

Learning Uncut Episode 105
Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Kelly Hopkins joins us from Kathmandu to discuss how his small L&D team has taken big strides to support learning for their workforce of 1,800 people, many of whom are frontline staff in retail outlets. Their philosophy of providing development opportunities to Kathmanduers for Life means not only building skills to provide an outstanding customer experience, but also broader personal development – not just to be the best but to be their best. The most important element of their learning strategy is coaching, which they've enabled not only with technology but also with smart analogue resources that are easy and effective to use in their retail workplace. Kelly describes what learning looked like when he joined the organisation almost seven years ago and how they've patiently and consistently built and embedded coaching into work. Also of note is an approach called Product Ropes which has been embraced to the point where teams across the organisation now voluntarily create the learning content for seasonal product rollout. I hope you enjoy Kelly's enthusiasm and take away some ideas to do more with supporting coaching in your organisation.

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to Learning Uncut, Kelly.

Kelly Hopkins:

Hi, Michelle. Thanks for having me.

Michelle Ockers:

I'm delighted to be able to invite you to be a guest. It was great meeting you in Auckland at the L&D Innovation and Tech Fest in July. Was it July? No, June. It was early this month, three weeks ago we met, didn't we?

Kelly Hopkins:

It was in June, yes. It wasn't that long ago.

Michelle Ockers:

No. And I was impressed by the presentation you gave talking about the work you've done since you joined Kathmandu New Zealand in 2015 and in particular what captivated my attention was the way you've woven coaching into your learning strategy. And I know we're going to spend some time talking about that. So thanks for agreeing to come onto the podcast and share your work with others.

Kelly Hopkins:

No, thank you very much. Look I could talk about what we do here at Kathmandu all day long and you probably don't have long enough in the podcast for me to do so, but I'm very happy to be here.

Michelle Ockers:

Learning Uncut Episode 105 Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

I did notice that having a conversation was not a challenge for you, Kelly.

Kelly Hopkins:

I do like to talk about what we do here. I'm really proud of what we do at Kathmandu. I think it's a fantastic brand and I think that we have a really great learning culture, so I'm happy to talk about that today.

Michelle Ockers:

Excellent. So Kathmandu is a brand that many listeners will know about, but we are listened to globally. So there may be some listeners who aren't aware of the Kathmandu brand, so perhaps if you can kick off the conversation by telling us a bit more about Kathmandu, the organization, what you do and who you do it for.

Kelly Hopkins:

Certainly. Well, Kathmandu is a New Zealand born and bred outdoor equipment and apparel retailer. We're an outdoor brand, and we exist to help everybody get into the outdoors and really experience the benefits that we get from being out in the sunshine or in the rain or in the wind or in the fresh air. So in fact, we've been around since 1987 established right here in Christchurch where I am today, and we have support offices in Christchurch and one in Melbourne in Australia and about 170 stores, retail stores across New Zealand and Australia. So 85% of our workforce is our retail teams, but we also have real specialist teams in both of our support offices because we do develop and design our own products. So we have fabric technicians and garment technicians and product developers and product designers and we have an entire team that's actually dedicated to developing a sustainable innovation in our product development as well. And we also have two distribution centres, so we have call teams in both of those. So we have a wide spectrum of Kathmanduers within the business.

We've always been an outdoor brand. Last year, so in 2021 in April, we actually relaunched our brand because, and this may appeal to your global listeners, but we really want to become a global brand. So we are the biggest outdoor retailer here in Australia and New Zealand and we'd love for everybody else in the world to experience our products and use our products to get out to their outdoors as well. So we actually relaunched our brand with a brand-new vision, purpose and values last year and I think they really aligned to what we're going to talk about today because our purpose as a brand is to improve the well-being of the world through the outdoors. So I think if you look at outdoor brands, most of them are about challenge and adventure and achievement and getting out and doing some kind of an activity and achieving something.

And we wanted to position ourselves a little bit differently. We feel a little bit different to other brands, so we want to be that brand that just helps you to get out and enjoy the outdoors. You don't necessarily have to be taking a three-day hike or climbing a mountain or running an adventure race, it might just be taking a picnic in the park and lying in the sun. But the well-being benefits that you get from doing that are immense. So we want to support everybody in the world to go out and do that because if I feel better myself outdoors, then that helps the people around me to feel better and then ultimately it helps the whole world to feel better and improves the well-being of the world. So that's what we're here to do.

Michelle Ockers:

It's a really inclusive and approachable purpose as well. Right?

Learning Uncut Episode 105 Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

Kelly Hopkins:

I think so and I think we've got great engagement from our teams, and I'll talk about our teams a lot today because they really are what drives our learning culture and drives our success as a business. But this purpose that we brought on when we relaunched the brand last year has really landed with our teams and I think the team are really passionate about it. Everybody's really engaged in it. And in fact in May of this year we were named the number one best place to work in retail, hospitality, tourism and entertainment in Australia and New Zealand for 2022, and a large part of that is down to the fact that we have this purpose that everybody in our business, all Kathmanduers share and we all feel really, really passionate about. And along with the new purpose, we also have a new set of values that we all share as Kathmanduers and they are courageous, joyful and open. So Kathmanduers are courageous, joyful and open.

What this means is that we give things a go, we are not afraid to try new things. We really enjoy what we do. We enjoy each other and we don't take ourselves too seriously, but another big one is that we are open to learn and open to grow. And I think Kathmanduers really are learners. So we have a really small learning and development team here. Until January of this year it was two of us. It's now increased to three, we have a product training specialist now, but for the last five years there's been two of us servicing 1,800 employees across two and recently three countries because we haven't another brand in the United States as well. So we support the Oboz brand which Kathmandu purchased in 2018. So as a really, really small team we are continually challenged by Kathmanduers who want to learn more and grow more and develop more and become even better than they are today.

So our philosophy as an L&D team is to develop Kathmanduers not just to be the best but to be their best. And we really want to be that retailer that offers more than just core retail or core role specific skills to our team. We want to give them that little bit extra. We want to give our team and Kathmanduers access to learning that's going to help them develop their careers but also develop as people. So when Kathmandu set an individual development plan each year, we ask them to think about three things. The first one is, what can I develop to become even better at the job that I have today? What can I develop to become more prepared for the job I want next, whether that's next year or in five years' time, and then what can I develop to become closer to the person that I want to be? And that's about personal development, about personal satisfaction. It might be well-being, it might be something that's completely unrelated to the role that you have now or to Kathmandu that they have an interest in. So we really want to encourage our teams to reach out and just learn and grow and become the best that they can be.

So we call this Kathmanduers for life, so we are not just training Kathmanduers to open and run a Kathmandu store and provide an excellent experience to our customers, but we want to give them skills and experiences that they can take for life and be proud of. So that's kind of always been our philosophy and we've tried to do that with a really small team of two, and I'll talk a little bit about how we've managed to do that because really it has been the teams themselves. So we have about 1,600 employees in our retail network and across 170 stores, each store has a store manager and assistant store manager, sometimes maybe two assistant store managers, sometimes maybe two assistant managers and a 3-I-C. And in fact that entire management team, they're all coaches, they're all teachers, they're all trainers. So Kathmanduers are constantly learning from each other and supporting each other to learn. And I think that's been really, really one of the things that I'm really proud of and that we've been really successful in developing and growing here at Kathmandu is that coaching and learning culture across the teams.

Michelle Ockers:

Learning Uncut Episode 105

Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

Wow. You packed a lot into that, Kelly. So much. Thank you for such a thorough introduction to Kathmandu, to the organizational purpose and values, to learning and development, giving us some nice teasers there around how you've gone about approaching the opportunity to support people who sound pretty open to learning in the first place but to support them with a really lean L&D team. So what I want to do is rewind a little bit and then talk about how you've reached this point. And by the way, I want to know when you're recruiting again, because I want to work for this company.

Kelly Hopkins:

And we're always recruiting, absolutely, so...

Michelle Ockers:

So let's rewind, you joined the organization in 2015.

Kelly Hopkins:

I did indeed.

Michelle Ockers:

So tell me a little bit about what learning looked like in the organization at that time.

Kelly Hopkins:

So at that time we didn't really have a learning and development function within the business. So our retail team, the retail operations team had sourced and onboarded an LMS or, Learning Management System, to provide online learning to our retail teams. At the time, and I don't know if I really should talk about this, but we basically rented some space on the internet for, annually what we paid was probably what I would pay to fly, return to the United States, it was a couple of thousand in Australian dollars. And then the content we created it using Moodle and a whole lot of free plugins that were available on the internet and it was managed by the retail operations team. They did a great job of bringing it on and had created some content. So there was some compliance content and then of course for us product knowledge is a really, really core... Is really key to success in our stores. We have a lot of technical product. We need to ensure that our team members are providing the correct information to help their customers get what they need. So we had some product knowledge on there.

Learning Uncut Episode 105 Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

Kelly Hopkins:

And what I found them with when I joined was that the system itself was really user unfriendly. Sometimes it was hard to start a course. Sometimes it was hard to finish a course. It was definitely hard to record a course, to report what was being achieved within the system. I mean, it was a lot of manual work for us at the time. So it was myself and at the time I had a learning and development coordinator whose role it was really to admin that site and it was almost a full-time job.

Michelle Ockers:

It's really not high value your work, right? And if you're talking about a very small L&D team, you really need to think about what's the most valuable use of your time. So you were a long way from that when you first joined but it's great that... And I think this is a nice illustration, even on a low budget. It's not an excuse not to do something and there's things you can do to bootstrap to get things started to at least provide some fundamental support for learning where that support consists of some content. And of course, as we're going to talk about today learning is about so much more than content, but you do often need some good quality content as a start point to support and enable learning. So what... You looked at this and you've looked at some point you've gone, "We could be doing better." What was your aspiration? What was the potential you saw for learning to be done differently and to have a bigger impact in the organization? Why did you want to change things?

Kelly Hopkins:

Well, it's interesting. I think, prior to joining Kathmandu, I spent about 15 years in Japan and I worked for some major global brands. I worked for Apple retail when Apple retail was launched in Japan and obviously being Apple retail, they have a really sophisticated online learning platform. And Apple has a lot of technical knowledge as well, so it was really, really important that the team there kept up to date, but not just on product knowledge on leadership and communication and how to provide a customer experience, but also how to interact with each other. So those were some of the things that I had in mind when I came. Kathmandu is a great brand and I think we need to understand that we are a great brand and see ourselves as a brand as well.

So when I started and my first... Obviously, my first priority was to understand what was happening and to deliver what was already there. We are quite complex for a retailer. It's not simple retail, we have highly technical product. We have three seasons within a year and within each of those seasons we have a lot of promotional changes that happen throughout the calendar. So there's always something happening and there's quite a bit to learn even in induction when you come on into the role and join Kathmandu in a store, whether that's as a store manager or as a sales assistant. So there was a lot happening.

What I saw was that, and this is typical, I think, in many businesses, a new starter would be brought into the business and start in their store and be sat down in front of the computer for their first week in the business and just be expected to finish their online content. And that was their induction. So there's a lot of content in there. Obviously, sitting in front of a computer for five, six, seven, eight hours a day is not conducive to really understanding and really retaining any of that information. But the store manager's objective was just to get it out of the way as quickly as possible, get that...

Learning Uncut Episode 105 Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

Michelle Ockers:

That's right. Get them on the floor as quickly as I could.

Kelly Hopkins:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, yes. It's almost like the necessary evil, right?

Kelly Hopkins:

Yes, exactly. And I think as a business, that was probably the expectation that we'd given as well. So the first thing I really looked at was that induction and moving the induction from being something that had to be crammed into the first week to something that was actually spread across the first three months in the business. And I thought three months because there's a lot to learn and it's a great... It's kind of a great period to learn a lot upfront. So there's a lot of things that need to be learned upfront. There's a lot of operational things, even using the point of sales system, product stock, inventory control, visual merchandising, all of these things that get learned quite upfront.

But also I thought we have a lot of different categories; We have insulation, which is down in puffer. We have rain wear, we have fleece, footwear, base layer. So we have different categories within our apparel and then we have equipment, so we have sleeping bags, tents. And what I wanted to do was allow the team to really learn about those and really get into them and get some really deep knowledge. So in order to do that, we needed to allow a decent period of time. And also, learning customer service, utilising the knowledge that they have in product. So we created a three-month induction program and actually created a paper map, like a trail... We call it the trail guide, induction trail guide. It's like a fold-out map that you used to get in a service station when you're going for a road trip. And it actually folds out...

Michelle Ockers:

It's really kind of on point with brand, right?

Kelly Hopkins:

Oh, yes. It's definitely on brand for us. So we... Everything we do we think about, how does this fit with our brand? But what it does is it gives... And we still use it today. So I think we've had that for about four or five years now, but it actually maps out three months of induction for a new team member, a new Kathmanduer, and what that really does is it helps them see where they're going and also helps to tick off what they've achieved along the way. So there are some things that have to be done upfront. So on the first day, everybody does health and safety and then they move on to other policies and then on to operational things. And then depending on whether they're a store manager or a sales assistant and there'll be other things, but then there's a lot of upfront in the first week, first two weeks.

And then across the next two months, they have product knowledge spread out across those two months. And then at the end of that, they have customer service to bring it all together. And it actually helps to tick it off as they go along. We found that this helped with that early retention. So prior to this, as you can imagine, we had a lot of turnover within those first

Learning Uncut Episode 105

Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

three to six months, because who wants to come and sit in a new job and sit in front of a computer and have to squash all of this information into their brains in the first week?

Michelle Ockers:

Well, particularly, Kelly, if you think about the kind of people who are going to be attracted to an organisation like Kathmandu, who are all about improving well-being through the... Improving the well-being of the world through outdoors, you join that organisation and then you sit indoors behind a computer for a week, it's not...

Kelly Hopkins:

Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

It doesn't meet expectations either, right? And it's not effective learning. We know that.

Kelly Hopkins:

No, absolutely not. So I think that made a big difference for us, was bringing on this trail guide and bringing everybody's expectation that induction didn't end after the first week but in fact it was ongoing, and in fact learning is ongoing and continual at Kathmandu. So we started to get this mindset going within our teams and then we realised that there is a real hunger for learning. As you said, the kind of people that come and work at Kathmandu, they love the outdoors, they love sustainability and the earth, they love our product and it's quite technical product, so they come and they want to learn about that technical product. So they're real learners, to start with. And I realised that our store managers were great operational managers, but we hadn't expected them to be coaches and to really be developing and training and coaching their teams.

So we partnered with a business here in Christchurch, a local business called RedSeed, who have some online training that is retail-specific and they have a great coaching course, and the fantastic thing about their product is that it actually has a coaching loop built in. So as somebody works through the online learning, they'll get to a point where they've watched a video, they've done some learning, they answer some long answer questions which get fed up to their manager, or in this case coach, and get feedback on those. And then there's a practical activity that they do with their coach to demonstrate their learning. The coach coaches them through that, gives them some feedback, signs it off and then they can move on to the next part of the course. So the online coaching course that we brought on from...

Michelle Ockers:

Can you pause for a moment there? I'm going to get you to pause. I want to walk through that, what you've just described there, that coaching loop a little more slowly before we talk to how you've built up the skills or people in the organisation for coaching. So people... Using this example, are we talking customer service training now, we're talking onboarding? It's...

Kelly Hopkins:

Learning Uncut Episode 105 Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

What we started with was... So, obviously, we didn't have a big L&D function at Kathmandu so I wasn't able to come in and just change the whole world overnight. It's a small piece, a small piece, a small piece at the time. And the first piece was actually licensing the RedSeed Coaching for Leaders Course. So they have an online course that is available to license from them through their platform and this is a course that's designed to teach store managers specifically to be coaches.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Kelly Hopkins:

And how they do that is obviously through some online learning but by being coached. So RedSeed has a coaching loop that they can build into the online learning products. For many online courses, even some of the ones that we have, you might watch some video, read some text and then answer a knowledge check which is a multiple-choice question and then you're done.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes.

Kelly Hopkins:

But with RedSeed coaching loop what they do is they actually build in that practical coaching and feedback into the online course and they really embed it and facilitate actual practical coaching.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So you talked about long form answers, that's quite unusual in online learning, right? We're more used to some sort of interaction-based theme, some sort of multiple choice where the system itself can give the feedback and say, "Yes, you're right. No, you're not quite right. Here's the correct answer." Even when it's scenario based, it's all supported through some sort of smarts built into a system.

Kelly Hopkins:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

In this case, you've got long form answers, which are sent to a real person, a manager or some other coach, and what's the expectation on the person that these long form answers were sent to?

Kelly Hopkins:

So the coaching, for example, the coaching course, is designed to take, I think nine weeks to complete. So the idea is that you would complete one piece each week or each two weeks, you'd submit your answers, your manager or your coach, so every person going through one

Learning Uncut Episode 105

Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

of these courses has a coach, and generally that's your manager. So for our store managers, it was the regional managers, for the regional managers who first went through it, myself and other members of the HR team actually coached them through the course on how to coach their own store managers. So the regional managers have been the coaches for the store managers, the store managers are the coaches for the assistant store managers and in most cases for anybody that's under them in their store. So what will happen is, a Kathmanduer or a learner will go through the first piece of a course, they'll watch some video, read some text and then they'll be given some long form of questions to really test their understanding of what they've just learned. And they'll write the answers...

Michelle Ockers:

And are they typically knowledge based, scenario based? What do they typically look like?

Kelly Hopkins:

It could be, depending on what the content of the course is, it could be one or the other or a mix of both.

So for example, the first section of the coaching course is, why is coaching important? And then the questions would be, okay, so why do you think coaching is important? How will it benefit your business if you become a coach and you start coaching your team? So just questions like this, really to delve into the understanding and the mindset, in this case, and the learner would type their answers in, they will be submitted through the system and they would appear on the dashboard of the coach. And the coach actually needs to respond to each of those questions individually with some feedback. In some cases, it might be, "That sounds great, good job," in other cases it might be, actually go and think about this a little bit more and come and resubmit it or let's have a chat about this. And you would submit some feedback on those, that would go back to the learner and they'd get a notification to be able to read that feedback. And then after that is a practical coaching activity.

So we utilize this coaching loop in several of our courses. The first one was the coaching for leaders course, we also utilize it in a recruitment course, in our customer service course and then in several others that we have. So the practical coaching could be, for example, if it's the coaching course, have a coaching conversation with somebody and your coach will observe and give you feedback on it or practice coaching with your coach and they'll give you feedback and it might be a role-play. And in customer service it might be, go onto the store floor, approach a customer, ask them some open questions and your coach will observe that and coach you on it. So depending on what the learning content is there would be different activities but following the long form answers would be a practical coaching activity that you would complete with your coach, they would then give you some feedback in the system, sign it off and then you're ready to move on to the next section of the course.

Learning Uncut Episode 105 Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

Michelle Ockers:

Lovely. So there's a couple of coaching points in there, it means you're not having to have a trainer as such because you've got managers as coaches or other subject matters as coaches, subject matter experts, sorry, as coaches, and you've got practical activities as far as possible in the real world that people can be coached on. So you're getting the application straightaway.

Kelly Hopkins:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And all supported through... Enabled with the right technology.

Kelly Hopkins:

Absolutely. So that was the first step, was actually just to bring on that Coaching for Leaders Course. And it was really successful for us, it did take maybe a year or a year and a half to really kind of see it embed across the teams and for our store managers to start to think of themselves as coaches. We supported this with some resources that they could use some analogue resources. So obviously, an online learning platform is great, but in order to support further, actually application of coaching within the stores, we created some coaching cue cards. So these sit at the point of sale, they're just a really small little card. And anytime a manager goes or a coach goes onto the shop floor, they can pick one of those up, go and observe one of their team members in an interaction with a customer, for example, make some notes, and we only ask them to make a note on one point within that interaction and then as soon as the interaction is finished, give some timely coaching and feedback to their Kathmanduer. So we have those coaching cue cards. We have some coaching guides on how to have a coaching conversation around certain topics and we also created what we call Product Ropes. So...

Michelle Ockers:

Before you go into Product Ropes, I've got a couple of other questions before we move on. I'm excited to talk about Product Ropes, I like the idea. So the first question is, obviously for the stuff that's part of your formal learning programs, you've got a piece of tech in place which allows you to quite readily track people's completion. That more informal coaching, do you measure that in any way or not?

Kelly Hopkins:

So we did implement a couple of things. So for example, the coaching cue cards, we made them part of the store audit checklist. So when a regional manager goes in to visit a store, they check lots of operational things on an order checklist and within that, there are the coaching cue cards. So they're actually expected to read through those coaching cue cards, check that they're actually being done, maybe give some feedback or coaching on how they're being executed. And so there is that measurement of it as well. The other, I think, is probably going to lead into maybe the discussion around Product Ropes, but we have just created lots of opportunities for coaching to happen within the stores but we also know that it happens because our teams constantly talk about it and they constantly speak about it and they constantly ask us for more resources.

Learning Uncut Episode 105 Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

We can see the resources that are there being downloaded and being utilised. When we go into stores or when we speak with store managers, we can observe them or we can actually hear them talking about how they coach their teams. And I think the word coaching and coach are now part of the vocabulary here at Kathmandu. So that was probably the big success, was moving our store managers from being just managers to being coaches and being the people who are responsible for learning and developing and growing their teams and themselves.

Michelle Ockers:

I love the way it's, the messaging around, including it in the operations audit is, this is part of our work, right? This is part of our day-to-day operations, which is really nice reinforcement of that, the learning... The work is the learning basically.

Kelly Hopkins:

Exactly. Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

So the other question I had before we move on to Product Ropes is about the response of your managers when you initially rolled out coaching as a key development strategy and set the expectation that part of their job was to coach their teams. Sometimes I hear stories that there's a little bit of resistance that managers say, look, we're really busy, we've got plenty of stuff to do already. Don't give me another thing to do. What was the response and how did you kind of talk to people, the managers, about the opportunity to coach and what it might mean for them and get that over the line with them?

Kelly Hopkins:

I think, and it's like anywhere, we had some people within the business who got it straight away and they really embraced it and they really kind of drove it and then we had some people at the other end who, as you said, "Oh, it's another job. Oh, I don't want to do it, I have so much to do already." And then there were a lot of people in the middle who didn't really know, who were trying it for the first time and who came along on that journey with us. But I think for us, it was starting with the regional managers and really having them go through it first. And then, our teams are really achievement driven, they're really achievers. So everybody likes to smash their budgets and everybody likes to have their store looking aligned with the VM standards and everybody likes to be winning and giving a great experience to our customers.

So it wasn't a hard sell to actually convince most of our store managers that coaching their teams was going to be the best way to really develop their teams' product knowledge, operational excellence and customer experience skills. And I think for most people, they kind of understood it. We've come on a real journey with customer experience as well, so I think in the five or six years, that I've been here anyway, we can really see that journey where our teams are much more customer focused. It's really all about engaging the customer and providing them with an excellent, first-class retail experience when they come into the store. And I think our managers really want to do that. It's the vision that they have for themselves and it wasn't really hard to kind of show them that well, the way to achieve that is actually to demonstrate it and coach it and be the coach of your team. We'll give you some resources, we'll give you the framework to coach on, but we are going to expect and ask that you are the ones within your team that are responsible for developing and growing it because we don't have trainers across our business. We don't have anybody else to do it.

Learning Uncut Episode 105 Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Yeah. And nice linkage into the culture and values of the organization as well and noting your point that it took a year really for it to get momentum and start embedding.

Kelly Hopkins:

And it wasn't consistent either. We had some pockets of real excellence where the coaches raced through it and they wanted more and they wanted more and then we had other store managers that we were chasing up months and months later and kind of prompting them to do the next piece and the next piece. So it's all about making sure that that 80% in the middle were tugging along as expected and achieving at the rate that we expected. So...

Michelle Ockers:

But what's nice is you didn't just tell them it was their job, you built up their skills, you gave them resources, including, and I love this, in the retail context, some analogue resources that were really easy and convenient to use to supplement the digital. Absolutely fit for purpose for the context, right?

Kelly Hopkins:

Yes. I mean, they can't take the computer with them out into the shop floor. We don't have Wi-Fi or iPads in our stores for learning. So in order to take that and actually practically apply it in the stores, we wanted to provide them with something easy to use and some resources. So that's what we did and I think that that's been kind of the key to the success as well. We could've just said, here's a system and a course and some coaching, go, and I don't think we would've had quite the success that we've had if we hadn't have provided these resources in the framework that we did.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Nice. Should we hit the ropes?

Kelly Hopkins:

Shall we hit the ropes? Absolutely. So one of the other things that I really wanted the team to understand and to learn was that not all knowledge comes from the online learning or from the computer, there's lots and lots of ways that we can learn about our products, our website is one of them, in the store, from your fellow team members, from your coaches, from the product itself, from picking it up, from wearing it, from trying it on, from the questions that your customers ask you. So what I wanted was for the team to really start to utilize all of those learning opportunities and learn from as many angles and aspects as they could. So we created Product Ropes and what Product Ropes is it's a downloadable PDF, it actually sits within our LMS in the resource library and they can download it. And Product Ropes, we've created seasonally by category, so when we come into winter, insulation or puffer jackets, it's our big one. So at the start of the winter, the Product Ropes is around insulation. So insulation applies whether it's puffer jackets or sleeping bags. When we're coming into spring, it's around camping. When we're coming into, here in New Zealand and Australia when it's January, February its back to school, so it might be bag packs, those kind of things. So we did it seasonally when people were going to... Our teams were going to need that knowledge, when customers were going to be coming and asking for that knowledge

What it is really flexible, so you can download the Product Ropes and either complete it yourself as an individual. You could do it in a day, you might do it across a week, we didn't

Learning Uncut Episode 105

Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

set any of these rules, or you could do it with your entire team, or you could do it within teams in your team and have your competition. And you might do it in a morning or it might be across a day or shift or a week.

The Product Ropes consist of almost a test or a quiz, so there's some answers that you... some questions about the product and the category that you can answer from anywhere that you like. So you could go online, you could ask somebody in your team, you might know the answer, you could go and find the answer on the swing tag of the product, and it doesn't matter where you get the answer from, it's just matters that you answer the question. So there are long form questions with long form answers that people would hand write and then there are a couple of scenarios. So this customer comes into your store, this is what they're here for, what would you recommend for them and there might be a couple of written longer scenarios. And then there's a role play. So the role play has a scenario that you would complete with your Store Manager.

So Product Ropes has a coach's guide and the Product Ropes, so we would provide both of those. The store manager would get the coach's guide so it had some example answers for each of the questions that the manager could then, or the coach could then coach on or give feedback on. Also some examples of how you might answer the scenarios and then also what you would be looking for in the role play with your team member and what you would coach them on. So we provided that to the managers as well. And Product Ropes has been really, really successful for us. The team love them, the team actually write them themselves now, so that's fantastic. We have teams across some of our regions who create their own Product Ropes and then they see in the minutes, say, "We want to do this one next" and they get really excited about it, so that's been a huge success for us. But it really builds in on that kind of coaching interaction that we had online and brings it practically into the store in a way that's really flexible and really engaging and approachable or accessible for the teams.

Michelle Ockers:

Fantastic. I love that people have grabbed on to the idea and are volunteering to create content and I assume you take a look at what they're creating, provide some guidance to make sure it's fit for use.

Kelly Hopkins:

I would generally find that our teams know more about the product than I do, and also they know more about the customers that are coming in and the kind of thing the customers need to know or asking than I do. So it actually really makes me happy. It makes my life a lot easier and I'm really happy to see it come through. Absolutely, I think sometimes when you're in a learning and development position, you know how to write a scenario and you know how to write a role play. So these are some of the things that we've worked with the team to develop as well. And sometimes we give some coaching on that.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep, fantastic. Nice, nice opportunity that you've grabbed onto for user-generated content. So in terms of your L&D team, now you're a three person L&D team.

Kelly Hopkins:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Learning Uncut Episode 105 Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

What do you guys do? What's your job then on a day-to-day basis?

Kelly Hopkins:

Oh my goodness.

Michelle Ockers:

Are you continually developing more resources? Are you...

Kelly Hopkins:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

How does it work for you?

Kelly Hopkins:

So we started, as I said, that journey with one coaching course online and through that, we were able to create a business case to actually migrate our online training LMS to a new platform, which is a bigger investment but is a much better product. So we now have a really innovative LMS platform that we utilize, within that we can create our own content with coaching loops, so it's actually embedded into the platform. And we have obviously a whole product library that continually needs to be updated, we have a lot of induction content. So currently, I think we're sitting at about 16 hours across those three months for induction. Our objective is to get that down to 10 hours of online training in the next year, in induction, but we're constantly creating new content.

So for example, just in the year that's been, we've created some content around well-being, around COVID, we've created a diversity and inclusion module, or course actually, based on the DDI principles of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. We are updating currently health and safety. We work with other parts of the business as well. So our platform, our online learning platform is so well embedded across our teams that we have people from loss prevention coming and asking us if they can create some content that we host on the visual merchandising. Our visual merchandising team have been fantastic, and they've created a whole lot of content that we now host on there that we didn't previously have.

So keeping that up-to-date and vibrant and fresh, that's a big job. But we also challenge ourselves, like I said, to go above and beyond just being that retail training provider. So we actually offer all of our retail teams the opportunity to achieve formal qualifications. In New Zealand they are NZQA certificate in retail level three and four and a certificate in business level three and four. So we have a pathway that any of our Kathmanduers can choose to take up.

And in Australia we actually have a partnership with Torrens University. So Torrens University has a suite of digital badges that are digital smart skills. So Torrens is the university that prepares you to actually go and work in the real world, is what they say. So their online digital badges are all endorsed by industry organizations. So Kathmandu is the endorser of the Torrens University leadership essentials digital badge. They've got one around organizational change that's endorsed by B Corp for example. There's one around creative thinking and critical thinking that's endorsed by Canva. So they all have industry endorsers. But what we have is we have licensed all of those badges so that we can provide access to them to all of our team members. It doesn't matter whether you are a store

Learning Uncut Episode 105

Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

manager or somebody who works at one of the support offices or an occasional team member who only works four hours on a Saturday, you actually have the opportunity to log into Torrens University and complete one or two or as many of those digital badges as you wish. So there's six, maybe seven now in application. And once you've completed six of those, you can actually choose to complete an academic assessment which will then give you a micro-credential. So it's a formal qualification through Torrens University, that's the equivalent of one elective subject in a university degree.

So our team members or our retail team have that available to them. So they have that option to progress their formal education through that avenue. So that is something that we've developed over the last two years through our partnership with Torrens University. So one of... I guess for us, developing and maintaining those strategic partnerships is really, really key to us because we don't have a huge budget. We have huge ambitions, lots and lots of things that we want to do and how we're able to do that is actually through forming partnerships with people like RedSeed, ServicelQ, who's our RTO here in New Zealand, Torrens University, which is based here out of Australia, that enable us to actually provide these really, really great learning opportunities to all of our team.

Michelle Ockers:

So with a small team and a small budget, how do you prioritize? How do you make those decisions on an ongoing basis of what your team is going to work on?

Kelly Hopkins:

That's a great question. So we've recently restructured our team to actually give it more clarity around that. So I am capability and diversity manager. So as well as learning and development, I actually look after diversity here at Kathmandu as well. And on my team, I have a retail capability manager who is responsible for creating and driving and executing the retail strategy. So she has been with us for about four years, but that role has been in place for about six months now. We created that role because it was a really good fit. So our retail capability manager, Novo, looks after retail. We're in a position where we're able to do that now because the online learning part almost looks after itself. So five years ago we probably spent 40% to 60% of our time administering the online learning platform. Now, the admin side really is so smooth that, unless there's a bug that comes up or something happens, we really don't have to do any of these, so there's so much more time.

So the online learning part takes care of itself. It runs smoothly. It reports, we can report on it. So it's about creating that content and we have a strategy. So we've just finished pulling together a three-year strategy for retail capability. Within that, we look at, okay, what do we do to continue to develop Kathmanduers to be the best and create Kathmanduers for life? So what we've found is that we currently have come to a place where we've got a lot happening and a lot of it we've done on a wing in a prayer, through these partnerships and through a little bit of luck and a little bit of giving things a go and...

Michelle Ockers:

You know what, Kelly? I had a manager once who said to me, "You create your own luck." So I think kudos to you and the team for creating your own luck. Right?

Kelly Hopkins:

I think Kathmandu is an environment where you can do that. It's a great place where... As I said, one of our values is courageous and within that is we give it a go. So it's a place where

Learning Uncut Episode 105

Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

we can give it a go. Some things work and we keep going with those and some things don't and we kind of just let them fall by the wayside or...

Michelle Ockers:

What's an example then of something that didn't work and why didn't it work?

Kelly Hopkins:

Something that hasn't been as successful for us in learning and development is probably our internal mentoring program. So this is one that we continue... We haven't actually let this one go. We're continuing to work to find how we can make this work well, because I think internal mentoring is a great learning tool to have within a business.

For us we have a very flat business. We are really going to push this in retail because we think we have... We see an opportunity within our strategy to make it work within retail, utilising some of the technology that we have to really kind of, as we did with coaching, where we brought in these analogue resources, we're going to use some of the technology to create a framework to support the mentor program. We have had the mentor program and some of the challenges that we've had is that we are such a flat structure that it's hard to find mentors for people within the business, because there are only a certain number of people that sit at any given level of the business.

We have a KLT or Kathmandu Leadership Team, that's our executive team, depending... In the last couple of years it's been anywhere between 8-10 people. Then we have a wider leadership team which is about 45-60 people, so the mentors for those wider leadership team members should technically be the executive team members. We don't ever ask any person to be a mentor to more than one person at a time, so that really limits the opportunities for things like that. Also we don't want to make too strict of a framework around it, so it's finding that balance of what's the right amount of guidance and framework and structure to put into the program. So we continue to work on that one and hopefully...

Learning Uncut Episode 105

Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

Michelle Ockers:

And fine tune it, yes. We can have a whole separate conversation around mentoring but let's not do that. Let's kind of tie together the threads of the conversation up to this point, Kelly. Thank you for taking us on a deep dive into some of those approaches and the way that coaching, user generated content, experiential learning is used. It's a really rich example for people to think about in terms of something that's really effective in your context. It's taken you a lot of sustained effort, but it's not something that requires a huge budget either. And that frontline environment, be it retail environments or manufacturing environments or contact center environments, but particularly where people aren't at computers, I think there's some really good examples of strategies and tactics for people to take away and think about applying. I've got a question around value and impact before I get onto some tips for others. So how have you demonstrated the value and impact of coaching?

Kelly Hopkins:

There are several ways. As I said, when we started on this journey, we did have really high early turnover, early turnover within our retail team in the first 3-6 months, it was even higher for retail and retail is traditionally high.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Kelly Hopkins:

We managed to pull that right back to be really, really low. We were sitting maybe around 10%, 12%, sometimes 15%, whereas we had been sitting at 65-80%.

Michelle Ockers:

Oh, it's a massive improvement.

Kelly Hopkins:

Yeah, that in itself was a massive improvement. And that was obviously down to a lot of things across the business, the retail operations team, the leadership team engagement, but one contributing factor was that people felt they were being coached and people were learning and managers were coaches, so that's huge for engagement. And we saw that through our customer experience and our customer feedback results which continue to grow and continue to be outstanding and exceed our targets. So that's fantastic as well.

Michelle Ockers:

So you're really using business metrics to say, "Look, we're getting the capability build right, because our people are able to apply and achieve improved performance," which I love, I love. So in terms of... Let's talk about the coaching and the success of coaching as a key learning methodology at Kathmandu. What do you think has been most critical to achieving success with the coaching approach?

Learning Uncut Episode 105 Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

Kelly Hopkins:

I think like anything, it was important that we stuck with it. It did take a while to embed it and it was inconsistent across the business to start with, and what we did was we didn't give up. That was our objective was that our store managers were going to be coaches and now some of the store managers are actually coaching other store managers so that the coaching doesn't sit with the regionals anymore, which is fantastic. But it was really sticking with it. And then I think it was, we have the right people in our teams. And probably people who didn't want to be coaches probably are no longer in the team.

Kelly Hopkins:

People who didn't know they wanted to be coaches have discovered the joy of coaching and are loving it, and I can think of some examples, really, really outstanding examples of that. And our store teams are really kind of learning teams. They have this real learning culture where they learn from each other, they support each other, they develop each other. And I think that that's been key to it. I don't think we could have done it if the teams hadn't been ready for it and they hadn't been the right teams to have done it. We just provided them with the language and the framework and the opportunity and the validation to do it and they really took it and they've made it their own thing. Basically, we signed on to an online course, we created some PDFs, we did some conference calls and they ran with it. So I think it's the teams themselves...

Michelle Ockers:

It was a little more than them running with it though. You were...

Kelly Hopkins:

Well yeah, this is true.

Michelle Ockers:

You make it sound so simple, but there was more you had to do, particularly in that first year, when you talk about never giving up, what did you have to do to keep the momentum, to keep building momentum?

Kelly Hopkins:

So I think... For example, if we look at the hierarchy that we went through to roll it out, it started obviously with the HR team and with the regional managers. At the time, I guess we maybe had 10 or 11 regional managers, sometimes we restructured changes and they're busy, busy, busy people. Some of them have regions that are spread across states in Australia. They might have 25-30 stores in their region, so they're managing 25-30 store managers and there's a lot happening there. So for them to take the time to actually go through the coaching training themselves and learn how to be coaches, these are professionals that have been in retail and they've been in regional management for a long time. They do know, they know how to coach and they know how to lead, but to actually have them go through that program, there was a big commitment on their behalf.

Learning Uncut Episode 105

Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

And they really committed to it because they understood that this was going to change what was happening in their stores, but then they all had to coach somewhere between 15 and 20. And we tried not to make it too big. So if someone had a big region, then I would take some of the coaching or one of the HR business partners would take some of the coaching so that any one regional manager might be coaching 10 to 12 people at a time. But if you can imagine that, that even 15 to 20 minutes every two weeks on each of those, that's a lot of time. So there was a big commitment. And within that you have your store managers who are really keen, so they get it in and they submit it and they're waiting and they might call up the regionals and say, "Have you coached? Have you marked it yet? Can we talk about it?" And then you've got your others that are kind of just doing it maybe on time and on the timeline and they're just sitting waiting for the response to come in.

Michelle Ockers:

So was there a lot of behind the scenes work for you and your team to nudge things, to keep things moving along to get...

Kelly Hopkins:

In some cases, yes. So we'd looked through and you're able to track, obviously, who's ahead, who is on schedule in completing the modules as they should be. And then who is behind and whether that's a week behind, three weeks behind, or in some cases two months behind. And one of the challenges that you have is as the learning and development team that sits in the support office, we're not actually the managers of the store managers, we don't get to decide how they spend their time. We don't get to assign them tasks and work. They have tasks and work and their time is managed by themselves and by the manager who's the regional manager. So we actually don't get to, what's the word I want to use, we're not in a position direct or dictate what any of those people do on a daily basis or how they prioritize their time.

Michelle Ockers:

You have to work through enabling strategies, right? Influencing, supporting, nudging, guidance. Yeah.

Kelly Hopkins:

Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

So what tips do you have for others who are listening to this podcast, learning and development professionals from around the globe? And they're thinking I'd like to either get started to do more with coaching in my organization, what do you suggest to them?

Kelly Hopkins:

I think you've just got to just start it. And there are many ways, you don't necessarily need to use the online platform that we've used. But I think if you want your team to be coaches, you've got to teach them how to be coaches. And as L&D professionals, coaching is ingrained in what we do and every conversation that I have with my own team is a coaching conversation, because that's what we do. And we have it in our minds that everybody knows how to coach, but not everybody knows how to coach and even the people that know how to coach, they don't necessarily know when to do it or how to apply that within their daily job.

Learning Uncut Episode 105 Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

So I think the first thing that you have to do is actually teach your coaches to be coaches, what is coaching, give them those skills, give them that development, give them the opportunity to learn, and then give them some prompts or some opportunities or facilitate them actually performing that coaching and whether that's through some kind of resources that you create or whether you bring them together once every few months for a couple of hours after the stores close and you actually do some practice and some role plays. Or you have assigned them in...

And for us, you might start and ask if you've got, for example, it's a retail team and you have a store management team, you might ask your store manager just to start coaching the assistant manager, not the entire team, because your store manager is not necessarily going to see a casual or a part time retail team member every week or every couple of weeks. But just ask them to start with this assistant store manager. And then through that the assistant store manager is going to understand what coaching is and get a feel for coaching and maybe they're going to go and try it themselves on some of the other team. So don't make it too big, don't make it too much of a challenge. Provide some kind of opportunity or facilitation or resource that actually enables it to happen, or prompts it to happen, and makes it easy.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, thank you. So play the long-term game and start small one step at a time, give some good supports and encouragement and stick with it, was what I heard earlier.

Kelly Hopkins:

I'm glad you got that out of all of that.

[laughter]

Michelle Ockers:

I did. So thank you so much Kelly for sharing such rich insights into what learning at Kathmandu looks like. I love the values - courageous, joyful and open - and it certainly feels like you and your team have lived those values in this journey you've gone on with a very small team to create big impact with Learning and with this strategy that embeds coaching through both formal and informal learning. And we'll put a link to your LinkedIn profile in the show notes and we'll also share the episode on LinkedIn and encourage people if they'd like to reach out to reach out to you by LinkedIn. Thank you so much, Kelly, really appreciate you coming on and talking about...

Kelly Hopkins:

Thank you so much, Michelle.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes, thank you.

Kelly Hopkins: And hopefully, I'll be back again in a year to talk about mentoring and how successful we've been.

Michelle Ockers: We sometimes do follow up episodes, I call them, "The What's Happened next episodes." I was just thinking yesterday I haven't done a what happened next follow up

Learning Uncut Episode 105 Coaching at Kathmandu – Kelly Hopkins

episode for a while. So we'll stay in touch and get you back to see where you go next, maybe in 12 to 18 months' time, Kelly.

Kelly Hopkins: Awesome. Thanks so much, Michelle.

Michelle Ockers: Thank you.

Kelly Hopkins: Thank you



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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