Michelle Ockers:
Welcome to this episode of Learning Uncut Elevate, where we dig into one topic to help you elevate your practice in learning and development. Before we get started, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and the connection to land, sea and community, particularly the people of the Brinja Yuin Nation on whose beautiful coastal lands I sit as we record this conversation. Today, I would like to welcome coming to us from the East Coast of the US, Catherine Lombardozzi. Welcome, Catherine.

Catherine Lombardozzi:
Thank you.

Michelle Ockers:
And you are our repeat guest and someone whose contributions to scholarly practice, to taking quality research and helping us to apply it in practice, I really respect. Last time we spoke about self-directed learning and scaffolding self-directed learning, which was off the back of a body of research you did in conjunction with or for the Learning Guild. They published your research report on that. So we'll pop a link to that one for listeners into the show notes. And today we're talking about another super on point, super important contemporary topic that you've done research on, which was published, I think, last year, 2024. Is that right?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
That's correct. It was done and I think it came out in August or September.

Michelle Ockers:
Current practices in leader development. Very timely. Let's start with that question around, you know, why now? Leadership development has been around for decades, but your report suggests there's things happening at the moment which are leading to shifts in leadership development. What's the context? What prompted the research?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
Well, I had a personal prompt for one. I had been doing a lot of work articulating what leaders can do to develop people. So I had a whole framework for leaders working with their direct reports and helping them to develop skills. And one of the questions that gets asked when you start talking about that sort of thing is how do we help our leaders to have the skills to do this, right? Because you're saying they need to be coaches, they need to be good feedback providers, all these things that are part of a development plan with their employees. And so their development as leaders comes up as part of that. And I had a kind of a stock answer to that. I mean, I know what we do to develop people. I mean, that's a pretty standard kind of approach. But I thought to myself, what are we doing in leadership development these days? Because it has to be different from when I was in the field. I mean, when I did leadership development, we were still doing week-long programs. That was like

ages and ages and ages ago. So I thought we must be doing something different now. And so I wanted to delve into it. And I got in touch with the Learning Guild and said, I'd like to research this and make it into a report if that's something that you'd like. So that was how that all came about. But the reason it's important to think about, is because the world is different post-pandemic. The things that managers are having to worry about, the tools and techniques that we have at our disposal for helping people to develop, all of that is changing and emerging. New things are emerging every day. And so you have to ask the question, should we be doing something different? For one, and then I said, well, when we ask that question, what do we decide? Are we doing something different? And so that's what I wanted to explore.

Michelle Ockers:
And it's really nice that you can take something that's come to your attention that you are personally curious about, you want to dig into and turn that into a piece of work that can then be shared to help inform others about the same topic. So well done on reaching out with that curiosity to Learning Guild. How did you do the research, Catherine?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
Well, it was a two-pronged approach. First, I went looking for industry and academic reports that focused on what are the characteristics of effective leader development. So there's lots of pundits, consultants, professional organizations that ask that question with some regularity. And so I looked for those reports. There's been research done, mostly on individual techniques, not on techniques across the board or overall strategy. So I was looking for those. So I went looking for those kinds of reports in the literature. There weren't that many. So that makes it manageable, which is lovely. And I also limited it to, for the most part, the last five years. So I didn't want to see things that were before that because obviously I was looking for something new. And then the other, the problem you have with doing that is anything that's published is two years in the making, you know. So we just have a slow publishing cycle for most things. Even things that are just one year in the making, you know, could be a little bit old in terms of when the data was collected. And so I wanted to real-time talk to some people who were doing the thing. And so I used my network and Learning Guild's network to find 13 professionals who are doing leadership development in organizations or who are active consultants who work with organizations and help them to devise a leader development strategy. So I talked to 13 people, did live interviews, and asked them the kinds of questions that I wanted answered. And that's what I used as data to pull together the support.

Michelle Ockers:
And you said there weren't that many sources that you found, but I've just had a quick look. And if listeners hear me flicking, I'm just flicking paper through the report itself, which is well-thumbed from my end, Catherine. I've referred to it a lot, well scribbled upon. There's almost four pages worth of references. It's very kindly being produced in a medium-sized font, I will say. But there's quite an extensive list of references if anyone wants to have a look at any of the background research that you did. So, as always, a nice solid evidence base for you to work from. The other

thing I want to say about the report is it's very clear, it's very punchy. So, you get to the point, you cover actually a lot of ground in this 24-page report. but you're very clear and on point getting to the heart of what's shifted, what strategies are being modified, as well as there's 10 characteristics around leader development and approaches to leader development, some of which reflect what's shifted. And we're going to focus on the what's shifted, what strategies are being modified, but also some of it is truly enduring. For instance, being well-grounded and evidence-informed. That never goes out of style, right?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
No, no, I hope not. My it's my claim to fame, so to speak. But we definitely want to be well grounded. And thank you for saying that I have to say this was one of the harder reports I've written because it was all over the place. It was hard to try to figure out how to make it make a point. And then I also thought to myself, is this saying anything new to people? Because if you read a lot of literature, which I do, it felt like there wasn't as much exciting about it. But then when I really started to try to make it readable, to your point, it really did start to bubble up things that felt concise and felt actionable to people. And that's what I was aiming for.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah, I guess part of the challenge, as you point out in the report, is the idea of leadership itself. What is leadership and the breadth of people at different kinds of levels of experience, different stages of their career who are stepping into leadership roles and need leadership development? and the variety of individual needs can make it quite challenging. So I think one of the things I quite like about the report is you haven't been highly prescriptive. You've kind of looked at some fundamentals which could be applied to a range of contexts and three key things that you picked up where strategies are being modified. So we're going to dig into those three key things now. Those three key things were blended, experiential and relational. Which one of those do you want to start with?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
Let's start with the experiential.

Michelle Ockers:
Ok, so your report clearly highlights that we're moving away from traditional fixed models, one size fits all models to more contextualized and highly experiential learning. So what's driving that shift?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
Well, one of the things that this speaks to what I was just saying, one of the things that's interesting is it's not like we didn't know experiential learning was important for leader development. We've been doing that for decades, right? So what's different about what we're doing now? And it really is just a much more integrated view, you know, that we don't do classes without having an experiential or an application component. People are very intent on doing that. And the reason for that is because whatever skill you're talking about, how an individual leader enacts that is going to be very nuanced based on their context. How I need to develop my people is going

to be different from how you need to develop your people because the skills you're developing is different, the people are different, the context is different, right? So to try to think of something that, to try to deliver a training or a learning event that is one topic for everyone is really hard unless you figure out a way to bring their experiences and their needs into the program or to give them opportunity to start to think through that applicability. How am I going to apply this? How is this going to work for me? And so that has really become quite important for organizations. And the other reason that's important is because whatever we do for leader development has to be immediate, right? There's no, you know, let's do it because someday you're going to need to know how, right? Most of the time what we're trying to do is because there is an initiative in the organization that really requires a certain skill set. And so we want people to be able to immediately go into the workplace and start to apply that. So why not take advantage of that particular reality and integrate that experiential learning and application space into your training program?

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. And one of the things I think was interesting in your report is the observation that the core skills of leadership haven't shifted much, but context has shifted, as you say, which is behind in part, this drive to highly contextualised, highly experiential approaches. Can you give us some examples of the kind of approaches that people are using to achieve this?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
There's a couple of things they're doing. One is they are doing specialized projects, you know, where they are putting the people who are going to a training event or engaging with this developmental program into small groups and saying, we want you to address this issue. We want to use the skills that we're talking about this class for you to address that issue. And so it's a special project outside of their normal work experience. We're seeing a little bit of that. We're seeing a lot of bringing their work needs into the program. I'm taking a course or I'm going through a learning event that's about developing people, let's pick a person on my team and talk about what that person's needs are and how what we're talking about is going to be able to be applied in that particular person's context. So we're doing a lot of that sort of thing. And where their programs are extending over time, which is another thing that we're really getting good at, where they're extending over time, there's a lot of between, group events, assignments to say, take this back to work, do this, come back, we'll talk about how it worked for you or didn't work for you. So there's that constant exchange between learning and doing and learning and doing that I think really is useful as well.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. And that reflection piece, I mean, we all have experiences, but the degree to which we learn from them is, I think, dependent on firstly setting an intention to learn. And also the reflection is a critical part of that. So building that in, which you point out. And that leads into, you talked about sustained approaches. So sustained and blended approaches to support people through leadership development over a period of time was another thing that you highlighted. We were leaning into more these days in effective leader development. What does that look like in practice?

Because the term blended is like, it's wide open, right? What do we mean by blended? What does that look like in leader development?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
Right. Well, as we know, there's lots of different ways that people can develop skills from taking some sort of formal training program to getting coaching on it, reading materials related to it, doing projects that help them to, you know, practice skills or learn things while they're doing things, observing other people. There's just so many different ways. And what blended does is it picks a few of those ways that are appropriate to whatever you're trying to develop in the context you're in and just makes up a piece of it, right? It makes it an arc. It helps you to use the advantages that each of those different techniques brings to the table and put it together in a coherent program. That's what blended is all about. It's about not just willy-nilly giving people a grab bag of different things to do, but actually giving them a set of activities and learning experiences that added together really helped to deepen a skill set in some fashion. Sometimes those things are put in order, so you give people a learning journey of some kind, you know, where you're saying, here's the order you should do these things in. Other times it's not in an order, it's just, people can take advantage of the different elements of the program in whatever order and timeframe they want to, but they still are all of a piece. They relate to one another, they use the same language, you can understand quickly what you're learning in one element of the program is related to what you're learning in other elements of the program. That's a good blend, right? It has that cohesion. It's not just a bunch of stuff put together. So I think that's important. And what we're able to do when you do that is extend it over time. And that's critically important because almost all of the skills that leaders develop or need to develop are skills that are on a very long continuum between a beginner at that skill and being an expert at that skill. It's a very long timeline. You can't just take a class and go from beginner to expert in three days. It takes years, right? And so the more you can pay attention to the development of that skill over time, the better off you're going to be. Now, most of our programs don't do years, but they can do a year. They can do six months. They can do three months where you are saying, Ok, we're going to give you some of the basics then you're going to be out in the world doing the work, developing the skill, trying to utilize the skill. And as you continue to do that, we'll continue to feed you materials that will help you to deepen your skill set in that area. And so recognising that that's what leader development is all about, almost all skills are like that. I think having programs that go over time is critically important.

Michelle Ockers:
Absolutely. There's a really nice example we've had on the Learning Uncut series before from a company called Zed Energy in New Zealand, where not only did they kind of do this blended learning approach, as you say, with a lot of the elements you talk about in the report wound into it over a 12-month period, but then they continued some of the elements as an integrated part of ongoing work. So pods of leaders continuing to meet regularly to set their own leadership development goals in the context of their work to support their work over the coming quarter. And there was a level of sort of accountability and something you call, I think, relational learning, which is what we're going to move into next. So I'll put a link to that in the show notes

if anyone wants to dig into that. I think it's a really fine example that was maybe even a little ahead of its time in the shifts it built in. So relational learning, the human to human side of things, Catherine, your research found that aspects such as peer learning, coaching and mentoring are key components of effective leader development. Why are these human or relational aspects so important? And why are they more important or equally important now as they ever have been? So contextually, what's the importance?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
What came out in my discussions was that the pandemic and the pace of change in organisations, pace of work in organisations, has fractured leadership teams. They don't know one another. They don't talk to one another. Sometimes they're never even in the same building if they're continuing to be working from home offices and being dispersed that way, they just felt like their leadership team was not a team. They didn't have those networks anymore. And the lack of, you know, those week-long leader development programs that we used to do back in the day, where you really did develop a cohort, right, that you hung out with, those things don't happen anymore. So using relational learning techniques is what helps to bring the leadership team together. It helps them to develop those networks to get to know their peers and what their peers are concerned about, what their peers' goals are, to get advice from peers. No matter how good we are, managers will much prefer to listen to each other than to listen to the pundits about what they should be doing, right? Because they figure their peers really know what they're talking about. And so that's why relational learning, I think, has really come to the forefront, is this idea that you mentioned pods with your one podcast guests. There's a lot of that going on, a lot of finding ways to bring small groups of leaders together to regularly talk to one another, and to continue to develop a single skill or have a cohort that they can talk to about whatever it is that they're concerned about. There's more and more leader development teams are trying to support that and initiate that in order to build that leadership cohort as a cohort.

Michelle Ockers:
Mentoring and coaching also get a mention in your report. What's kind of the variety of ways that you were hearing about those two approaches being used?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
Well, I didn't hear as much about mentoring as I heard about coaching. There's a lot of people talking about coaching. The problem is the scalability of coaching. So where it was possible, people really will try to get coaches in there somewhere, because they really feel that one-on-one, very targeted development support can really make a difference to people. It's expensive. It's hard to do. So it's only offered to a small number of a leadership team. When it's done with some sort of a officially certified or professional coach the other way that organizations are doing it is trying to help leaders be coaches to one another and help senior leaders be coaches to the people that work for them. So there's a little bit of that going on, but just because you're in a leadership role doesn't mean you're a good coach, right? So there's a little bit of a tension there. But still, that's partially what people are doing. And one person mentioned AI as a coach. which I just personally, I just cringed at. But he

said, you'd be surprised, you know, it's not there yet. But he thought, you know, to have an AI tool that could answer questions and give advice, he thought would be an advantage into the future as those tools become better equipped to do that.

Michelle Ockers:
It's so interesting people's responses to the idea of AI coaching. I've done some work evaluating a program for the Australian Public Service that was to do with regulatory skills. They trialled the rollout of a conversational coaching bot, which is all about learning transfer. I don't know if you've ever heard of Coach M, which Emma Weber's company, Lever - Transfer of Learning, offers. But I have had a couple of conversations with Emma on the podcast about that coaching bot. What we found with the evaluation of the initiative with the Australian Public Service was people either loved it or they hated it. And that was a little over two years ago. I don't know if it still is polarizing, but some people really took to it. Emma herself was very wary when it was first suggested to her by someone else that she tries it. She was very much, no AI tool could ever do what a human coach does. But the way she ended up approaching it, she was surprised by how effective it was for many people. It was more about the AI tool enabling people to reflect better and have a better quality conversation with themselves. And of course, it's a conversational chatbot. So it's structured, there's some scripting behind it. It's not as free flowing as a large language model like a GPT. I think we'll see more of that into the future. And of course, it does make it more scalable and accessible. But to your point, human coaches, I think they'll still be around for a while yet.

Catherine Lombardozzi:
Right. Yeah. I think people do recognize the difference between a human and a non-human still and prefer the human when they can get it. But that's the problem. You know, given the choice between nothing and a non-human coach or advisor, you know, maybe the non-human is ok.

Michelle Ockers:
Have you ever heard of the Turing Test?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
Yes, absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:
Yes. So I read a book not long ago called The Singularity is Nearer by a fellow named Ray Kurzweil, who's kind of a bit of a futurist. And it's about this idea of the merging of human intelligence and artificial intelligence at some point in the future. And the Turing Test, of course, is around testing an AI, almost like blind testing with people who are able to try to determine, is this a human or is it an AI? And he's predicting the Turing test will be passed before the end of this decade. So watch this space on that.

Catherine Lombardozzi:
I can certainly see that it's getting close. If not past in certain instances, I do think that there are some really high end chatbots and other kinds of things that really do feel quite natural.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. So watch this space on coaching. That's a little sidetrack, but I think an interesting and topical one nonetheless. So let's talk then about practical steps. What can L&D professionals do? What steps can they take to improve the impact of their leader development programs?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
I think that the first message that every single professional I talked to spoke to was make sure you have a strategic objective here. Leadership development kind of writ large is not near as important as tying a leadership development initiative to something that the organization really needs and really needs right now. Whatever that might be so the first bit of advice is find your strategic purpose and make sure that it's really lined up with what your organisation is trying to achieve, what your senior leadership team is trying to do, so that you're not just doing some sort of generic leadership development program, but in fact, you are contributing to the organisation's ability to advance its goals. So I think that's number one. Number two, I do think that it's very useful for professionals to have a good understanding of the dynamics at play in learning. So how do I know whether the assignments that I'm giving to people for application are actually going to help them to learn something? Well, you have to know something about what problem-based learning looks like. There are frameworks that we have in our theoretical base and in our research base that can really help you to understand what are the dynamics I'm trying to catalyse here. And does the way I designed this program or the way somebody else designed the program for me, does it actually do that? And so if you want to create something that's customised to you, that really is going to have an impact, then your ability or the strength of your understanding of the dynamics of learning is gonna be really important.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. So pitfalls, what things should L&D professionals look out for and avoid as they're shaping their later development programs?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
I think we have to look out for one size fits all. I think even when you are doing a program that is for your entire leadership team, I talked to one leader who does have a very large leadership team all over the country, doing similar jobs, but not perfect. And yet he's doing one topic across all of those people and all of those levels. How does that possibly work? Well, you can do that, but you've got to design it that way. It's not actually one thing. It's a blended thing. It's got different pieces to it. It takes advantage of different levels. So while it is sort of an overall effort, it's very customised at the one-to-one level, right? For the individual person who is engaging with the program, it feels relevant and real and applicable right away. And that's a little bit of a trick to pull off. I get that. But it can be done if you design it well. So that

is the one pitfall that I think that we have to learn from and it really just and when I just think about what I did for leader development back in the beginning of my career with a 1 week programs that were all beautifully designed and had these lovely workbooks and just had all this stuff and we're generic. leader skills and you know I just cringe now you know I mean, they were good and they were anticipating what leaders would need to know but they weren't near as applicable as relevant across the board as what we can do now with the tools that we have and with our knowledge of design.

Michelle Ockers:
And what we're being called upon to do for it to be effective due to the pace of change and the more complex dynamic people are working in. But hey, those one-week retreats, they were often somewhere really beautiful and involved a lot of good connecting with other people, right?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
I remember some of them were really bad hotel spaces, but otherwise most of the time they were really quite nice. And I just remember we always had to, we put together these literal boxes of workbooks. I mean, the production value of the handout materials was huge. And yet they were all just sitting on people's shelves. They were, you know, I don't know, $80, $100 each just to produce the thing. And, you know, for every manager that went through, it's just ridiculous. But these days, we don't worry that much about that kind of thing. We're much more loosey goosey about how beautifully formatted things are. Because what's important is whether it's relevant, useful in the moment.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. What works? Is there anything you haven't had a chance to share in this conversation that you would like to share as we close out the episode?

Catherine Lombardozzi:
Well, one of the things I guess I'd like to share is one of my soapbox issues, is you have to give people time to develop, right? So part of the reason we're using some of these techniques and designing in these new ways is because We want to minimise time away from the office, away from their day-to-day work. But that doesn't mean they don't need time. Reflection takes time. And talking to their peers takes time. So we have to make room for that. And one of the things that's really hard on leaders these days is their jobs are so intense. They can't breathe, no less actively engaged in a learning event. And so we really do have to find ways to loosen up their schedules a little bit to help them to have the space that they need to continuously develop and not just assume that if we keep them going at the pace they're going, they'll figure it out and they'll learn. They may do that, some of them may do that, but more of them I think will get burned out and will start making mistakes and will start to really have problems. So if we really value developing leaders, we need to make some room for it.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah, well said. Thank you, Catherine. So people can access the Learning Guild report for free. We've got a link in the show notes. There's also a webinar that you did with Learning Guild if people want to dig in a little bit more and perhaps see you talk in some different ways with someone else about the report. And one of the people you interviewed who is happy to be named is, you know, we've got an episode with Mark Saddic with a body of work that he undertook with Terra Wallace from U.S. Bank as a fresh Learning Uncut podcast. So thank you for introduction to Mark. And we will pop that link in the show notes as well. And for listeners, I am very much on the lookout for more good examples to feature in the Elevate series of people doing high quality work with leader development programs. So don't be shy about approaching me if you have done something which has been particularly effective with leadership development recently. Thanks again, Catherine. Your LinkedIn profile and your website will also be in the show notes if people want to reach out for you.

Catherine Lombardozzi:
Fantastic. Thank you very much.

 About Learning Uncut

Learning Uncut are learning and development consultants that help Learning and Development leaders and their teams become a strategic enabler so that their businesses can thrive. We work in evidence-informed ways to drive tangible outcomes and business impact and are strong believers in the power of collaboration and community. We specialise in helping to build or refresh organisational learning strategy, update their L&D Operating Model, enable skills development, and conduct learning evaluation. We also offer workshops to shift learning mindset and practices for both L&D teams and the broader workforce – as well as speaking at public and internal events.

Learn more about us at our website.

About your host, Michelle Ockers

Michelle is the co-founder and Chief Learning Strategy at Learning Uncut. She is an experience, pragmatic organisational learning strategist, L&D capability builder and modern workplace learning practitioner. She also delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events.

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*

Find Michelle on LinkedIn