

Learning Uncut Episode 101
Leadership Development for a Different Future – Helen Sedcole
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Helen Sedcole, the Chief People and Culture officer at Z Energy, joins us to discuss their approach to leadership development. There is no pushing people through standard modules and declaring that they are 'done' – something we call sheep dipping here Down Under. Rather leadership development is seen as continuous process that it is part of everyone's work to take responsibility for and engage with. You will hear the word 'context' a lot in this conversation – from industry context to organisational context and individual context. Development goals, which are owned by the individual, are shaped quarterly to meet the current context. One aspect I was particularly interested in is the use of learning cohorts of five people as a mechanism for support and accountability for learning and performance for leaders.

I'm really looking forward to meeting Helen at the L&D Innovation and Tech Fest in Auckland on the 8th and 9th of June 2022. This conference runs alongside the HR Innovation and Tech Fest. One ticket gets you into both. This is a really well curated conference, with several think tanks run every year with People and HR professionals to understand what challenges they face and what they really want to discover and learn about. Helen is one of a number of excellent speakers, many of whom are sharing case studies about experiences and solutions they've been undertaking on aspects of that we are grappling with in the People and Capability areas – such as diversity and inclusions, belonging and connection, wellbeing, and leadership. I'll be helping a client, Waka Kotahi New Zealand Transport Agency, to present their work on becoming a learning organisation, as well speaking on a panel about adoption of learning technology. I encourage you, if you are able to get to Auckland to do so, to join us – and be sure to find Helen and me to say hello.

Michelle Ockers:

Kia ora, hello, and welcome to Learning Uncut.

Helen Sedcole:

Hello, Michelle. Nice to be here.

Michelle Ockers:

It's lovely to have you here, and we are going to be meeting again in the not-too-distant future in Auckland for the L&D Innovation Tech Fest in early June.

Helen Sedcole:

We are, indeed. I can't wait - actually in person which is going to be a real treat for us.

Michelle Ockers:

It's going to be very exciting. There's a lot of buzz around the face-to-face stuff right now, and they've got a great range of speakers and some excellent case studies. And I know you're speaking there. And in the time we have available, we will cover off some stuff, but there will be more that you'll dive into at the conference. And, of course, if people are coming to the conference come along and listen to Helen because you'll have the opportunity to do to ask some more questions, I imagine Helen, and dig into something that they might be interested in.

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Helen Sedcole:

Yeah, absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

And, of course, we always provide a link to our guest LinkedIn profile, so if anyone through the course of this conversation thinks, oh, I'd like to know a little bit more about whatever aspect of this case study you speak about Helen, they can always reach out to you on LinkedIn, if they aren't able to make it to the Innovation Tech Fest in Auckland, in June. So let's look at your story. It's a great story about leadership development, which there's a lot of interest in how do we reshape leadership development to reflect the contemporary environment, and what we really need right now. Before we get into the detail of that, can you tell us a little bit about your organization? Is it Zed Energy? Zee Energy? How do we say the Z?

Helen Sedcole:

Great question. It's always a good one to start with. We are Zed Energy. We talk about NZed (NZ) as a country, and Zed (Z) energy got a really interesting story in that it was a classic complete and utter reinvention of a business that already existed. So we started our business just over 10 years ago now where we bought the assets of what was Shell Energy, and most people would know Shell, the royal Dutch Shell Oil Company. We bought their assets in New Zealand, so we had their downstream business.

So we weren't an oil company. We were an energy distribution business. That's probably the first distinction. And then the other part of that was our leader, our CEO, at the time who is still our CEO, incidentally, Mike Bennetts had a vision for we could do business differently. There had to be a better way and there had to be a different way he'd been working for many decades in a global multinational corporate and thought there was a better way of doing it including a better way of leading. So he had some quite firm views about leadership, and I'll talk to our beliefs around leadership as part of the podcast because I think it's really relevant.

So we completely reinvented ourselves. We ditched the Shell brand. We created the brand Z Energy, and we went forth boldly into the universe setting up a new way of doing business and a new way of doing fuel retailing and convenience retailing at the time. And yeah, the story's been really interesting. Our environment has changed considerably, and I think we'll talk about that a bit further through in the podcast, but it was a it was a really interesting example of determining your own future and not letting your past completely determine your future.

So yeah, that's Z Energy. And we are now over 10 years old. We have gone from being privately owned to publicly listed to—we've just transitioned yesterday, we're now part of the Ampol group of companies, so we are now back in a trans-Tasman fold, but determined to be a local regional player rather than a multinational. And we have started our ventures into working in low carbon. So we've now got electrons as part of our business, and we have an electricity company. We're doing a lot of work on electricity charging we've worked on bio biofuels. So yeah, starting that transition into the low carbon future that we all have great aspirations for.

Michelle Ockers:

There's a lot going on in the energy sector. Isn't there?

Helen Sedcole:

Yes, there is, which is great.

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Michelle Ockers:

Yeah absolutely. So how long have you been with the organisation now, Helen?

Helen Sedcole:

I've been with Z for four years now.

Michelle Ockers:

So six years into the history of Z, if we time it from when the acquisition of Shell happened, what's your role and who is your team if you can introduce us to that?

Helen Sedcole:

Yeah, great. So my role as the Chief People Officer at Z Energy, and my team this people and culture team. And our responsibility, I think of it has kind of been twofold. Firstly, our responsibility is building organisational capability and performance. And then the second, responsibility is being guardians or kaitiaki of the employee experience. And I talk about us as being guardians because actually, most of the employee experience happens every day, every minute, every hour, and is not necessarily delivered by the people and culture team.

Your employee experience is delivered by the relationship you have with your line manager, and how you get on with your colleagues and whether working from home works or not. So a lot of the employee experience exists outside of our team and we're the guardians who make sure that it's consistent with our aspiration.

Michelle Ockers:

What does that mean to be a guardian in this context?

Helen Sedcole:

I think so my title in te reo maori is actually po tangata. And po means pole or something that actually supports and holds something up, and tangata means people. And I think being a guardian is actually holding on to our vision for what matters to our people, and holding on to the aspiration and then holding ourselves to account for whether we're delivering on it. So that's the protector and the supporter and the person who's upholding our vision and our aspiration.

Michelle Ockers:

It's such a long way from the kind of old-fashioned view. If you think about HR, what's the job of HR versus people and culture, and it's like well it's all-around industrial relations and employee relations and remuneration, and it's a very different vision for the role and a sense of purpose.

Helen Sedcole:

Absolutely. And I was talking to another very progressive organization the other day. They have a subcommittee of their board called the remuneration people and culture committee. They said it's interesting because we used to be all about the R and now we're all about to see, but it's a great way of describing it. So yeah, very consistent with our vision for what matters.

Michelle Ockers:

Within the people and culture team, is there a separate group of people that you say well, that's our learning and development or our capability team or how are those responsibilities distributed?

Helen Sedcole:

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Yeah, so I we talk about our team as three groups of people are all aligned are delivering our vision. So we have an OD team, organisational development, and that covers building organizational capabilities, learning, the future of work, and organizational change. Then we have our employee experience team. So we deliberately changed the name of this team to employee experience about three or three years ago. And this team covers everything from our office experience, and office experience is interesting these days, right, because it's not actually in the office necessarily. It's what's the experience of being at work at Z.

We have a payroll. We have some an HR advisor who supports some of our core rituals ,so things like our recognition programs and our values and our heroes and they also own our policies. And then I have a team of people and culture business partners who sit out in the business units and partner with the business to ensure that because the other part of what we do, so if you think about in terms of building organizational capability being guardians of the employee experience, then our business partners are still going, do our line managers have the capability to do what they need to do in order to honour the vision that we have?

So it feels like a nice way of organizing ourselves in terms of building our capability, delivering a great experience, and then ensuring that experience is showing up in our business units.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, and thank you for giving us that philosophy. I think that's really great context for your approach to leadership development. In terms of the number of leaders in the organization, you've got an interesting—I think we said let's make sure we clarify your company structure because you have a large proportion of leaders, I think.

Helen Sedcole:

Yes, we do. So well actually, I should define leadership, but the way our company is made up is we have our core corporate structure, and we have a supply structure. So we have terminals who deal with unloading and offloading ships full of fuel. And then our retail structure actually stands separately, and we have two different models there, so we have—which is interesting because our brand and our experience for our customers is delivered through our retailers. So we've got about close to two, 3,000 people operating at retail sites both under the (inaudible 09:32) and the Z brands. They're not our employees, but our employees within Z are working from a retail perspective with them in terms of building the capabilities that they need ensuring that our brand promise and delivery and all our infrastructure is in place.

We have a probably a disproportion number of people, leaders in our business if you think about that because we've got all the retail sites are sitting outside of our corporate structure, but we would have of the 500 people we've got, we'd have over 200 people who are in people's leadership positions. We also have a belief that everyone in Z is leader, and I think that's quite an important foundation for how we go about leadership development because if we fundamentally believe everyone at Z is a leader, then everyone needs a level of leadership development.

And we define leadership as causing something to occur that would otherwise not occur. So creating a different future than the one that is predictably in front of you. I think that's a really important thing to understand when we talk about leadership because that means you don't have to be managing people or even influencing necessarily people within your business to be acting like a leader, and I think about people like my payroll person who's in a stand-alone position. She came from another role. We promoted her within Z from another team and she has made many leadership calls in the time that she's been in her role because she's gone, I can see how this works and I can see how it would keep working if I did

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nothing. But actually, if I step in, I could actually create a different way of doing this, and that to us is leadership; creating a future other than that is predictable.

Michelle Ockers:

It feels like from your opening description of the history and the start point for Z and the brief foray we've had here around the industry context that this is an industry where that view of leadership sits particularly well because you need to shape the future because we know the future for energy needs to be very different to the past. So what's happening in the energy sector that you'll respond — well, let me actually frame that question a little bit differently because we could be here forever just talking about what's happening in the energy sector, right. Yeah, what are the key drivers of change in culture and leadership? Why are you doing things differently? And what are the key shifts you've been working on?

Helen Sedcole:

Oh, great question. So look, it would be naive to say we're the only industry going through change, so I think that's the first thing. We think we're going through change actually. Our change is almost glacial compared to some others, so we know that we have an absolute ambition and we know that ambition is shared by people of New Zealand and people around the world to reduce our fossil fuels, to reduce our carbon emissions, to move to a cleaner more sustainable future.

So we know that exists. We also know that will take a while to phase out. So although we know we've got a huge transformation to go through, some of the analysts are saying that's 20 years out, so it's almost glacial when you compare us to somewhere like media where they've gone through industry transformation like this. It's been phenomenal, so actually, we've got the benefit of foresight in some regards, and an appetite to do things fast that's been difficult for us in some instances. We set up a biofuels refinery, and no one wanted to pay a premium for it. So we were kind of there but the consumer wasn't with us, business wasn't with us, government wasn't with us.

So sometimes you get ahead of yourself in terms of leadership, but we've maintained our commitment to actually leading around the transition to low carbon, and we're continuing to do that. And actually, the nice thing about a change in ownership is that we get the scale of a trans-Tasman business that enables us to take some pretty big runs at some low-carbon stuff which is really exciting. So I think we're going through a change in our industry, there are many industries going through change, and that's why one of the things that we realized was that leading through change is different through leading in stasis, and leading when you're in a growth industry and your core business keeps growing is very different to leading in an industry where your core business will decline. And you want to use a way—you want to be able to optimize your core business so you can fund your future business.

That's quite — I was going to use a word that I probably can't use in a podcast. It's quite brave yes to acknowledge that and I think to acknowledge it in a publicly listed context where shareholders are interested in returns, and you're saying I want to use some of those returns to fund a sector that I'm not even operating in at the moment.

Michelle Ockers:

It's just the kind of thinking and stance we need at a global level to actually make a difference because you say 20 years and it's glacial change. That 20 years will go quickly if we don't use it wisely, right?

Helen Sedcole:

Yeah, and we can help some of that change go faster. And we think we should be part of that.

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Michelle Ockers:

Yes. So what does leadership need to look like in your situation? Then when you're going through a period of change and your core business is in decline, what is your vision for leadership to make that happen?

Helen Sedcole:

So our vision for leadership is that in order to lead through the transition we're going through and to lead in a VUCA world, and I'm sure you've talked about VUCA and previous podcasts. But for those of you who haven't, VUCA is a volatile uncertain complex and ambiguous environment. And if you ever wanted evidence of VUCA, just check out your news feed for the last 24 months between COVID and wars and global—

Michelle Ockers:

Social movements.

Helen Sedcole:

Social movements, yeah. It's never been more volatile in certain complex and ambiguous, and I think that requires different things of our leaders. So our leadership framework starts with the premise that everyone is a leader and that leadership is causing something to occur that would otherwise not occur, and that extraordinary results come from extraordinary leadership. So we start with those fundamental beliefs, and then for us, the most important things our people leaders need to do and all of our leaders need to do is connect, act, and learn.

So connect to your context, connect to your people, understand what you need to be connected to because context drives a lot of clarity for people in terms of how to then take action. Action needs to be quick and it needs to be we've moved as a whole business. We do our planning cycle, yes, annually, but we actually plan and forecast and re-plan every quarter. So we've moved to a business cycle of quarterly planning and action. And then you have to be prepared to learn because actually, things change.

Sometimes, you need to pivot. Sometimes, things don't work, and you can actually see that they're not working quite fast. So connect, act, and learn are the big foundations of that leadership framework, and we've got what does that mean for me at an individual level? What does that mean for me as a leader of other people, and what does that mean for me as a leader of the enterprise, which is quite different as more systems thinking and how do I actually enable that, but we've kept it pretty simple; three dimensions, and three ways of thinking about leadership.

Michelle Ockers:

And they're easy to remember, right? The connect, act, and learn, very easy to remember. And much more memorable than things like oh, foundational, proficient, advanced, mastery, things like that, which is what we typically see in frameworks labels like that. They communicate very clearly what kind of the skill is as well.

Helen Sedcole:

Yeah, and we've also played with the leadership of self, leadership of others, leadership of enterprise, and we don't think it's as hierarchical as it used to be so it used to be I have to do this, and then if I lead others, I'm different, and if I lead the enterprise, we've got people who lead the enterprise who don't need any other people.

We've got people who design policies that impact the whole enterprise and our customers who don't have any people reporting to them, but we still need them to think like enterprise leaders. So I think we've also kind of challenged our assumptions about how you develop

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leadership from a hierarchical perspective to go what's the most important thing that this person as a leader needs to be focusing on. And it may be enterprise leadership before its leadership of others in some instances. So that's been quite a thing for us to wrestle as we work through our framework.

Michelle Ockers:

And I do want to get more into kind of the development experience or journey that your leaders are offered and undertake. I understand in terms of you talk about having a leadership development ecosystem and I understand that your performance framework is particularly important as part of that, and that it sets the context and that you change the performance framework before you rolled out the revised leadership development program. Is that right?

Helen Sedcole:

We totally did, yeah. We changed the performance framework again because it really no longer served us that whole annual cycle where you sit at the end of the end of the year, you set objectives at the beginning, you sit at the end of the year and you have a conversation that's quite artificial about how do you think I did boss, and very hierarchical. My boss tells me how they think I did. Actually, most people know how they've done.

Michelle Ockers:

Have you done away with those annual performance reviews all together?

Helen Sedcole:

We call it a retro, so we still have it, but there's no surprise in it. We have fortnightly performance conversations which we call CFR conversations, and that stands for coaching feedback and recognition. And then we have a quarterly retro and goal setting. So each quarter, we go so how did the quarter go? What did I learn? What am I proud of? What do I need to carry forward into the next quarter? What are my learning objectives for the next quarter? So this is where you see it starting to weave in, so we set our leadership objectives on a quarterly basis for individuals.

And then at the end of the year, we're like yeah, so how did the whole year go relative to what I was what I was hoping to achieve, and I've got it all there. I've got the quarterly conversations that I've had. But the thing that we shifted there is it matches the needs of our business cycle, so we're much more cautiously with fortnightly catch-ups which fits with our more agile ways of working and who's a fortnightly sprint.

Michelle Ockers:

I was going to say it just feels completely agile to me with a capital A, right? Yeah, you did work on an agile ways of working.

Helen Sedcole:

We call it the Z how. It's a mixture of agile human centred design and lean, so we've done what makes sense to us. We went through this phase where agile was the new black. Everyone was doing agile, but actually understanding why you want to take on more agile practices was more important to us than doing our job. And we had to have agile at work for us in a way that it worked for people working in a terminal, and that it worked for people in a more manufacturing environment, and that it worked for people in finance, so actually helping figure out our way of doing that. So yes, it was aligned with that.

The other thing that the performance framework did was it really put you in the driver's seat of the performance conversation, and put your line manager in the position of being the person who is coaching you to perform at your best. So when we have our fortnightly

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catchups, my line manager, I've just had mine this morning. He only has two questions for me that he has to answer before he goes into it.

One is what's changed in the context that you need to be aware of, and what would I like to acknowledge you for over the last fortnight? That's it that's all they need to ask. And for me, I have to go how am I performing? Are there any roadblocks? What do I need to share with my line manager, or what might they need to know, and how's my— and that could be anything including things outside of work. What's my outside of work context, and how's that affecting me? And how confident am I about delivering my objectives on a one to five scale?

So anything below a four, you should probably be digging into that, but I as the employee on most of the performance side of that conversation, my line manager is going, what context do you need to know about that will help you be more successful in focusing and prioritizing your work, and what I want to acknowledge you've actually done a really good job on? So coaching people doing the good stuff, so we're coaching around the positive side of performance as well as the negative side of performance.

Michelle Ockers:

It's quite a shift in terms of responsibilities and accountability of the individual rather than sitting there and saying, so boss, how do you think I'm going? It's like it's up to you to figure that out. You own that and you use the manager to have the feedback, have the conversation. How did people respond to this shift?

Helen Sedcole:

Really positively. Now, we kind of went from a parent-child relationship to performance-management to an adult-to-adult conversation, so there's got to be something refreshing about that. And we do a monthly engagement survey. We use a cool tool called Peakon, and that gives us access to how people feel about recognition, focus on performance, goal setting, and those all of our indicators on this have gone just up and up and up and up ever since we changed our coaching feedback and recognition framework. It's just been a game changer.

People are really clear in terms of performance expectations. They know what they need to focus on, and they feel like they're getting good feedback and recognition.

Michelle Ockers:

It sounds pretty simple as well in essence in terms of what tools do you need to give people to make this happen.

Helen Sedcole:

Yeah, it is. And I think the other thing that we really talk about them as conversation guides. So as a line manager, I'm really only asked to do the bare minimum that I need to do to have the most impact. So it doesn't fit. It's not administratively complex, and it's designed to empower people to perform at their best.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. We do tend to and I'll use the royal we. We tend to expect a lot of our line managers. And with flatter structures, in particular, they can end up quite overwhelmed and overloaded, right. So making it easier for them to do a great job in the way you have is a great example for others to think about.

Helen Sedcole:

Yeah, we're really quite excited about it and I suppose that goes back into the development experience which was how do you also then take a similar tone in terms of designing the development experience for people? So how do you make sure that it fits with the rhythm of

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the business? It kind of makes sense in terms of enabling you to do a better job rather than, oh, this is how we do leadership at Z. Let's sheep dip you through a development program, and then just leave you because you're kind of done. We've cooked you now as a leader, off you go. Or we do lots of one-on-one coaching with you, but actually you're not really connected. This isn't really connected to the priorities of the business or to your priorities.

So we said about Julie Fitzgerald who's also I think going to be speaking at this conference which is super exciting. We spent quite a bit of time going how do we make sure the leadership development that we are delivering is enabling people to lead better and is connected to what matters to us as a business.

Michelle Ockers:

So how did you answer that question? I'm curious.

Helen Sedcole:

We had a lot of chats. Because we did have a beautiful development program we originally ran, and the three core beliefs haven't changed. But there was a big-time commitment to it, and you kind of came out the other end very clear about all the frameworks and behaviours, but it was quite easy. Two or three years down the track to lose sight of it like you can lose sight of anything.

And we also found in our VUCA environment, what's important to us quarter to quarter or year to year can really shift. And so we went, well, as part of our as part of our quarterly cycle, we have a kind of a two-week period at the end of the quarter. We're doing a lot of planning and reflecting and learning. Why don't we tie our learning experiences into that, and why don't we start with our senior leaders that might be a good place to start?

So we went actually what if we—outside of building foundations and foundational understanding about some of the core principles for leadership, what if we did this every quarter and we focused on a specific development aspect that was relevant to the context in which we're operating, and we focus on that for all of our leaders and then to keep it alive? We have learning cohorts of about five people, so small enough for you to be able to eyeball each other and hold each other to account. Too small if it's a pair, it's too easy to let yourself off the hook. And if it's too big, then no, you don't get all the voices in the room or online.

So what if we built learning cohorts that actually got together in between those experiences who were all deeply committed to each other being great leaders and who are able to kind of hold each other to account for what they were focusing on between now and the next time we got together? And we've also made it completely cross-functional across the business, so my learning cohort, my current one, has got people from our retail business, a leader from the health safety and wellbeing team, someone from our customer experience team. So we've got a really nice mix and someone from supply, so we've got a really nice mix of people and our cohorts.

And actually that just gives you good perspective and they know our framework, and they know what we're all collectively committed to. So I've got a group of kind of colleagues who came to help me out and provide me with a safe place to ask the questions that I might not ask my line manager or that I don't want to struggle with my team. I need someone at a different level to help me with that, and we do have a little bit of backbone in that. We have an executive member who sits across the way we've done that across those teams. And on a every three weeks, we have a coach come in and go right, so what are you talking about in your learning group? How's your learning group going?

Michelle Ockers:

So there's an executive member in each of the learning groups?

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Helen Sedcole:

Yeah, for our senior leadership group.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. And can one executive member belong to more than one learning group or is it—okay so—

Helen Sedcole:

That may change over time, but having an executive leader take responsibility for the development of our senior leadership group feels like a pretty sensible thing to do.

Michelle Ockers:

It does, and likely to increase the accountability because it says it's important because an exec has skin in the game as well, right?

Helen Sedcole:

Yeah, absolutely. And I can speak on behalf of myself. I know with my colleagues as well. We wrestle with leadership stuff just as much as our senior leadership group do. None of us are done. None of us are perfect. We're all perfectly human. I think actually that's helpful for people to see that we struggle with some leadership practices just as much as anyone else do.

Michelle Ockers:

And increasingly, we're expecting our leaders to be—authentic is the word that's overused, but to be real. When we talk about psychological safety, part of the way we as leaders create that is to be vulnerable ourselves, right?

Helen Sedcole:

Yeah, absolutely. And it's also quite helpful to just get the context of what's going on in the wider business as you're grappling with your leadership challenges.

Michelle Ockers:

True. So is there a prerequisite? Is there something I have to do or some criteria I have to meet before I can join one of these cohorts?

Helen Sedcole:

Well, actually there's no choice in this instance. This is our senior leaders and you are part of the group whether you like it or not. When you sign up to be a senior leader at Z and you're in that senior leadership group, you're in, and we figured that was the best place to start, hey, it's A, smaller cohort group and there's 50 odd people in there, and B, we went—this is the group that has the ability to impact. All of those people have enterprise-wide leadership accountability, so we know they have a big impact on our business.

So we've started there. Then the next phase that we're doing which Julie is working on is we've really liked the cohort approach. It's working really nicely for us. So we're expanding that now into a future leaders program that we're doing. It's got another name. The leaders map program, and we're using a cohort approach there as well. And one of our senior leaders who's not in the people and culture team is actually the sponsor of that group, and they're the guardian of that group to make sure that they're learning really well, and being both supported and challenged as they go through their development experience.

Michelle Ockers:

And is there any formal learning delivery or sessions that people attend or content that feeds into the overall development experience they're having?

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Helen Sedcole:

Yes, there is. So there's some core foundational learning about just understanding our framework; why it exists, how it works, how to use it. And I'll talk a little bit about that actually at the conference in terms of how we use our framework I think is potentially different to the way some people might use it. And then, we've got some core foundational things, articles, formal learning, we've got an external coach we use for both the leaders map program and for our senior leaders.

So there's a mixture of formal learning and classroom based and kind of—

Michelle Ockers:

So the kind of things we would expect to be in a blended learning programmer there, but the thing that really brings it to life is this sort of—I think you've actually used it from applied leadership and conversations we've had before, and the peer base, the cohort structure which I think it's a really important area of interest at the moment for us in people development because we know there is power in learning together. We know there is power in sharing our experience, in setting up experiences that give people an opportunity to reflect, to elaborate on their knowledge, to learn from the knowledge of others.

So there's some really solid learning science underpinning the approach we're talking about here. And I will in the show notes, I've got a couple of resources that talk about this, and I get lots of people asking me about cohort-based learning and how do we get that right. I think this is a really nice example of setting it up for success. So let's talk a little bit further about this idea of applied leadership and what that means. And this may be a second question. You've talked to us about the cohort-based learning, what makes cohort-based learning work? What have you discovered? So maybe start with applied leadership and then we'll come back to the cohort-based learning.

Helen Sedcole:

Okay, so applied leadership for me is—and my CEO and I have this conversation on many occasions. There's no point having a beautiful framework if it's not actually helping your business to actually thrive. And so applied leadership to me is about what part of our leadership — let's think about our current context. I'll give you a live example if we think about our current context, what elements of our leadership framework serve us best in this context and what learning might we need to do to bring that to life?

So one of our examples that we talk about in terms of our beliefs which is extraordinary outcomes only come from extraordinary leadership, and leadership is intervening in an otherwise predictable future. We've just gone through an acquisition process, and we've been going through that for quite some time. So we've been being acquired, not the acquirer. We've been going through that since September signal.

Now, it's been a friendly acquisition. We think it's great. We're very excited about it. But we sat down and went okay, let's do some real applied leadership in action here. What's our current context? We're about to go through an acquisition. We're going into a year where we've got huge performance targets. We've got some massive stuff around energy transformation that we're working on. What's the predictable future? We stop doing stuff because we wait for the new owner to tell us what we should be doing.

We lose our good people because we're not focusing on development and performance. We suddenly decommit to the fact that we say all the time that Z is for New Zealand, and we totally believe that it is for New Zealand and we still stand by that. So we went through a whole lot of things. These are the predictable outcomes. And then we went okay, so if leadership is intervening in an otherwise predictable future, what are our leadership

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commitments to the next 12 months, and what would an extraordinary year look like? And then we generated our extraordinary outcomes, and we're leading from those.

Michelle Ockers:

Those two questions are so powerful. What's the predictable future, and what would an extraordinary year look like? I'm a big fan of powerful questions to lead us to better thinking, yeah.

Helen Sedcole:

So we went through that as an executive team. And then as the cohort learning, we went through this with the senior leadership group, and went here's where we've got to.

Now, first part of generating an extraordinary outcome or actually delivering on it is enrolling and engaging people in it. So the first step of that was how do you guys feel about this? What questions do you have? In some instances, they thought that we might have had rocks in our head, so we had to talk through why we'd committed to certain outcomes. And then the next part is well, how do you bring them to life? How do you actually plan for something that's actually in some instances so out there that you don't do waterfall planning to get to this. It's going to require something quite different of you.

So then the next bit is well, how do you lean into one of these? How do you generate your next steps because it's something that we've never done before? So we're coaching around that. The next predictable piece, so heads up to any on our senior leadership group development coming in June, July is that what is predictable is we will experience some difficulties, and we'll suddenly find ourselves off track. And so the next piece of formal learning that we will do is how do you deal with breakdowns, and how do you declare them before they happen? So how do you look for them in advance? What are the weak signals? What should you be doing? So our formal learning will be around that.

So that to me, I'm living it. This is applied leadership. This is about being deliberate about how we're leading through a period of organizational and industry transition and leading consistent with our beliefs that extraordinary leadership generates extraordinary outcomes.

Michelle Ockers:

So again, context. This is coming through very powerfully in the conversation. It's all about context. What's happening right now. It's not like here's your leadership development program and it's always module one, module two, module three, module four. It's all around what's the need right now, and you're talking about in this particular instance an organizational wide need, but you've also hinted at connecting this to individual need through the quarterly coaching feedback recognitions conversations. What does that look like and how does someone connect with the right level of support for their individual quarterly development needs?

Helen Sedcole:

Oh, that's a really good question. I don't know if I can answer it in a way that's going to do it justice. A lot of it is about self-responsibility. So we have built into our system our coaching feedback and recognition system. We have built in a quarterly conversation about your development. And in that it says, apart from don't forget. Here's the leadership framework. You might want to look here, and you might want to think about this as you think about your leadership challenges.

It's really down to the conversation you're having with your line manager. A lot of the leadership focus that you get out of that, some of it's technical. A lot of it is about what's the leadership orientation that I need to have in this coming quarter, and how do I bring that to life? So if I think about, for me, at the moment, if you think about that we connect, we act,

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and we learn, there's a lot of connect for me and my current focus because it's about connecting people are now ample who are buying our business and people in Z and making sure that we're connected on the appropriate context and that we are actually understanding each other's universe as well so that we can then generate into the future together.

So it's very personal in terms of how am I leading in the context that I have right now with what's important to me and what's important to Z and what we've committed to, I probably haven't articulated that well.

Michelle Ockers:

I know I like the fact you've landed on this space where it's like what does this look like for me? So let's stick with that for a moment. You've identified what your context is and what's most important for you in the coming quarter which is around connect. How do you then out of that in terms of the learn element? How do you identify what you need to learn and how you're going to learn that, because that's your job right, if I have if I've understood what you said about your performance framework? So how do you go about that?

Helen Sedcole:

Well, without getting into — probably gets into some of the stuff I might talk about at the at the session—

Michelle Ockers:

We don't want to give away all the lollies in the lobby, right?

Helen Sedcole:

Some of that is about identifying really some specific tangible things where you can go, I see how this will be different. And what will be different the way I'd like to look at it is so what will be different in the conversation we're having next quarter? What will I be able to look back and see that has shifted relative to where we are now? And we get really good feedback from our teams about how we're leading through our monthly survey.

We have really high levels of engagement with the tool and interaction with our people through it. So there's a lot of what would I expect to see shift in my engagement? I would say expect to see this piece shift. Okay, so how am I going to be doing that? Sometimes, it's actually as soon as you get to the point of declaring it, you're like oh, okay, I know exactly what I need to do. Here's the conversation I need to have with this person. This is what I need to do in this area, and I actually need to back off this concept. So yeah, we've been kind of working through that for a while now.

Michelle Ockers:

Does your learning cohort then become a significant vehicle for you around your quarterly development objectives as a leader?

Helen Sedcole:

It hasn't yet. I'm probably making separate declarations to them about small things I want them to hold me to account for. Yeah, so I think a specific example at the moment is we've got together as a cohort and said, okay, so what's the one thing I'm going to be doing now that's consistent with my commitment that I've made to all of you, and what can you hold me to account for next time we get together. That to me is more the applied leadership that right. So they're not committing to me doing a development thing. They're just committing to me being the best leader I can be.

It's not necessarily that I'm gonna go and learn something. It's like I know I need to lean into this, or I know I need to work with this group on that, or I know actually I need to be clearer

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on such and such, and I haven't given myself a space for it. The space is probably a thing that we're talking about. You talked about the reflection piece.

Sorry, I'm just going to go off piste a little bit. But one of the things that we have, we have this really interesting dynamic where people say they want to grow and develop, but then we don't always necessarily see them doing a powerful job of engaging with their development planning. And sometimes it's because it's so big, so I quite like the quarterly bites at your thinking about your development.

But the other thing I think about the learning cohorts that's been an interesting learning for us is that we've kind of taken control and not taking control of them by for each of them, we've actually dedicated time in their diaries for them to be meeting where we're saying we expect you to block time in your calendar to have this conversation. Sometimes, we've experienced people going, ah, I haven't got time to do my development stuff because I'm so busy doing my job because actually this development is about helping you to be better at doing your job. But it tends to be I haven't read that business book because I haven't had time or I haven't been able to find time to do blah, blah, blah, whereas we're I think by explicitly we're scheduling this in people's diaries.

We're saying, this is part of doing your job. Developing yourself is part of doing your job. Being the best leader, you can be is part of doing your job. Having time to reflect and work with a cohort on your leadership commitments is part of doing your job. So I think that's probably been one of the powerful learnings for Julie and myself.

Michelle Ockers:

So you literally schedule those sessions that your team schedules those sessions?

Helen Sedcole:

Yeah, we kind of went how many state do we want to get here. So what we did was we've done for the senior led group, we've gone out and said, here we go. I've invited you all to these meetings. It's usually on the third Wednesday of every month from two to three. That's a placeholder for you. Get together with your cohort and you set up your meetings, but it's locked out in your diary.

Michelle Ockers:

There's something in your diary to start with.

Helen Sedcole:

Yeah. So again, it's kind of like we're doing this because it's important and we're going to ask you to tell us how it's going, and your executive member is going to be reporting back to our external coach on how this is going.

Michelle Ockers:

So helping to create the space and putting in some accountability mechanisms a key here, so what else have you learned along the way? Yes, what else, but you're not in there facilitating, right? You're giving them a structure, a space, helping to protect that and the commitment to that through some accountability mechanisms, right? What else have you learned along the way about supporting and enabling cohort-based learning?

Helen Sedcole:

I think don't try and do it wholeheartedly for the whole enterprise to start with, and there is something about when we can get this working with our senior leaders, and they see the value of it, you start seeing it actually feed through the enterprise. The other thing that I've learned and I don't know why I'm saying, I've learned it because I knew it before but I just kept forgetting it was the power of just cross-pollination across the business.

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And I think sometimes that cross-pollination, when you do it in large groups it's like oh yeah it was great to catch up with everyone. It's kind of social and that's lovely and that's powerful and valuable in its own right, but the power of the smaller group being connected across the business kind of helps you elevate your own thinking, helps you get out of just focusing on your team or your thing that you're working on and helps you remember you're part of a bigger business and a bigger system and a bigger aspiration. So I think it helps you play a bigger game.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes, I would second that. There's something about extending the relationship and allowing a group to build the relationship over time as well. That makes a big difference as opposed to just coming together for a 15-minute breakout room in a Zoom session, right?

Helen Sedcole:

Yeah, and in fact we did change our learning cohorts after the first quarter. And we've got a little bit of a oh, I like my people I'm hanging out with and learning. I don't know if I feel like—

Michelle Ockers:

Sounds like a classic classroom scenario where everybody wants to sit in the same seat over the course of your three-day program, right?

Helen Sedcole:

Yeah, so I don't know whether we'll change it again this quarter or not. We might say there's enough change going on. Maybe that's the constant. Don't know. I think we're taking a fairly experimental and iterative mindset to it as well. We try some stuff it works. We keep doing it.

Michelle Ockers:

What hasn't worked that you've learned from and had to change?

Helen Sedcole:

What hasn't worked? I'm trying to think of things that we've gone yeah no that didn't work. Trying to load too much content in. I couldn't tell you if it's worked or hasn't worked, we haven't managed to do a single one of these face-to-face yet. God damn you, COVID. We've had aspirations to them face to face on many occasions every time we've done it so far.

Michelle Ockers:

What do you think the benefit of face-to-face is over virtual, and when do you think it's worth the effort, time, cost to do face to face rather than virtual?

Helen Sedcole:

Ah, well it's a big debate we've been having. I think that face to face allows really powerful human connection that you just can't get it all virtually. It allows you to understand the nuances and pick up on some of the things that are going on in the wider room. It enables us to get better connection on some of the complex learning. We've got the next session we do. We've been working with our leadership coach Conrad Amos. He's fantastic, and we're going oh, this really doesn't feel like a virtual session. This is one that really does need to be. We really would like to have people in the room.

I think it's going to be one of those things where people are, and I know there's a podcast, so no one can see me. But it's the one where people sort of start scrunching their nose or raising their eyebrows and all of that stuff, all that non-verbal stuff where you go ah, I'm just not sure if that's landed, and I can see if I'm in the room. I can really see if it hasn't landed versus if there's a bunch of people on screens it's just harder to read the room with some of

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that. And there's the collective learning is I think somewhat diminished in some instances depending on what you're trying to learn.

Michelle Ockers:

So complexity would be one of your key criteria?

Helen Sedcole:

Yeah, complexity and I think the other thing for us is actually taking advantage of the time around that space. So, for us, I would really like to get our senior leadership group together to do the learning, and to just be in a room with each other and connect and talk about their whano and talk about how they feel about our current change in ownership. And we're doing it all through these sorts of interactions, but there's just something human about being in a room with someone and being able to go and break bread with them, and commune with them. That is that is better achieved face to face if you can.

I think my and my head's up is we did that yesterday with our team for morning tea and I was completely overwhelmed. There would have been close to 200 people, and I was like wow. In a world post-COVID, this feels very strange.

Michelle Ockers:

I understand exactly what you mean, and the Innovation and Tech Fest will be my first face to face conference since COVID. So let's see how we all cope with that Helen, I'm really looking forward to meeting you. And if any of our listeners are going to be there, please, find Helen and I. If you've listened to this, we would love to meet you and say hello at the conference.

Helen Sedcole:

Absolutely. That would be great. I look forward to seeing you then.

Michelle Ockers:

It will be wonderful, Helen. Thanks so much for this conversation and for sharing this really fresh and purposeful approach to leadership development at Z Energy. Thank you.

Helen Sedcole:

Michelle, thank you.

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About Learning Uncut

Learning Uncut are learning and development consultants that work with learning teams and/or business leaders to accelerate learning transformation. We specialise in supporting organisations to create or update their learning strategy, enhance their learning team's capabilities, align learning to business value, and implement modern learning approaches.

We are highly collaborative and pragmatic. We partner with organisations to align learning to their business needs, unleash continuous learning, and build capability to help them thrive.

Learn more about us [at our website](#).

About your host, Michelle Ockers



Michelle is the founder of 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*



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