

Learning Uncut Disruption Series
Chris Coladonato– Working as a Distributed Learning Team
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Welcome back to the Learning Uncut Disruption Series. My guest today is Chris Coladonato and we are talking about working as a distributed team. Chris, could you please introduce yourself and tell us a little about the work you've been doing for the past couple of years in regard to distributed teams?

Chris Coladonato:

I would be delighted. So, I am a work from home employee and I have been for the past 12 years. I'm a talent development professional at an insurance company and it just happened by accident that I started working from home. It wasn't my choice, it just happened to be the option I had. And when I started working from home I realized I didn't really have a lot of tools or know how to do it. So I started building my skills and then over the past couple of years I realized if I don't know how to work from home, others probably don't as well. And you can't really be effective or productive if you don't really understand how to work effectively in your environment. So I've been working on building tools and resources, curating and sharing those back with my organization as well as upskilling our leaders to lead people who work from home.

Michelle Ockers:

So Chris, what has the last week looked like for you because at this point in time we are still very early days of organizational responses to covid-19 and the shifts in ways of working. What have you been doing drawing on that expertise that you've built up over the past week?

Chris Coladonato:

So, what happened was last week our CEO announced that he recommended people work from home if they could, to be safe and for their safety as well as the community safety. And it was at that moment in time I realized we are going to really need to help people who have been put into this unplanned transition to work from home. We need to give them the tools and resources and the knowhow in order to be successful. So I started out with sharing three tips for getting started when working from home. I then have started shifting into adding additional resources. We're building a work from homepage on our company intranet and I'm curating resources there. Then we'll be moving into helping our leaders get better at how do I, during this time of unknown and uncertainty, how do I lead people when I maybe can't see them and they're not sitting right next to me?

Michelle Ockers:

So Chris, let's start with those three quick tips because they would be for individuals. So what were those three quick tips for getting started with working from home?

Chris Coladonato:

So the first tip, especially during this unplanned transition, is really to define your space and your equipment needs. Now I just need to put this out there that this is really an uncertain time and you're going to be working with kids at home, potentially spouses, partners. So you need to be flexible with them. You need to be flexible with yourself. So I would encourage people to think about, what do they need to be successful and know that it may change over

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the weeks and days. So, do I need a monitor? Do I need my keyboard, my mouse? Can I go pick them up at work? If I can't, where can I carve out a space to work at home? Is that in a spare room or do I simply just have my dining room table?

Chris Coladonato:

The one thing I'd like to also point out is it may seem, hey, I can just sit on my couch and work with my laptop, but in the long run that's really not good for your health. It is going to cause some pain in your body and your shoulders as well as in the long run probably hurt you. The second thing is set your boundaries. Now this isn't about setting your space boundaries, but set your boundaries with your space, your time and availability and especially when you are what I like to call coworking with others in the same house. So, what time will you work if there's somebody else in your house that's working? Do you need to trade off on and off if you have to take care of the kids? What time are you going to start working? What time are you going to end working? Because working from home, you lose that commute. You don't have that trigger to tell you when is your workday starting and when is it ending?

Chris Coladonato:

And then lastly, I always recommend discuss as a team how you will communicate and collaborate. It may seem simple, we can just do the same things as we have in the office, but you really have to be intentional about, okay, are we going to use a virtual conferencing system? Will we use cloud-based services? How do we get a hold of each other quickly? Is that an email? Is that a text? Is that a Slack? So you have to make those decisions and the sooner you make all of those decisions, the faster you can be productive and effective.

Michelle Ockers:

So, we've talked a little bit about what it means for us as individuals, as learning professionals, and you've started moving into the next space, which is about learning teams. It's not uncommon for people on learning teams to spend some time working from home. But the reality now is for some learning teams, everyone is working from home. So it's a fully distributed team in that sense. You talked about taking protocols, it's easy to go there first and it's important to get that right. But what else is important? What do people really need to know about starting to work as a fully distributed team?

Chris Coladonato:

One thing that a lot of people miss, they think about the technology, I'll use Zoom, I'll use WebEx. They think about what cloud based services. So how will they exchange files because they probably already have that set up. They may also talk about when will we hold our meetings now and what tool we'll use. But what they may not think about is the people aspect. Now that you're fully distributed, there is no in the office interactions, there is no, I'm passing you by the hallway. So, what you need to do is think about what connections do you need and when can you set those up. So you could have a Friday coffee chat with your team. You could have a regular one on one with somebody that you're used to seeing in the office. Well maybe I just have a 15 minute chat with them. And what that allows you to do is keep that personal connection with your team, which will allow your team to work more effectively throughout this time when they are fully distributed and not in the office or co-located.

Michelle Ockers:

So you touched a little bit on team meetings, other practices, are there practices you recommend people either maintain as they transition from having been working face to face

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in office environments to working fully distributed or introduce as part of like a daily or weekly operating rhythm?

Chris Coladonato:

It goes back to that connection. So, one thing they may not think to do is have a good morning chat or maybe they use Skype or Microsoft Teams. Go into a channel if you can and just throw down, "Hey, how's everybody doing today?" Because again, you're missing that connection and you have to be really intentional about it. I'd also encourage people to continue their one on one meetings. In fact, they may add more of those because you aren't seeing each other day to day. So you might want to add an additional one or two. And then as I mentioned before, keep your regular team meeting. I think those are vitally important, but you may want to throw in some additional, let's just hang out and let's get to know each other as a team and let's continue to build our relationships that we may be building in the office.

Michelle Ockers:

So are there some common traps that people should be looking out for or let's talk about traps. We'll move on to indicators of challenges later. Are there things that people in their kind of rush to move to working from home and not having the experience to draw on that they might fall into that we should try to avoid?

Chris Coladonato:

I think one of the traps is, I'll go back to setting boundaries. So you do lose that commute time. It is very easy to sit in your chair from 7:00 am all the way to 4:00 pm or 5:00 pm or 6:00 pm and knock it out of your chair because now your meetings are on a web conference or they're on a phone call. So it's very easy to sit all all day long and probably work longer than you're used to. So, one of the things you need to do is be intentional about taking breaks, getting up from your chair, maybe you stand while you're doing a phone call or a web conference, maybe you take a break at lunchtime and take a walk outside. It is so vitally important for our energy, for us to do that and to keep our energy up throughout the day. And it's something that people often forget about.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so if you are a leader of a learning team or even just someone keeping an eye out on your colleagues in this new situation, what are some of the signs you might look for that something is not going as well as it should or could, and that you may need to take some sort of action to support either individuals or the team?

Chris Coladonato:

One of the things you want to keep an eye on, and it's tough because this is a time for all of us of uncertainty and we're all dealing with a lot of emotions. So productivity and work product might slip a little bit and you just need, you want to be aware of that. But if it continues to slip, that might be worth a conversation. You want to reach out to that person to just check in on them and ask, "What challenges are you facing?" or "What obstacles are getting in your way with this working at home?" The other thing is listen for who may go silent or who may talk more and it doesn't just have to be on a phone call. So if you normally use a chat feature or you have something like Workplace by Facebook or Microsoft Teams, if you have somebody that might go dark, maybe they don't turn their light on on their Skype or on any other text-based messaging and that's unusual for them, pick up the phone, give them a call.

Chris Coladonato:



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If you have somebody that's talking a little bit more, they may have a need for connection more so they are sharing more. They're on Microsoft Teams more or Slack more. That might be a, "Hey, I'm lonely over here and I really need some help." I'd encourage leaders to really check in with their teams often and just do a quick little, "How is your day going? How are you mentally dealing with all of this?" Could be you asked for people to do an emoji, what's your gif today? How are you feeling? And it just really helps you to keep a pulse on emotions, especially during this time.

Michelle Ockers:

So in terms of still focusing on the learning team itself, in terms of ensuring that people are functioning at as well as they can as we make this transition, are there any other aspects that we should be highlighting?

Chris Coladonato:

I think it's just keeping an eye on what do they need to be successful? So do they have one, the tech? Two, are they able to set themselves up to be successful? So, are they having any challenges or obstacles and being really open and asking that question. Opening up a video chat if you can so you can start to see each other face to face and have the whole team do that as well. We are all in need of even more personal connection and more social interaction during this time. So what you don't want to do is create any isolation in your team. So bring the team, the entire team together and again turn your webcams on, turn your video cameras on so that everybody can see each other and just keep asking questions. What challenges are you facing today? What went well for you today? So we can really keep a pulse check on those emotions and the mental health of our people as they shift to working from home.

Michelle Ockers:

Chris, there's a couple of other complimentary conversations which will be going out as part of the Learning Uncut Disruption Series, which I think pick up nicely with some of the points you've made there. One of those is a conversation with Megan Torrance about agile work practices and another is a conversation with Nick Shackleton-Jones about emotion and the impact that has on specifically on learning, but I'm sure some of that will be relevant as well so we can elaborate further for listeners in those episodes, watch out for those. Chris, what is it that you think learning professionals are really well positioned, perhaps even uniquely positioned to bring to their organizations right now?

Chris Coladonato:

I think that learning professionals may think that this is not the perfect opportunity for them because now their workforce is going out and they're all focused on themselves, but this is actually a really great time. Even if you are not a distributed working professional, you are a learning professional and what learning professionals do really well is we're able to curate information and share it back to those that we support in a way that makes it easy for them to get what they need when they need it.

Chris Coladonato:

There is a lot of information out there on working from home. A lot of really great information about this as well as how to lead virtually so to encourage learning professionals to take this opportunity to curate and use all of their curation skills to pull together a nice set of resources for their organization and they can keep curating as we go throughout this, since we're not quite sure how long it'll last and they can keep listening to their customers. What

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pain points are they having? What challenges? So use those skills that you have as a learning professional, listening to your customers, really taking in what they say and giving a product that will meet their needs. You're just doing it on a topic that maybe you don't know about, but you certainly are a subject matter expert in curation and learning and that's where you can use your skills.

Michelle Ockers:

So again, this idea of communication and connection is really important and we're talking about outside of the learning team, if we're going to be creating business value or business impact and really helping the wider organization right now, there's another level of communication and connection that's important, which is to others in the business to understand what they're experiencing, what their needs are right now. So, all of those practices you talked about within the teams for connection, communication, I assume that at least someone, the learning leader, maybe some other people in the organization are going to need to be replicating those with others in the organization. What tips are you giving people or what practices are you encouraging in your own organization for the learning team with staying connected with really listening to and responding to the needs of others in the organization?

Chris Coladonato:

Yeah, I think it goes back to what we talked about as you mentioned in communicating, connecting with your own team. So asking those questions, asking "What challenges are you facing now that you are working from home?" One of them may be going back to one of your previous episodes, they now have to do webinars where maybe they just had face to face meetings. If we have the skills in virtual facilitation, that is something that we can help with. So really just digging in and asking questions and asking questions on a regular basis. What challenges are you facing? What obstacles? What is a pain point that you have? What are you not able to do now that you're in this new distributed world? And then seeing where might the learning team be able to support and help with that? Because this is going to be a very fluid situation so what may be true today, maybe different a week from now.

Michelle Ockers:

Keep talking. Keep asking.

Chris Coladonato:

Keep talking.

Michelle Ockers:

Chris, are there any final words of advice you'd like to provide to learning professionals and learning teams who are having to figure out or scale rapidly with working in a distributed way?

Chris Coladonato:

I think it goes back to two things. First of all, just do what you know best and that's where you can add the most value. So listen to your customer, which is the business and use your skills whether they are curation skills, maybe you create some short videos, helping people understand how to work from home based on the materials that you curate. So, use your talent development professional skills. The second one is don't forget that we're all human and while we may lean on the technology, we may focus, is my office set up correctly? We may focus on is everybody using the tools right? Are we sharing what we need to share? But

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don't forget about the human aspect. This is a very different situation for all of us. And when you move to work from home, that can be isolating even when there's people in the same house with you. So, check in with each other, check in with your customers and just keep doing that because what you don't want to do is lose sight of your customers or yourselves.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you so much for sharing your experience and tips with us today Chris. There will be a link to Chris' LinkedIn profile in the show notes for anyone who would like to take a closer look and Chris is available I am sure online from time to time by our LinkedIn and Twitter. We'll include a Twitter account for Chris as well, a Twitter handle. I'm sure she would be happy, Chris, to answer questions or engage in a conversation with others.

Chris Coladonato:

Absolutely. And just feel free to reach out.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you so much.

About Michelle Ockers

Michelle Ockers works with business and learning leaders to realise the untapped potential of learning in organisations. She is an organisational learning strategist and modern workplace learning practitioner. Michelle works with organisations to develop and implement transformative organisational learning strategy, and to build the capability of their learning team. She delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events. Michelle also mentors learning professionals at all career stages on career planning and professional development.

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

- *Australian Institute of Training and Development Dr Alastair Rylatt Award for L&D Professional of the Year – for outstanding contribution to the practice of Learning and Development*
- *Internet Time Alliance Jay Cross Memorial Award – for outstanding contribution to the field of informal learning*

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