

Learning Uncut Episode 22
Emerging Stronger: Taking Bold Action – Adam Harwood
Hosted by Laura Overton



Hosted by Laura Overton, Michelle Ockers & Shannon Tipton

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Welcome to the Learning Uncut Emergent season 2. Join Michelle Ockers, Laura Overton and Shannon Tipton to explore core strengths that L&D professionals need to take bold action

Laura Overton:

I'd like to welcome everybody to the next version of the Emerging Stronger podcast, where we are looking at how learning and development can develop this core strengths that they need in order to take the bold action that to be honest, our businesses all require at the moment. And today I'm so thrilled to be joined by Adam - Adam Harwood. We've known each other, I think I've been looking at the timeline for about seven or eight years now, and it's brilliant to have you on the series. Do you want to introduce yourself a little bit?

Adam Harwood:

Yeah, and I thank you, Laura. That's crazy, it's quite a long time, isn't it? But it's been a wild journey. One that has been through lots of opportunities, ups and downs, which I'd love to get into and talk about on this podcast for sure. So my name's Adam Harwood. I'm currently at a company called D&D London as Head of Learning and Development. But I've worked at various different organizations in various different industries. So, in retail for the likes of Poundland, Ted Baker and Asos. In FinTech, I've worked for Revolute. Also in tourism as well if I have to go back further than that when I was at Thomas Cook. So lots of experience along the way, and I'm delighted to be here, and just to tell my story really at this point.

Laura Overton:

So it's not as though you've chosen nice, quiet, stable industries to be working with. I mean, there's been so much change that's been going on all around you in almost every single role that you've taken on.

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Adam Harwood:

Definitely. I have had my stint in the start-up world, working in very fast paced industries, but then jumping out of that and going to somewhere like hospitality is completely different again. But I think the one thing for me that stood out is, and a lot of people ask me this when they look at my LinkedIn or talk to me about my career, is that, was there any different approach that you took, any different philosophy? And I would say, no, I think that L&D you know what the core of it is to improve performance, help people perform in their job. And that remains the same, whatever in industry you're in.

And I guess my philosophy mindset hasn't changed and that's what drove that confidence in me. Once I've seen something and I've seen it work, and I know how to do these things. I feel like going into a new industry or a new company, I always feel confident I can land something because I always fall back on that philosophy of, what is L&D there to do? And I think that's really helped me in my career.

Laura Overton:

So interesting to hear. I mean, what we're talking about in this series is taking bold action at a time of, to be honest, quite a lot of uncertainty. When you put your foot down, you don't actually know whether the grounds going to be stable or not. So for you, Adam, what does bold action mean to you? How do you define that?

Adam Harwood:

Prior to this podcast, I had a little Google. I was like, well let me unpack bold and what it means. And then I can relate it back to myself. And I the thing that stood out for me was someone that strives to stand their ground. I think that's really important. It's something that they believe in and also for. In the L&D context in, certainly what I've been through, it's striving to do what matters most and what makes the most impact. I think that's so important. I go back to when I first started at Thomas Cook and it was a real wake up call for me. I did a talk at Learning Technologies on performance support, and it was a real highlight of my career. I've always watched a lot of those speakers on the conference circuit. And I've always thought I'd really love to be out there, and I got the opportunity two years ago. I thought the best way to talk about it would be to tell my story and to tell people what I'd gone through. And I remember at Thomas Cook that we used to run training courses before reps used to go to destinations. They were like induction courses. And we'd have a whole week of classroom training, customer service, you know how to do public speaking, all of the rest of it. And people would come out of that induction course. And honestly, Laura, the feedback we'd get, was mind blowing. And it was like, "I loved it. It was amazing. Trainers are the best."

And I was like, this is literally, I was at the peak. I was like, "This is amazing." I'm getting told I'm great. Everything I'm saying is great. And people are also really enjoying the course. And we were like, "This is perfect." But then what happens was those same reps that said everything was amazing, went to resort. And then you started to get managers coming back, going, hold on a minute that person's not very good at what they're doing, they're not performing. You can't have trained them right. Your course should have been longer. Or your training course needs fixing. And I remember feeling absolutely gutted. I was thinking, "Oh my God, what's, what's going on here." I thought I'd made impact, and that really lit the fire in my belly of going, "That's not enough. L&D's role is beyond the classroom. L&D isn't just a case of turning up, closing the door, saying some stuff and hoping people perform. There's so much more than that."

And I think that moment, and that experience stayed with me for my

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whole career. It really did. It was that moment of going, "Oh, my word, that moment of truth of, I thought that I was doing enough for people to perform. And I wasn't." So that was good. But I guess that's why I think about boldness is having that determination to really focus on what matters and make impact, because clearly in that example, Thomas Cook, I thought I was making impact but I wasn't, which was definitely a lesson for me.

But beyond that, I would say, when I think of boldness, I think it's more than that. I think that it's about taking risks and experimenting. I think that's a word that probably wouldn't have been associated with learning and development until a lot recently, but I think we've got the ability to do that so much more now. And also acting with confidence. Standing by your decisions if you believe in something.

One of the things that runs through my career and I say this to you as well, Laura, you've been an ally of mine and someone that I would always be proud to say, as part of my network, is you've got people that will be by your side and support you. There are always people out there. So when you are like, you've got a feeling about something, I'm sure there's another L&D person out there.

Laura Overton:

You are not alone.

Adam Harwood:

Exactly. So, yeah, that's like a little bit of my version of boldness.

Laura Overton:

That's fantastic. I mean, what strikes me is that you talk about that incident at Thomas Cook, and it's almost like that's a big wake up call. Did that cause you then to take bold action, to do something different to what you, we used to do. And to be honest, what you are celebrated for, I think that's one of the toughest things, we talk about this in the Emerging Stronger program a lot is our thinking habits and how we see ourselves tend to be the things that have been reinforced. The things that we've been celebrated for, the things that people have, sort of held us up on the platform for, but it's actually not necessarily the thing that's good for us. And did you have to take different action as a result of that feedback on Thomas Cook?

Adam Harwood:

Yeah, I did. In that situation at Thomas Cook, it's very much like that was the expectation. That also makes it tough for people in L&D as well, when the expectation is you will run these classroom sessions, et cetera. So that was tough. But I remember now, like, leaving that role and I think my next position was maybe Poundland or Ted Baker. I can't remember, Laura, I've been in that many places.

Laura Overton:

It was Poundland. It was Poundland after Thomas Cook.

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Adam Harwood:

Yeah. That was the spark. The spark was "Oh, okay. I thought I did my job." I didn't know I needed to do more." And then I started to be a bit of an L&D geek and read up on stuff - things like 70:20:10, knowing that, okay, I acknowledge that classroom is one part of it. Okay. Fine. Learning transfer. I remember buying the performance support book by Bob Moshier. Even now it's still relevant, but remember buying it and not really having a clue at that point what he was talking about. But I feel like there was definitely acknowledgement from me going into the new roles. But I think what was the blocker, which was interesting, and I guess this is something that some other people in L&D encounter, I wanted to execute it. I know it was in my head that, "Okay, I know I need to deploy some solutions after the classroom." In my head I knew that that was felt right, because obviously they're still going to encounter problems when they're working. Right, I knew that. But it was more that when I came to making solutions or bringing up ideas either stakeholders around me were like, "You don't do that. You just do classroom." Or your own team.

I remember at Poundland, I'm sure none of the people that were working with at Poundland are listening. Sorry if they are. But I remember we did a feedback session on each other as a team. I remember one of the bits of feedback about me that was quite constructive. It's funny that I still remember it was, "Stop talking about technology." And I remember like, okay, it was quite interesting. It was all about like, "Our role here is to do classroom, to be in front of people. And that's it." And like you said, Laura, that's the challenging part because people come into this role thinking that is it. That is what I do. And to tell them that actually you need to do more than that to get people to where they need to get to and to help them perform. You need to do more than that. And it's a really hard thing to people to go, "Oh, well, I just got good at that. And you're telling me to forget about the part of my role that I was good at." That's a tough conversation, but you're absolutely right.

Laura Overton:

It was part of the benchmark research. When I was leading that benchmark program in the last couple of reports that I had written after 15 years of doing that research was all about how the high performing teams were learning to let go of some of the successes. And actually you can't embrace a future without potentially letting go of something that's gone well in the past. And I think that's really what you are describing there. And that guess that's why that's led me onto this journey with Emerging Stronger. It takes a certain amount of inner strength to be able to rise up to those challenges. Where Adam, do you think are the biggest opportunities right now for learning professionals to maybe create that change in impact that you've been talking about? What are the biggest things that are standing out for you right now?

Adam Harwood:

Yeah. I've alluded to some of it already, but I think that be a bit more explicit. I mean, I did a podcast actually back with David James. It was called the Modern Learner skillset, which is basically me attempting to outline what I think a modern L&D person needs in terms of the skillset. Well, I listened back to it. That was about maybe two years ago that I did that podcast. I thought back "Is there anything different I'd say now?" I go, "No." If L&D people want to make change and impact I think there are a couple of things.

First of all, get as close to the work as possible. I think there has to be acknowledgement and we can call it wherever you want - learning in the workflow, learning in the flow of work or performance support, whatever you want to call it. It's the acknowledgement that they, your people are on the job. They're doing the job. Can you be alongside them? Can you help them while they're doing that job? Laura, you mentioned that benchmarking report that you worked on for years. I remember the key thing that came out from that was people are motivated to learn because they want to do their job better and

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faster. Doing their job better and faster isn't, "I'm going to stop doing my job right now and go to a course and sit in a course for four hours." It's like, no, they've got a problem right now. Can you help them? When I was at Asos, Laura, I know I always talk about this and I'm going to bring it up again. There was a bit of research from a company called Degreed that basically talked about how your workforce learned. And it talked about this idea that every day and every week they are googling for something, trying to find it, or they are asking their friends. They're doing that every single day when there's a problem that they encounter. What they're doing a lot less so is L&D led activity, i.e., going to a classroom. It's not to say they don't ever go to a classroom. It's just they're doing it a lot less.

And I think, again, that was a real pivot for me, a real moment. I would rather operate in the place that they are in day and more daily and weekly, rather in the place they're sometimes in. And I think that the, so in my mind, if someone's listening to this, what does that mean from a practical point of view? When someone comes with a problem or a challenge, the temptation is learning development professionals is let's put together a course, let's put together a program. It's like, no. This is something that I know Bob Mosher would say, and a lot of the advocates of performance support, learning in the workflow. Build performance support first. Do that. Build support that they can access and that can guide them and navigate them rather than just go, "Right we're going to instantly build a course." Because you know they're going to be there. You know they can access it.

In addition to that, what I would say is, be where they are. Absolutely, get as close to the work as possible. But get as close to your people as possible. The amount of information that's freely available now, that's out there on the web or YouTube or wherever that they can access in terms of content. It's just there, so if someone wants to find out what it takes to be a good leader, or what they need in the first 90 days of their job, they're going to find it. That stuff is just there, right? So I think L&D wins when you focus on the challenges your people face in the context, their role, their organization, and the situation they're going through.

If you can really unpack and find what are they trying to do, what's getting in the way. If you unpack all of that and help people find that information, then that is you solving a real problem. And I think people engage when you solve their problems. And that has been the formula that I've always repeated in my head. They will come back. They will come to you and they'll keep on coming if you solve their problems. And I think overall that's my biggest thing when it goes through the career and my times at Asos and other brands was, let's get under the bonnet here. Let's discover what's really going on here. But not just assuming, because I think L&D does a lot of the assumptions of, "Oh yeah. We need to do leadership course." No.

Speak to the leaders. Speak to new starters. Understand them. Understand what's going on, their friction, their concerns, their challenges, all of that. And I think that overall, if you don't know where the problems are, and we talked about this in the start, Laura. I remember a conversation with you about when I started in my role at the D&D London. It was a tough one for me because it was my first real senior role. I went in and I know that they had a lot of legacy and I was like, "Oh my God, I'm getting told a thousand different things to do." I was getting told, "We should run that program again. We should do apprenticeships. We should do graduates. And I'm like, whoa, whoa, whoa, too much information." How do I zoom out of this? And the way I did it - and we talked about it and it was very, useful conversation for me - was jumping to the data. Understand what it's saying and that will help lead you to the priorities and understand what's happening in that business. I think that sometimes L&D people get quite scared of it sometimes, or not familiar with it, but it will help you.

And I remember in the context of D&D London, I picked up on the fact that 25% of our new

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starters were leaving in the first 30 days of employment. When I took that to the board and the CEO and COO and said, "That's what's going on right now, and I've got people over here wanting me to do communication training. I want to focus on that. Is that all right?" It's that speaking with data and using real terms, talking in their language. And that's another thing that can really be helpful I think when it comes to, if you don't know what the problem is, there's a way to find it out and speaking to people and digging into the data for sure.

Laura Overton:

So I think that's just really interesting because actually the biggest opportunities are the opportunities that potentially the data is flagging up for you. Not just the general data that's out there, but also the data, particularly the data from within your own organization. What I'm hearing here is actually that the data has given you courage to have conversations potentially that you wouldn't necessarily have had before. I think that's quite an interesting...

Adam Harwood:

I think you're right, Laura, I think you're right. When I go back to that conversation I had with you, it's convincing stakeholders that, because I came in and certainly even at that level there was like, "Oh you are the training guy?" I'm like, "Yeah, well you can call me that if you like. But like I want to solve problems. I want to help the business improve." I think that I started to gain credibility and earn currency when ... I remember flashing that slide up in that meeting with those stats (and that was just one of those stats) ... I remember they looked at me in this new way, like, "He's gone to town on this. He's done research. He hasn't just gone, he's going to run these courses because someone said they would be good and there was feedback on them. He's gone into the data. He's looked into it."

And I remember that was the shift for me. And you're right, Laura, I needed courage to do that for sure. But I knew that no one's going to argue with you if you've got hard evidence there and like, this is what's going on. This is what's happening. Then you are having a serious conversation with serious business leaders about real problems. And then you can start to look at how do you solve those problems? The conversation's different. I think that's another thing that taking away in terms of L&D and how they make the most impact and what opportunities are there. I think it's about having a different conversation from the outset. It's that idea of someone comes down (and says) "I want to do this training course," or you go to them and that word "training" comes up. It's about shifting the conversation slightly to be a bit of an L&D detective in a way. I know there's a guy, Kevin M. Yates, his name is, who's got a really good e-book actually, he talks about this. It's quite interesting. It's all the things you can say when someone comes down and requests training and I'm like, "That is gold."

Laura Overton:

It's a fantastic resource. And in fact, Kevin was on one of our Emerging Stronger podcasts earlier in the season with that. I think also it's having that courage and that confidence to talk business. And again, it's another thing that Shannon and Michelle and I have also been working on quite recently is sort of like, I guess, a campaign of helping us go through those steps to build our confidence, to have a different type of business conversation. You know that conversation that we have with ourselves first, as well as having that curiosity to dig into some of that data and then say, who else do we need to talk to? So watch out for that one,

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Adam, we'll probably put a note in the show notes.

Adam Harwood:

Yeah, absolutely.

Laura Overton:

Because it's a habit that we actually, we need to continually refine, even if we were good at it. How do we keep making sure that we build our credibility and move forward?

Adam Harwood:

It's not easy as well. It's not easy L&D's a dance that everyone thinks they know, right.

Laura Overton:

Yeah, exactly. And we're all dancing in the middle of the floor.

Adam Harwood:

It's so tough.

Laura Overton:

I'm going to be a little bit mean here because I know that you've taken this incredible attitude into each of your roles and made a difference, but would you be willing to share with us, without naming names or anything like that, a situation where actually personally it wasn't as easy as you've been making it sound basically. A tough situation in a circumstance, a tough situation in your L&D professional life that you've had to face.

Adam Harwood:

Yes. I know when I think about examples of when I shifted the goal post and brought something into the organization, I did think about bringing that example up Laura, about what was a relatively classroom led organization and I shifted it. But I dug a bit more deeper and I thought what's the one I remember really feeling a lot of pain from and the outcome of it was, I felt like I learned a lot from the experience. And that was when I was at Asos and things were going well, I would say. The tools were in place that were helping people do their jobs in workflow better and faster. It was happening. I felt it like organically. Now, the challenge I had, was that was all going on but then we had a new HR director that came into the business. Now what happens when someone's new that comes in usually to get that quick currency, they want to bring something in. They want to bring a system in because it's an easy one to, say tick off. "I bought it in. That was my deliverable achieved." And I know that because it happens time and time again when someone new comes into organization that system comes in alongside them. Right.

And I remember that basically there was a threat at the time of taking apart this world that I'd created at Asos which was essentially in context was lots of different tools that were interlinked that were helping people. It was everything from like tech tools to resources, to like a video library. It was all together. It wasn't a single solution. It was an ecosystem and what I'd refer to as best of breed. My firm belief was that there's not one tool that can do it all. I think some learning management systems, if we're going to go down this route and talk about the technology, they claim to be the jack of all trades. I don't think that's the case now. How many apps have we got on our phone? They're all good at doing different things, all

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good at serving different audiences. My belief with that was threatened because the idea was that the director that was in the business was going to say, "No, we're not going to use these tools anymore. We're basically going to use this system. It's the HR one. It makes sense." Monolithic approach, all singing, all dancing, bells and whistles, all in one, through one vendor.

And I was like, "It can't happen." I remember this was a tough period for me, Laura, because I'm like, "This guy's new. I'm probably seen this as disruptor, a little bit controversial to some people." And I was like, "You can't do this because this is working and it's absolutely fine. And it makes no sense to do this because there are good tools that you're ripping out." What I did was - I didn't feel like my words were enough. I didn't feel like my passion was enough. I wasn't going to win this argument by just saying, "Hey, I believe this." So I went to town. And I remember - I dug it out, especially for this podcast - I put together a very, what I'd refer to as compelling case, like a pitch deck that related to everything right from external views of the shift of technology and what is the likes of Bersin saying? What is the outside world saying about movement away from one single system to multiple systems? I brang in that information. Then I brought in internal information as well. So basically what are the most important people possibly in any organization, what are our employees saying? What do they like?

But the most important thing I did is like, how can I absolutely, it's hearts and minds in this case, how was I connecting with people that were big and were making decisions that wanted to bring this in? I focused on all of the things I knew that the business would lap up. It was flexible and agile. I know we worked in that way. That was the way we operated. This one vendor that we were going to try and go with was trying to say that we had to be locked into a contract for two years. Whereas all of these smaller systems we had could be moved around, they could be swapped. It was easy. It was flexible. And then of course it made commercial sense. I made a play on the commercial element as well. And when I can look back at that, and ultimately the end of this story is I put that case forward, put it in a pitch deck, presented the pitch deck, shared it. And it got taken quite high up. And ultimately the outcome of it was that the solution was we would stick to our best of breed approach. We wouldn't bring in a "one solution." I went on as a result of that. It was a confidence build for sure. It was one of those moments, I almost felt like I was like, "Yeah, I won." That's what I felt like at the time. I was like, "Yes." I mean, I couldn't believe it. I guess it felt like a bit of a David and Goliath situation. I was a bit like, "Oh my God, I can't believe." Since then I've gone on to do podcasts about it. I've written articles about the shift and how we did it.

It was something that was very unique to Asos at the time. When I look back at that, and I think what did I do, what was the things that really helped? Evidence. Find your evidence. Do your research. But once again, find your allies. Your allies are out there. There are people that have been through your same journey and you can lean on them. It is not someone you can obtain, like Josh Bersin wasn't just a phone call away. There were papers that were there. There was also someone I remember who'd gone through the same process at a company - I reached out on LinkedIn - based in Canada. I was like, "Have a phone call?" She was like, "Yeah, sure, no problem." Had a phone call. The amount of information I got from that was amazing. And the lastly I'd say talk in a way that makes sense to the business. If I made that argument about emotion, if I made it about a feeling, it wasn't going to cut it. It was like, how can I really change hearts and minds of how I feel about this, but not just be all passionate. It was more of a case of how can I make a compelling case that this is right for the business. And that was the thing for me that I remember looking back on it and really felt like I came out of that knowing that if you really feel strongly about something, yeah absolutely be passionate, but go town on your research, get your evidence

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and find your people. That's my advice on that one.

Laura Overton:

I mean, that's amazingly powerful advice for people, but also, I'm just wondering on that core inner strength, that's what you use to build yourself up. When what you believe in is under major threat, whether it's your job or whether it's something you've committed your professional reputation to, that causes a shake up inside, doesn't it?

Adam Harwood:

Definitely.

Laura Overton:

It causes a shake of a crisis, potentially a crisis of confidence, fear, anger. There's a whole potential...

Adam Harwood:

Lots of things.

Laura Overton:

I'm not projecting any of this onto you.

Adam Harwood:

No, no, no. I connect with all those emotions for sure.

Laura Overton:

I just wondered sort of what else, if there was anything else that you drew on from within yourself that allowed you to take the route that you've just described.

Adam Harwood:

I think the feeling of, I've been here before, maybe. That was really helpful, something I pulled on. The idea that like, because I am passionate about learning and development and I'm passionate about my career, and when someone comes in and says, "Nah, we're going to change that," it goes against your value systems and your principles and your beliefs of what you make of the whole industry you're in. So yeah, it's a tough one, Laura, actually. I haven't had to go back to that place for a while. But now thinking about it, I guess I feel like it goes back to that place again of knowing that if you can build evidence, make a compelling case, then I knew that I could stand behind something that I believed in. And I've definitely done that before, where I've had to stake my claim, but just not just for emotion, but through real hard facts and evidence and research. I think that was the thing I pulled on most. It was maybe the inner confidence that I go, "I've been here before." I've definitely had someone challenged me and I had to present back something, but present it back in a way that's going to be meaningful. So yeah. Maybe pulling on the previous experiences I had that can help me get there I can.

Laura Overton:

And also I wondered how that pulling on that previous experience actually helped when you transitioned into D&D because obviously they, for global listeners, it's a chain of 42 very disparate restaurants around in the UK, each I believe if I remember rightly from what you told me in the past, had its own siloed approach, its own brand of building up its teams and its skills. And you joined them pretty much when COVID hit.

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Adam Harwood:

Yeah, I did. I mean, funny enough, Laura, I did that presentation of like, "Here's all the things I'm going to work on." Yeah. I didn't get a chance to really work on them because COVID happened.

Laura Overton:

I mean that's quite a lot of instability thrown at you. In fact, you could say more instability, more change, more uncertainty than when you were defending your plot there through Asos and I just wondered sort of how... If you got some lessons you could share out of that. How your core strengths as a learning professional helped you respond to new job, new, very hard-hit industry as a result of COVID, whether... How you drew from one set of experiences to help you cope with the next one. If you've got any brief thoughts for us there.

Adam Harwood:

That's really interesting. I think you are you're right. I mean like it was exactly that. One minute I was doing Head of Learning and Development job and next it was completely thrown up in air, all the restaurants closed and I was seen as the guy then to lead, support and guide our people during lockdown to help them find the answers they needed. But then also out of lockdown helped them then return back to their restaurant safely. And honestly, I think what it comes down to is just that confidence that I feel like I know from the experiences at Thomas Cook and Ted Baker and Asos, I think it was always that feeling of like L&D is put here to help people, whether it be to support and guide them. I knew that and I took that confidence.

When it came to like everyone is in lockdown, all we had was our laptops and don't forget there wasn't a digital company, how can I still turn the wheel and get things moving and get people sharing, collaborating? I knew that I'd find the resources to be able to do that because it was all about people could see that this guy is trying to help me with my current situation. And I think that I knew that that would shine through. And I think that because people have seen that before and people lean into that. People really lean into that. They know you're trying to help them. But also you're putting a spotlight on them. I think one of the things that really one hearts and minds at D&D was, it wasn't just like me siloed sending information to help them. It was like, let's lean on each other, let's support each other, let's be united. And it is those feelings. We even had like, we created a portal of like knowledge sharing, where people were doing recipes, stuff that was both educational and fun. There was also really serious stuff where I was leaning on other people. I feel like I'm giving you a bit of a waffle answer in this one, Laura. I just think there is something about people, I've leaned into this before where people go, "He's helping me and he's not just helping me, he's opening the doors and he's getting me to share knowledge." And I think that that's something I've connected with before that I can see that I take a lot of confidence from. If you can open the door for people and you can get them to share knowledge and be themselves and, be their best selves, then you are on the right track.

Laura Overton:

What I love about your story though, is how you've drawn on those core strengths that you've brought into all of your different roles. And on some occasions it's linked directly into that performance agenda that Charles Jennings and Bob Mosher talk about. What is the business impact? What does this mean on sales, on customer service, on contact centre response times and that pure performance and the same core strengths also led you to

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really stimulating a culture change within an organization.

Adam Harwood:

Definitely.

Laura Overton:

That, I mean, that's why you won the culture pioneer award from Training Zone over here for that work. The fact that it wasn't just something that L&D did for the organization, but the way that you equip that organization to connect and engage and share.

And it's just only just occurred to me now, Adam, that it's actually those, that North star that you've got about, how can I help people do their job wherever they're at. How do I use evidence? How do I put aside the things that I used to do in order to pick up the right thing for the right person at the right moment, which is now. That kind of thing seems to me to be the thread that seems to have gone through your work and your professional career.

Adam Harwood:

I think you're right, Laura. I think that's a really nice way of like summarizing. When I think about D&D at that time, what did those people need right now? They needed to feel an element of connection. They needed to feel like they weren't alone. And they needed to feel that there was support there. That was at that point. Then it was a bit later, they needed to feel like they were safely going back to the restaurants and it was all those kind of things. And it's like, what were the questions they had? It wasn't just the case of, I had the option when we were going back to reopening the restaurants, of just putting e-learning or generic advice about COVID online and go read that.

And I thought, no, no, no, no. Let's think about these people. Like our people. What are they going through? What's on their mind? What's their anxieties? What's their frustrations, their questions? And really tapping into that and then helping people and answering those questions. I guess I reflected on two different things there. There was helping people feel not isolated. They could communicate and they could collaborate in this lockdown world. But then out of that, the one thing I'm really pleased about is we won an award for the best COVID training, because it was really tailored and specific to the point someone was at, the role they were doing and the organization they were in. And it was absolutely in their moment when they needed it. So it was like, you are about to go back to your restaurant next week. Here's what you'll need. And it wasn't just copy paste, dump. It was specifically for you to help you perform and do your job better and faster. And that's again the ethos or the approach has always been the same for me. It's like, how can you help them do that? And it's not just shoving loads of content. It's really fine tuning who your people are, what do they need, what's in the way, what questions do they have, what anxiety's they experience, what friction is there along the way? And then helping them with that stuff. And that is the stuff that people will latch onto, but not just latch onto once. They will keep on coming back. They always will.

Laura Overton:

Now, Adam, you've mentioned how you do share widely of your experience and as an industry that's brilliant. And we'll put quite a few of the different things you've been talking about in the show notes. But if you were thinking about internally in your own team or new teams that you're going to be moving to, what kind of things do you think that you should be doing in order to build up their... Because not everyone can live your experience, so how do we help other people develop those strengths? Have you got just a couple of quick bullet points for us to maybe able to take away?

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Adam Harwood:

I haven't had like big teams or lots of direct reports, but I feel like I'm really quite proud when I look back there are people that, if I've met them along on my journey, that have been curious about this stuff. And like curious about a different way then, I don't, and honestly, I feel like this is, I don't want to kind of gloat my own ego here, but I feel like those people that have shown me that, and I've gone, "Oh, you are interested in this stuff." And then I've leaned into that. They've gone on to be really successful and are doing absolutely smashing now, which is really, really good for me to see. It just takes that spark of curiosity to go, "Maybe there's a different way of doing this." And the moment I see that or experience that for people I've worked with and I then go, right, okay, I'm going to share stuff with you. I'm going to share knowledge. I'm going to bring you along. I'm going to share my vision. Then I think that it goes back to...

Laura Overton:

Stories are really powerful and I think the ones that you have been telling, the one that Michelle captures on Learning Uncut podcasts, the Emerging Stronger stories. They're all part of that growth bit to build that courage to take different types of action.

Adam Harwood:

Curiosity as well, I think is so important. I think that if I had to take anything away from like, my timeline is - L&D professionals challenge yourself and look at what you're doing. But also, use your network. I think that's one of the things... There was at L&D awards recently, Learning Technology. Sadly I didn't win one. But I went with Mike Collins who's been a good friend for-

Laura Overton:

You've got so many on your shelf already.

Adam Harwood:

I thought I've known this guy for like 10 years, and I just thought, I still remember going to when he did the talk and even quoting bits of his talk when he did it that time. I thought, if you are at that point right now where you're in L&D, start building your network. Go on LinkedIn, go slack groups, go on anything like that. There are like-minded people, even if they're not in the same company as you, that are trying to do things differently.

Laura Overton:

I still agree with that because part of the Emerging Stronger masterclass that came on last year, it's a global cohort and it was one of those things that seems to have come across from everyone was "We were working with people that we would never have connected with in countries, because of the fact that it's digital, that we would never have connected with. So we're having people who are working on projects together, working out experiments together, from Bogota to Toronto to London. And that thinking across networks, across countries, across borders, across sectors and silos. We weren't expecting that from the Emerging Stronger process. It was one of the things that we sat down afterwards and it was like, "Wow." It just blew our minds. Just the power of what you just said there about how, when you network out in a new way and work on problems with different people it's amazing.

Adam, you know I would love to sit and talk with you. I love, I always learn something every time I chat with you. But we are going to have to close off. And we are asking all of our guests on this particular podcast about if you were mentoring another L&D professional, what would be the most important core strength you would advise them to develop and what

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would be your top three tweetable tips on how to do it?

Adam Harwood:

Yeah. All right. I guess I have to call on where I started in my career and that pivot moment I had, or the wake-up call, whatever you want to call it, is that, I would say that I was always of the belief that training programs were, or to a certain extent training programs and e-learning were reliable means for real performance improvement. They can be the solutions ... but they're not the solution always, and there's other ways of approaching it. And I think that they're isolated events that, and I think for me, if you want to make a difference in L&D, switch the thinking, not about learning, switch it to performance. That is what L&D is there to do from day one from induction to technical stuff to core skills to transition to change. It's all about impacting performance. That's my mindset over and over again now. And I think that when I think about, so what does that mean? Then I feel like it's about being where your people are, which I've already mentioned. That doesn't necessarily be on mobile or desktop, but it means actually getting close and understanding what they're going through. And also it's about providing support and context in the flow of work and understanding where's the work going on. How can you be close to that? And if you can tune into what's really going on with your people, and then you can support them in workflow, you will be closer to impacting and influencing performance than ever before.

I don't know if that's necessarily answered your question. I feel like I've just taken my own version of that question to give you a different answer. However, I'm thinking if there's one takeaway there it's just take the learning hat off, put the performance one on, because it goes way back to that Thomas Cook experience, which was people, I remember when they left that room and I thought they were going to go on to perform. Those managers didn't care about how much they knew. It's about what they did that really mattered. And I think that still stands true. It's really important. How do they perform?

Laura Overton:

I think that's a brilliant core strength. To have that business first, performance first North Star that guides everything that you do, every aspect of this conversation today, Adam, and everything that you've been doing in your career and showing how actually that opens door to you. And then when that opens doors that opens more confidence, and more confidence opens more doors and more credibility. So, I think that core strength of holding onto that as your North Star is powerful for us. We know it in our heads. Making it a reality is what you've shown us, that brings the joy. And the courage and the strength. So, Adam, I wish we could talk more. We can't, but can I just say on behalf of the listeners, how enjoyable this conversation is, and thank you so much, sharing all what you've been sharing with us today.

Adam Harwood:

No, it's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you, Laura