start-up? What was going on there?
David Keegan:	It actually was only two weeks that we had to set up, so it was very, very quick start-up. Long story short, was that I had been working with another company in Nauru, with Australia's off-shore processing there, helping refugees to integrate into the Nauruan community, and that was very much about working with the grass roots community organisations and the government to do that.
	I was invited, at the end of that year of working with the organisation, to set up a company to continue that work when the previous organisation withdrew. For me, it wasn't something I was setting out to do, but it provided an opportunity to start an organisation and pursue some of the humanitarian interests I'd had from working with refugees here in Australia, and in other context for that.
	And so it was really one of those opportunities where I had to make a quick decision, but I also wanted to take an opportunity to have a border impact, and so we decided to set out on this journey.
	Primarily, we were driven by a desire to help refugees that were still in Nauru at the time, but also to broaden that impact to help refugees that were in other developing context, in albeit similar situations, where they were uncertain about their future, and one of the things as a leader I've always been committed to, is trying to innovate, and trying to drive change that will lead to a positive impact on individuals.

And so I saw this as an opportunity to also do that through HOST.

Michelle Ockers: Absolutely. In that two weeks, you went from ... was it a standing start? I imagine you had a network and so on, but what did you have to do to get started? What point did you have to reach? How did you have to scale up? Where did you find people from-

David Keegan: Because we took over from another organisation, we were fortunate that we could adopt some of their staff, and so we had a core team that came with us, but we had to recruit quite intensively over the first few months.

We needed about 80 staff at the time, so as you can imagine, recruiting for that many people was quite challenging, and we were limited in our ability to be selective, but we started off with about 30 from the previous organisation, and had to recruit out from there.

Michelle Ockers: Right. You spoke a moment ago about some of your aspirations for the organisation, contribution you wanted to try to make to people, about wanting to be innovative. It sounds like you had an idea of what kind of organisation you wanted to create right from the start, so what did you want HOST to be known for?

And following on from that, how did you need, or want your leaders to behave, in order to achieve that aspiration for what you wanted HOST to be known for?

David Keegan: Good question. I think I found myself in one of those situations that a lot of leaders, when you start up a company, find yourself in, where you go, "All these things I've complained about in the past in previous organisations, I now have to be responsible for, and deal with."

I was very clear that I wanted HOST to be an organisation that was prepared to take risks, that was prepared to drive real, practical change. I didn't want to be an organisation that would come in with a pre-defined idea of how to do things; I wanted to be able to co-design programs and solutions with the people who were affected day-to-day.

I wanted us to be known for innovation and for trying new things, and I wanted us to not be an organisation that spent a lot of time talking, but was quite practical, and was happy to learn as we went, rather than necessarily having the perfect end-point in mind, and so in order to achieve that, I was really clear that I needed leaders who were confident to lead, and to lead in ambiguity at times.

And part of that involves being prepared to take risks, being prepared to make decisions, being able to access information at the right time and the right place, and to have leaders that were empowered to really drive our vision forward, rather than being an organisation where I called all the shots, and everyone waited for me to tell them what to do.

That was principally one of the motivators for us to embark on a coaching approach.

Michelle Ockers: It's a pretty slow way to work if you've got staff spread so wide, if everyone's waiting for you to make the decisions, right?

David Keegan: We had some real practical communication barriers, in that we weren't all located in the same place, we relied on technology that wasn't always reliable.

I really wanted to empower leaders to lead.

Michelle Ockers: Was this common in the sector? Was this the way your leaders would've been used to working, or were you looking for a fairly big shift from the organisations or the environment they would've been used to?

David Keegan: It's not something I would say is usual. I think that there's a couple of reasons for that. One, is that the leaders I was working with were probably, by nature of our rapid start-up, were relatively inexperienced. They had primarily been really good caseworkers or front line workers that had found themselves in leadership roles, and I think that's not uncommon in many NGO's or even non-NGO's to have leaders find themselves in those situations.

Many of the leaders that we have were used to having accountability to people above them, who basically told them what their job was.

I think the additional factor was that the context that we were working in, particularly with Nauru, was very risk averse, and very political, as you would know, and those things tended to work against people's creativity, and so at the time, there was a tendency for people to be risk averse, and to, I guess, tow the line, rather than to look at how they could be creative.

The irony of that, is that in most of the context we want to work, creativity is what you need, because the normal structures don't exist, and the normal services don't exist, or resources.

Michelle Ockers: Understandable. It was quite a big stretch you were looking for out of people? Quite a big shift you were wanting them to make. As the leader of an organisation, what's your view on potential contribution of learning, and how do you want learning to happen to create this kind of shift?

David Keegan: As a leader, I have gotten to where I am because of other people who've helped me to learn. I think leadership is something that you don't learn from a textbook alone, I think it's something that you need other people and mentors to support you with.

So for me, I was very clear that in order to be a good leader, you needed to have a desire to self-learn, and to keep learning, and you also needed to be able to learn from others, and to not necessarily to learn in a way where people tell you

what to do, but to learn how to make decisions, to learn how to understand what your job is.

And what I've found myself in, was a situation where I had leaders who instead of going, "Okay, what can I do to fix this problem?" Would sit back and refer it up the line to go, "What would you have me do about this?"

I wanted to help people to learn that there's another way, and I guess in answer to your question, my personal journey has been very influenced by people who have helped me to do that, and I guess I wanted to pass that on to the people that were working for me.

Michelle Ockers: You decided as part of this approach, this philosophy, the shift you were wanting to make, the coaching, was an approach you wanted to use to support the development of your leaders, and to empower them. Can we take a look more specifically at your leadership coaching program?

How long from the time you set up the organisation was it until you started the leadership coaching program?

David Keegan: It was about six months, I think. Certainly our first six months were very intensely about getting basic things set up, so it was very early in our journey that we decided to get this going, but about six months, I think.

Michelle Ockers: Okay. I think it's fairly clear, but why did you choose coaching as the solution and not some other form of learning support, or other form of learning intervention to make the shift you wanted to make?

David Keegan: There's probably two main reasons. One, as I said, effectively I had gained so much from executive coaching myself in the past, and really making that transition as a social worker myself, from direct service working to leadership and then to executive roles.

For me, it had been a model that had worked fantastic. The second one was, I was in a situation where I needed to create a sense of safety for leaders, where they could explore and recognize their own learning journey, so in terms of a learning approach, coaching provided a way that information and advice and resources could be tailored to the individual.

And I was in a situation where I had leaders of all different levels, and to me it would've been ... I could've put together, or enrolled people into courses, but I didn't feel like people would've got the tailored information they needed, and I wanted a program that could work with people at their own level, and encourage self-directed learning, rather than people always waiting to be fed information.

So if you remember part of what I was trying to create was leaders who were self-motivated, able to resource information they needed, and being able to respond to the situations that come before them, given that many were working

in environments where you couldn't write policy and direction to cover every situation.

So I needed people to use our values, to use our philosophy, and make decisions real-time. Coaching provided, in my view, a way that people could talk through, have a sounding board in a safe way, without a supervisor who's ultimately trying to keep them accountable for their employment.

And to feel safe to be able to talk about the things they're struggling with, but also get real-time advice and direction. The coaching program also allowed me to get real-time feedback, which I couldn't get from a training course in the same way. Yes, you could do a feedback session at the end of training, but I felt through the coaching program, one of the things we'd built in was that as we went through, I was able to get feedback about the kind of things that people were talking about.

Not individually, but around the themes, and around the challenges that people were facing day-to-day, and I could respond to that in real-time.

Michelle Ockers: I think Karen's going to dig into that a little bit more with you. I'm going to hand over to Karen to start looking at some of the process aspects, and how did the coaching program hang together.

Before I do, there's a couple of things you touched on there, which I think in the learning and development world, we talk about a lot, and one is the idea of safety and creating safe spaces for people to learn and grow, and the other one is personalization, and the learning experience being personalized, but often we talk about technology solutions, I think what you hit on there is that coaching is almost the ultimate form of personalization; that one-on-one support to help people to grow in a safe environment.

Really relevant things to pull out. Over to you Karen, to talk about process.

Karen Moloney: Thanks Michelle. Just want to take a little step back, because we're almost ready to dive into the detail, but just thinking about coaching as a process, when it's something ... I've been through a lot of coaching myself, it pushes personal boundaries, and challenges commonly held beliefs, which can be quite a confronting thing to do for a coachee.

Working with the right coach is key to the success of any kind of coaching activity. How did you go about selecting coaches, or a coaching provider, to work with your organisation employees at scale like that?

David Keegan: I guess I drew upon my own experience. There are different coaching approaches out there that I had been aware of; some of them focus more on facilitating the coachee's learning, some of them are a bit more directive.

I was particularly looking for one that was able to blend a couple of different roles, essentially I was looking for my team being able to have a coach that could be like their personal mentor, their teacher, their guide.

Someone who was able to not just listen and reflect back to them, but also provide them with information, and direct them to resources that they could continue that self-learning process.

I worked through my network, and through a coach that I had previously worked with to find a group that could do that. I was also particularly looking for, because I had staff in various different places, and I wanted a consistent approach across the whole network, I was also looking for someone that could do that through an online platform.

Karen Moloney: Okay. I might just dig into a little bit more about the actual program itself, and what it looked like, because part of the story that I was really particularly interested in, because when I've come across coaching within organisations previously, it's been kind of more at that exec level.

It's usually one-on-one and confidential, and the relationship is between the coach and the coachee, and the management don't get to see anything that happens behind that, and I think that was quite different about what you did, so could you just explain to us an outline of what your program looked like, and how it worked?

David Keegan: Sure. What we went with was a program that went for 10 sessions, and at either end there was what we call a 360 review, so the intention was that the coaching program would start and finish with a three-way meeting between the coachee, the coach and the supervisor of the coachee.

And the purpose of that being that at the beginning, the person's supervisor was brought into a discussion about not only their development needs, but also the strength that the person already had.

As an organisation, we're very focused on trying to use strength-based approaches, and trying to work with what's possible, rather than what the deficit is, and so we also built in a strong focus on allowing leaders to identify their strengths by using a program called Strengths Finder, and so basically across this 10 week program, except for the beginning and the end, the coach would work through with the leader at their own pace, through some particular objectives.

What was a bit different about this, is that we were able to set our broader objectives, and at the time, what we were going for was trying to create a culture amongst our leaders, where they could feel safe to fail, so safe to make decisions and learn from those if they don't work.

We wanted to build a culture of innovation, and we wanted to encourage leaders to be able to respond in real-time to real life situations, without having

to wait for someone more senior to respond, within reason and within policy, but we wanted to empower leaders to act, but we wanted leaders to be able to respond to the day-to-day challenges that are faced.

And so basically in each coaching session, the coach would work through, whether it be a practical tool on helping the leader to understand how to prioritize and delegate tasks, or it might be working through with the coachee, what their learning needs are, and what they could do about developing their own learning plan.

And the idea being, sorry, that you get to the end with a three-way meeting and you evaluate success, as well as the continuation of that, so it didn't just end at the 10th session; the idea was that the coach would hand over to the supervisor to continue that learning approach beyond that.

Karen Moloney: Sure. Something you've touched on already, is that you were getting real-time feedback through this process. Can you just explain a bit about what sort of feedback you were getting, and what form that took, and how you were able to use it?

David Keegan: Sure, so we met with the coordinator for this program, we basically worked with two coaches, we had 20 participants across our organisation that were all very frontline leaders, through to middle leaders; we didn't include any executives in this, because what we wanted to do was really offer this approach to frontline leaders.

What we did, was we basically had monthly meetings, or roughly monthly meetings, where we got feedback about high-level things, and so one of the things I was really keen to do was to be able to respond as issues emerged as a leader, to be able to respond to issues.

So for example, after the first round of 360 or three-way meetings, it became apparent that our leaders were struggling to provide honest and genuine feedback to their supervisees, and so getting that feedback allowed me to do some internal communications with the team to share my own story about, and tips about how I've learned to give feedback, and what I've found useful with doing that.

I was able to respond to that, and respond to those needs as we go, but also I was able to get feedback about some of the barriers that my leaders were facing in their day-to-day work, and work with my leadership team to try and manage those, and undo those barriers so that there was confidence in the process overall.

Karen Moloney: I think that was again, another element of this story that I really liked, was around how you were using that data real-time, to act and take your organisation in the direction you wanted to take it, because there's lots of talk around at the moment about data analytics, and in our space, and people

assume that you need to have a system for that, and be tracking particular metrics, etcetera.

Whereas this was actually quite a basic solution, in terms of that it was feedback from coaching sessions, and the coaches had identified particular things that were coming back, and they were the things that you were able to act on, so I just wanted to kind of ... point of note for the audience there, is it doesn't always have to be the big shiny thing; sometimes it's simple as taking some feedback and seeing what you can do with it.

David Keegan: And if anything, it was actually very much like that. When we had our meetings, the meetings would happen between me and the HR manager, and another senior manager, and we would talk through the kind of things that were coming up, but we were also able to provide feedback to the coaches about how we would like them to direct staff in relation to particular issues.

For me, that was really invaluable, to be able to adapt the program as we went, and was very much consistent with the way we wanted to work, which was to be flexible and agile in the way that we operate.

Karen Moloney: Totally.

What particular results have you seen during and after the program?

David Keegan: I think during the program, it got off to a slow start, but by the end, people were asking us for more, so I think by the end, people were saying to me, "This has been the first time I've had the opportunity to really reflect on my own journey as a leader, and to reflect on what I need, where I felt safe to do that."

I've found that leaders were more willing to bring up issues in our organisational leadership meetings, whereas before they'd sit there silent and listen to you revel on about the updates.

I've found, although we're still working on this, that leaders were more active in trying to find resolutions to issues, rather than just passing it up the line, so for me there were really significant gains like that.

But there were also some realisations that this takes some time, and that there are other aspects of our culture that we need to work on, but at least it revealed to me how we could work on these kind of issues in an ongoing way, and we're now considering further coaching programs with different segments of the leadership to address various aspects of that.

Karen Moloney: You mentioned a slow start there, was that because it was something that was quite new for people? It took a little bit of time to kind of get people used to that idea and get buy in and uptake?

David Keegan: One of our learnings was that not everybody knows what coaching is.

Karen Moloney:	Okay.
David Keegan:	Definitely, I took for granted that, probably because of my own coaching experience, that I knew what it was, and that everybody else didn't, and we actually did a number of Skype online sessions with the leaders to introduce them to the coaching program.
	We explained about coaching and what it is, but we actually found it took people, generally somewhere between two to four sessions before they actually really got what it was about, and I think initially, the feedback we got was that leaders were feeling like it was some kind of accountability process, or some kind of performance review process.
	Rather than understanding it as a learning process, and so if I was to go back again, I'd probably emphasize the learning journey itself, which at the time probably wasn't emphasised as much as it could've been.
	We've found that was difficult, and also people making time for it in their work. So you constantly get sessions cancelled because people would say, "I'm too busy, I haven't got time for that." So helping leaders to realsze why this is important, and why it's something that they should invest in, even though I had, as a CEO, said that we're going to do this and this is why it's important.
	I think we needed to allow a bit more time to allow people to get the concept, and to share with each other about their experience, but I guess that the format of the program allowed us to respond to that as it went, and we did a lot more education about that in the early states, more than we had planned to.
David Keegan:	And I think, as you say, coaching is primarily something that executives do, it's not something that we've found at a frontline level, and so that was certainly a learning outcome for us.
Karen Moloney:	Thinking long-term, what sort of impact has the program had on your employees, particularly under company culture?
David Keegan:	I wouldn't say that it's completely revolutionized our culture, but I think it's had a significant impact in our formative, early years. I think culture's something that we always have to work on.
	But it's certainly something that I think helped us through the messiness of our early period, to have a space that we could, with some accuracy, respond to what our leaders needed day-to-day.
	So I think it has, as I said before, increased the confidence of our leaders. It's certainly at least created a common language, so one of the things that the coaches talked about in the sessions with them, was operating styles, for example.

Which is understanding how different people operate in different ways, and focus on different things, and learning how to use your own strengths and operating styles to engage best with other co-workers, it's something that I've heard people bring up in meetings, it's something that leaders talk about with each other, it's a language that we didn't have before that allows us to explain and talk about things.

Part of the outcome of the coach program was we got a table with ... as part of the process, they do a strengths assessment, we got a table representing all the strengths that our leaders have, and that has helped us to better look at gap filling that we might need to do in future recruitment around leadership.

So as you might expect with being a human service organisation, a lot of our leaders are very much in the touchy-feely, emotional side of things, and that's great, that's what we need, but trying to balance that out with different kind of leaders that complement our team, has been something that we've been able to get from it.

And look, I think generally, it's given people a level of confidence and motivation to continue their own learning. I think one of the most encouraging things I heard from one of the leaders, was that he was inspired to continue that journey, and to continue to learn and to look for other mentors that he could work with, to continue learning as a leader, rather than previously, I think he just thought that management was something that you just kind of did, and you learn a few skills, and you did it.

But I think learning maybe the softer skills or the higher order skills of leadership has been something that we wouldn't have got through a direct training program.

Michelle Ockers: Anything you can do to light the fire, that desire to keep learning, I think is a great outcome, and it's that shift you described, from, "Is this about performance reviews, is this about performance management?" To, "Hey, it's actually about growth, and now learning." And if that's continued, that's a great outcome for your organisation.

David, you've shared lots of things about how you went about stuff, what you did and why, we like to be really practical on the podcast, and help people to try new things, so if anyone listening is keen to do more with coaching, or with using coaching to help build culture, what would be your key take away tips to help them get started with that?

David Keegan: My view would be that you take some time to think about obviously what you want from the program, and what are the broad goals. I think obviously, as I said before, it takes some time to invest in understanding what coaching is. I think there are very different versions of coaching out there, they all offer some different pros and cons, so spend some time getting to know, and finding the right coaches.

The two coaches we had were perfect in terms of understanding the context and the kind of learning needs that we had at that point in time, and I think giving it a go, and being willing to adapt as you go, I think one of the hardest things as a leader sometimes, is to accept that you may not have got it right, or that you may not know what's needed at the time.

And I've found through the process, there was some confronting feedback that I had to take on board that was more about challenging my assumptions about what was going on, and less about whether something was right or wrong, and so I think be really open to what the coaching can reveal, and to giving people the space to create their own sense of who they are as a leader.

And I think because it's not something that you're meant to control and manage to the finite detail; it's meant to be an organic process, so that's probably my main tips.

Michelle Ockers: Thank you. We're big fans of letting go of control, here.

Karen Moloney: Letting go of control and just giving it a go.

Michelle Ockers: Yes.

David Keegan: That's right.

Karen Moloney: We've got one final question we like to ask all our guests, so David, could you share with us the biggest thing that you do for your own professional development?

                    I'm wondering what that will be ?!

David Keegan: Clearly coaching has been effective, and I still see my coach occasionally, but we call it having a coffee catch up now, rather than coaching.

                    To be serious though, I tend to have found that surrounding myself with wise people who challenge the way I think, has been the most effective way to learn, and I do that through two ways. One is through podcasts actually, by listening, I particularly like to listen to podcasts about other people who have done startups, and people who've innovated and created.

                    And I particularly like to find people on my LinkedIn network, or beyond, who are innovators and entrepreneurs, and who think outside the box, because it helps me to challenge my assumptions, and to think about what else I don't know, so it's about doing things that spark my own learning.

                    It's something that's taken me a long time to be comfortable with, but I find that I love learning from other people.

Michelle Ockers: Do you have any favourite podcasts, David, or anything in particular you're into at the moment?

David Keegan: I've been listening to an NPR podcast called 'How I Built This', which is mostly about general business start-ups, but there's some great stuff in there that I've found useful.

Michelle Ockers: Thank you. Share a link to one in the show notes.

Karen Moloney: Yes, and we'll pop a link to your LinkedIn profile there as well, if anybody would like to get in touch with you to find out more about what you did, how you did it, who you used, what you used.

David Keegan: Sure.

Karen Moloney: And obviously if they're interested in finding out more about your work at Host as well. Thank you so much David, for taking the time to share your story with us today, I think there's just so many different little pieces in there that we've unpacked, so hopefully that'll get some people thinking about how they can use coaching differently in their organisations. Appreciate your time.

David Keegan: No problem, my pleasure.

Karen Moloney: If you're finding Learning Uncut valuable, please take a moment to rate the podcast, and leave a review comment for us. We really appreciate your help to ensure that as many learning professionals as possible have an opportunity to learn from the work of our fabulous guests.

                  Thank you very much.