

Learning Uncut Episode 108
Using a Strengths Based Approach – Brett Archer
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

I'm joined by Brett Archer, the Capability Development leader at SBS, the Special Broadcasting Service, who is Australia's multicultural public broadcasting service. We discuss how they have taken a strengths-based approach to leadership development. The approach has its foundations in positive psychology, a discipline that one of our previous Learning Uncut guests, Hayley Curcio, has also applied in her work. Since adopting a strengths-based approach SBS has seen engagement survey scores about leadership behaviours improve consistently year on year. In an interesting extension, Brett has used the strengths concept to look afresh at the organisation's strengths and how these could be leveraged for learning purposes. There's a few little surprises in our conversation, including that Brett loves his LMS. One of my favourite moments is discovering what Kylie Minogue has to do with social distancing at SBS.

If you can make it to Sydney on 8-9 November, come along to the L&D Innovation and Techfest where Brett will be speaking about other aspects of the strengths-based approach. I'll also be speaking about shaping a high impact organisational learning strategy. We'd both love to say hi if you are there.

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to Learning Uncut, Brett. It's great to have you here.

Brett Archer:

Thank you for having me, Michelle. It's a pleasure to be here.

Michelle Ockers:

It's been a few years. I can't even remember how we met. I know our paths have crossed a few years ago.

Brett Archer:

They have. Haven't they? I can't remember either. It might have been at conference or something like that.

Michelle Ockers:

Did you ever do anything in the 70:20:10 Forum, at some point?

Brett Archer:

Yes. Oh gosh, isn't it sad that we do so many things that you can't think necessarily about the specifics. But it might have been there, for sure.

Michelle Ockers:

I think I was working in North Sydney with Coca-Cola Amatil, and you were... I think... I've got a recollection of catching up with you at Crows Nest, which most of our viewers won't know where that is, but in North Sydney. I think we physically got together after striking up some curious conversations and seeing some common interests way back in like 2014, 2015. And I'm pretty sure we've actually met face-to-face at some point...

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Brett Archer:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

But our paths haven't crossed for a long time. And recently I saw you on the agenda for the Learning and Development Innovation and Tech Fest, which is coming up in Sydney in November, where we're both speaking. And I thought, "Great opportunity to reach out." I can see you've been doing a lot of great work in the past few years, and we're going to talk about some of that work today, so...

Brett Archer:

Looking forward to it. So it's nice to be able to actually interact with you rather than just listening to the podcast. So that's wonderful. [chuckle]

Michelle Ockers:

Brilliant. So you work for an organization called SBS. Everyone in Australia will know who they are, but we do have a lot of overseas listeners. So can you introduce us to SBS, what they do, and who they do it for.

Brett Archer:

Sure, I'd love to. So SBS does stand for the Special Broadcasting Service. And it's Australia's most diverse broadcaster. So we hold a really unique sort of place in the Australian media landscape. And we are here to inspire all Australians to explore, respect and celebrate our diverse world, a diverse Australia. And by doing that, we sort of contribute to an inclusive and cohesive society.

So not only are we Australia's most diverse broadcaster, but we're actually proudly the world's most linguistically diverse broadcaster. No other broadcaster in the world provides news and information in the amount of languages we do. There's about 68 different languages that we service in Australia, which is not bad, when you stop and consider that we actually started as an experiment back in the '70s... In '75, I think it was.

A three-month experiment to see if we could provide information... Important information to minority communities in their native language. I think it was back then, it was the Medicare Scheme, I think it was. So it was started as broadcasting sort of pre-recorded messages for a few hours every day in Sydney and Melbourne across around seven to eight different languages.

So at its core, SBS was sort of founded on the belief that all Australians, regardless of your geography, age, cultural background, language skills, you should be able to have access to that high quality, independent, culturally relevant media, so that you can participate in public life.

And when you have a look at the recent things that we've all gone through, our bush fires, a global coronavirus pandemic, where SBS was able to actually work with government agencies to ensure that we've got that really vital health information going out to communities in multiple languages, is a really strong demonstration of that, I think. And that's probably why SBS is consistently rated as one of our most trusted media sources, which is in... Pretty difficult to find sometimes these days with misinformation, etcetera.

So the modern SBS though, is a multi-platform media organization. We've got free-to-air channels. I think about six different channels. So we've got SBS, the main channel, NITV, which is our National Indigenous Television Station. SBS Viceland, SBS Food, SBS World Movies, and of course, the new SBS World Watch as well. And on radio, we're providing over 60 different communities with languages, services in their own

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language, and the wonderful SBS On Demand, which is probably what I interact with a little bit more. On-demand services, anywhere I need to, any time from your smart-enabled device.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. Origin story. I wasn't aware of the origin story. That is really interesting. And obviously with diversity being a core part of your purpose, cultural diversity, I imagine your workforce is very culturally diverse. And I also wonder about this idea of starting as an experiment and has that permeated through the culture?

Brett Archer:

I think so, yeah. I sort of think of ourselves as the little broadcaster that could... You know? So we are not necessarily the biggest broadcaster out there, nor are we the biggest public broadcaster, but... Geez, we pack a punch. And I think that is in no uncertain terms because of the strength of our diversity. When you do broadcast in so many different languages, by our very nature, we are quiet, culturally diverse.

About 55% of our employees actually, identify as being culturally diverse as well. We've got about 50% of our people, 53% are female, 51% of our senior leaders are female as well. Of course, we have a large contingent, about 40% of our employees are linguists... Linguistically diverse as well. So we do have a diverse workplace. And I think that gives us a lot of strength 'cause we get obviously diversity of thought there as well. So different ways of doing things, and of course, it makes for an amazing and fun place to work as well.

Michelle Ockers: I can imagine. How many people work for SBS?

Brett Archer:

So it's interesting, we do have a pretty big contingent workforce. As you can imagine, we sort of swell and then right-size depending on the thing that we are covering or the work that we're doing. We're about to broadcast the World Cup this year, so many of us are very excited about that. So we will probably obviously swell with that. But we have around 1500 employees across our major sites, Sydney and Melbourne. But we also have offices in Brisbane and satellite offices all over the country.

Obviously, Canberra, really important for your political coverage, for news and current affairs as well. So around 1500 employees across those locations. And apart from the diversity, they're a pretty diverse bunch in terms of the divisions that we have, the different work that we do. So we've got some really digitally savvy employees. You can imagine when you're working with this kind of broadcast technology and amazing digital products daily, they're pretty digitally savvy.

Some of them are skeptical. You're talking about journalists, so they're sort of trained to question everything, which is a good quality. Can be challenging for a learning and development professional to come in and start talking about topics when they're saying, "Uh, hang on a second, where does this come from?" Or "What does it mean? And how can you back that up?"

Michelle Ockers:

But that's good, right? That holds us to higher standards and to questioning ourselves, "What am I doing? Where's the evidence base for that?" That's a very positive thing.

Brett Archer:

Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. And it's lovely to see that when we have... Different partners and vendors might come in and help us with some content, they're always commenting on that, that we're a very engaged bunch. And it's one of our values, is to

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engage and participate fully. And in terms of that high quality content, the reliance on quality and that questioning also kind of steps into the space of content as well. They are surrounded by such high-quality content, they kind of expect that from everything that we do though as well.

So when I'm there sort of trying to talk to people about different topics or introduce vendors, we do have that sort of high-quality expectations, because we're surrounded by such high-quality content in the work that we do as well.

Michelle Ockers:

And I think this... What you've just described talks to the importance of the context we work in to understanding how to work most effectively in that environment. Before we talk a little bit about your team, one thing I wanted to clarify, in Australia, the term public broadcaster, people will understand that that means you are government-funded. But people overseas might not use the word public in the same sense.

Brett Archer:

Sure. Sure.

Michelle Ockers:

So I just thought that's worth clarifying.

Brett Archer:

Yeah, absolutely. So we... You could kind of think of as a hybrid, I guess. We... 70% of our funding is provided by the government, and we are about... 30% of our funding comes from some of our activities. So we do some advertising, and we also even... Yeah, we'll sell some of our learning and development as well based on some of our strengths, which I'll talk about a little later. But anything that we do generate in terms of that revenue from our amazing SBS media team is funnelled back into our production. So that allows us to do things like purchase high value content from overseas or make our own productions. That all goes back into our efforts so that we can best serve our audiences really.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, it sounds like such an interesting place to work, Brett. What... Tell us a little bit about your role and your team.

Brett Archer:

Sure. So I am the capability development lead at SBS, and I work in the people and culture team. So I look after anything learning and development-wise that sort of hits the entire organization. So here you're looking at things like our learning management system, you're looking at things like leadership development, career development.

And I consult across the business as well. If there... Ever there's a need for any type of training or development that will hit the majority of employees, that's the space that I work in. We have other learning professionals at SBS as well working within different teams and divisions across the organization. So for example... A great example actually, is an amazing team that we have in our audio and language team.

So we really hire there for people that have the language skills and connections to our communities, strong connections. Because we can always train and develop people on how to run a podcast, like this one, [chuckle] or how to actually broadcast radio. So we have some strong technical training teams. But really when we have a look at our broader learning and development approaches, that's where I... That's the space that I play in.

Michelle Ockers:

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And do you have anyone else reporting in to you as part of your team, or you're... Are you a central team of one?

Brett Archer:

I am the team, yes. I am a central person. We used to have... There's other colleagues that I've had in the past, but for the moment, it's just myself within the team. So... And I think a lot of that is because of the work we've done previously, to be able to build systems and processes, and put them in place so that I can do a lot of work myself without having to have other team members. But that may change in the future. But for the moment, it's a one-man band when it comes to learning and development.

Michelle Ockers:

Alright. So let's get to the main show here, the main part of what we're going to talk about, which is the work you've done taking a strengths-based approach in recent years to learning and development at SBS. Can you start by telling us a little more about what is a strength-based approach? What does that mean?

Brett Archer:

Sure. Sure. So when we have a look at strengths, there's probably two major players that I've seen over the years that like to talk about strengths. But when introducing the topic, I like to... We're learning and development professionals, so I usually like to turn this into some sort of activity, where as I...

Michelle Ockers: Yes, of course.

Brett Archer:

Well... [chuckle]

Michelle Ockers:

You're not going to make me answer questions or anything?

Brett Archer:

No, I won't turn against you there. But I do like to get people to think in that way. Just think about, "Okay, well..." If you were to grasp the concept of strengths, it's usually thinking about, "Okay, well, what do you like when you are your best self?" So if I was to ask you to talk about something for two minutes that you really enjoy doing, what does that feel like?

Brett Archer:

And a great way to think about that is the opposite, actually. If I was to tell you to think about what you're like when you're at not your best self. What you're like in a bad mood, for lack of a better description. If you're talking about something that drained you. So you might talk about things that make you anxious or agitated. Maybe you feel withdrawn in certain situations. Not your full self. Not able to bring your full self to work potentially, which is a challenge that some people have.

And obviously, that's not particularly useful, is it, to be in that space. You're not your best self, you're not thinking clearly a lot of the time. We do need to be honest though, that a lot of the times... Well, sometimes we will be in that space, but we need to try and find ways to get out of that space if we can. Because it's not too helpful, and you're not having a great time. You're not good to be around either, and you're not probably, thinking as creatively as you could if you're in that sort of a more negative space.

So when we think about strengths, we're thinking about what we're like in our best mood. What we are like when we're enjoying what we're doing, are we're

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getting satisfaction from that? So we're probably more focused, more passionate about what we're doing. Probably speaking in a more animated way as well.

And from a leadership perspective, if you're coming from a place of strength, and you are in that best mood or your best self, then you're probably more likely to inspire others and be supportive. Because you're not trying to support yourself, you're able to actually extend that and support others. You're more confident, you're more adventurous potentially, open to new ideas, open to taking risks or trying new things as well. So again, you're not going to be in that space necessarily all the time, but how can we try and maximize the times when you are in that place of strength and try and recognize when we're not in that place of strength and move to that.

So really, this approach is born out of a lot of the work from positive psychology work and how that applies in a business context. So the two organizations I mentioned before... I think there's a group out of the US called Gallup. And when I last looked at their content, I think they called it the StrengthsFinder. And then there's a group out of the UK called CAPP, which is the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology. And that's the work that we tap into, which is the strengths profile. And a wonderful organization in Australia, which accredits people in the strengths profile, is the Langley Group led by Sue Langley, who's been amazing, wonderful expert on positive psychology and someone that's helped us on our journey as well.

Michelle Ockers:

So again, the evidence base for this is from the area of positive psychology?

Brett Archer:

That's right. So what I found interesting about this is it's almost counterintuitive to what I've done for the majority of my career, which is to have a look at helping people with their development areas. So, "You're doing amazing here, that's great. But let's now have a look at the things that you're not so great at, where we need to develop and learn on."

What's come out of the research though, what they've found, is that if managers only look at weaknesses... And we're almost afraid of that word, aren't we? We don't call them, 'a weakness' we call it... Like I said, a development opportunity or a development area. So when managers only look at that and only look at the things that you need to improve... So conversations like, "Oh, Brett, you really need to go on this finance for non-finance managers course, because we need you to get across that. That's an area of improvement for you." What we've found is that there's a decrease in performance, up to about a 26% decrease in performance. And when you stop to think about that, it's probably because we're putting people in that space of, "Oh, I don't really like this. It's not something I'm good at. It's not giving me energy. It's taking a lot of my energy away from me."

And what that does is it sort of dampens some of your strengths. Now, often we will still need to do that. If it's a hygiene factor. If it's something we really need to address, then certainly, we should work on our development areas. But the research has found that if you instead focus on conversations around strengths... So if managers speak to their team members in performance conversations saying, "You are amazing at this. You've got a strength here. I can see it gives you energy. You're great at it. Let's put some goals in place to heighten that, or work on that even more." Then what happens is we see an increase in performance. Around a 36% increase in performance.

And again, it's probably because people are being placed into that really good space. That good mood sort of area where you are more open to ideas. As I said before, more confident, etcetera. And what we found is that by using your strengths, your then weaknesses in performance areas actually improve as well. Because you've got

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more energy, you've... You're able to work better basically. You're more likely to be engaged at work, you're more likely to have better customer satisfaction scores and productivity within teams goes up as well. So there is a lot of evidence for this strength-based approach.

Michelle Ockers:

So Brett, it sounds like self-awareness is a critical part of this, and if I can follow the line that you've just taken us through the arc here, by examining our patterns for when we are high energy and in what we would regard as positive or good mood, and looking at what were we doing, potentially what strengths were we using at that time, what environment where we in versus lower energy points in time, that by looking at those patterns over time, we get to understand what's driving that and where our strengths lie?

Brett Archer:

Absolutely, yes. You've got it on the nose there. So there are tools that you can use, so I've just mentioned a couple where you can actually go and have a profile done for you, but just even in self-reflection and self-awareness, you can have a think about those things. So the tool that we use in terms of the strengths profile, has a look at about 60 different strengths, it used to be hundreds of them, but they've actually managed to get it down based on general working populations around the world, what we utilise, what attributes we use in our day-to-day work. And the tool that I have... That we look at, has a look at all the 60 of those strengths, but through three different lenses, so you're asked 180 different questions. So the things that you want to sort of ask yourself is okay, well, is this thing, this attribute something that I feel that I'm really good at and perform well at, or is it something that it's... I don't... Not so great at this one, not very good at it. Then the next question you need to ask yourself is this, is this something that I find energising? Because it might be something that you're good at, you can do that, but maybe you find it draining.

So for example, something like networking, we're all going to go to a conference soon, which is going to be great for some of us, but for others, maybe it's not a strength to have that sort of networking situation where you're speaking to lots of different people, making connections, etcetera. Maybe you're good at it and you've learned how to do it, but you're not necessarily energised by that. So energy, do you find it energising or do you find it de-energising? And then the next question you gotta ask yourself as well, how often I actually utilising that strength. Because you might find that you've got something that you find really energising and that you're good at but you're not using it as much for some reason. That might be because of the environment you're in or the role that you're in as well. So a strength can only be something that you perform well at and that you find energising, those are the two things. Those others that you might be good at but not energising, we would probably call more of a learned behaviour, so you can do it, but doesn't necessarily give you energy.

Michelle Ockers:

And sometimes we have to do that stuff, right.

Brett Archer: That's right.

Michelle Ockers:

We don't get to opt out of it by saying, "Ooh, it's not a strength, therefore I'm not going to do it." It's like...

Brett Archer:

That's right. So it's about sort of having, like you said, that self-awareness to know okay, well, I have to go and network, I have to put myself out there, it's something I need to do, but just making sure that we're not in that space all the time. If that was your role or your job to do that day in and day out, you can imagine you'd need that glass of

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wine, maybe not on a Friday night but a Thursday night instead, because you're quite drained, it's taking all the energy away from you. So if we can recognise the things that give us energy and we find our strengths, then we're going to be happier, we're going to enjoy our work a lot more and be a lot more productive as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So you've used this approach in the organisation in a range of ways, when did you start using it and what triggered you to look at using it? How did you think it was going to help the organisation?

Brett Archer:

Sure. So we started looking at strengths when we started to look at our leadership development program. So we had a look at some of the leadership behaviours that we wanted to see from our leaders, and we consider anyone that has a direct report to be a leader in our organisation, a people leader. So our program is one that is pretty far reaching in terms of the numbers of participants, it's not an exclusive program, it's everybody goes through it. So strengths really matched with some of the behaviours that we're trying to inspire within our leadership cohort, and we've had a lot of success with that. So a lot of our team members in the people and culture teams to our business partners and others, including myself, have gone and become accredited in the strengths profile so that we could roll that out. What I talk... What I will be talking about at the conference a little bit more though, is that this has inspired us to think a little bit more broadly as well.

So we've seen amazing results from focusing on strengths with our leaders and in team work as well, but then we started to think, "Okay, well, what are SBS's strengths? What are our organisational strengths? What are some things that we do really well and that energise our people that we might be able to leverage?" Because as I said, we're not necessarily the biggest organisation, so how can we better use our strengths from a learning and development perspective to get better results? And that's some of what I talk about at the conference.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So let's stick a little with the leadership development, which is where you started, and then I want to come back to this idea of organisational strengths, I'm already... I've got some curious questions on that one already.

[chuckle]

So you've decided to use the strength-based approach as part of your leadership development program.

Brett Archer:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

What did you do to actually introduce it? How did you use it?

Brett Archer:

Sure. So the first thing we did is to have a bit of a watershed sort of moment where we actually got some help from the Langley group. So Sue Langley came along and talked to us about strength, talked to us about some of the research and the reasons why a strength-based approach is a good idea. And she's an amazing speaker, so it was great to have her come on site and take our leaders through that. And then we started

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the work of okay, let's now start to extend this into our team. So we had all of our leaders complete a strengths profile, which involves a really deep sort of one hour debrief after that, when we have a look at your profile with one of our accredited practitioners, and then it started to have a life of its own. Then we had leaders going, "This is great. Why haven't I seen this before? Let's embed it into my team. I want my team members to have their own profiles. I want to talk about strengths in my performance conversations now." So not only are they getting the understanding of their own strengths and how they can be aware of those and develop those, they actually started to want to do that with their team members as well, it's been a few sessions that we've had that are team-based strengths as well.

Michelle Ockers:

So how'd your leaders going through this assessment first? Was that in conjunction, if they were participating in a leadership development program, they got to do the profiling or was that you just... Any leader could take part in the profiling, how did that work?

Brett Archer:

Sure. So our leadership development program actually hits all of our leaders. So, took a little while, but we actually provided that profile and that debrief for every single one of our people leaders. So that was something that we rolled out to everybody, but now that it's kind of institute, it's something that we can extend to other groups as well. So for example, I run an emerging leaders program, so building the bank of future leaders of SBS and the strengths profile was a great way to insert that into that program as well so that people can be aware of their strengths as they're becoming leaders, not just our current leaders as well. And obviously, our teams change and evolve over time, so as new leaders come on board, it's something that they've got access to as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so someone completes the questionnaire, an accredited or certified facilitator does a debrief with them, once an individual is aware of their strengths, do they require any additional support or do you offer additional support to them, or is there a support environment to actually use those strengths? It's like well, "So what? I'm aware of my strengths now." Is that enough? Am I equipped to go off and harness those strengths and use them more effectively, or is there a level of enablement or support that you found is effective?

Brett Archer:

Absolutely. So you've tapped into something which is a passion of mine actually. I despise those kind of learning interventions that are really showy and sort of like, "Okay, that was great, we did this profile." And then you grab the profile and you stick it in a drawer and you close it and you don't see it ever again.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Brett Archer:

For my money literally and for my professionalism, I just think that it's such a wasted opportunity. So when we are having a look at the profile and doing a debrief, I definitely want to make sure that that's action oriented. So this is lovely and it's great to increase your self-awareness, but so what? What are you going to do with that? Let's actually put in some things in place or highlight some of the things or the insights that we're getting from this profile to turn that into action. Yes, we do provide support. So as I mentioned, our people and culture business partners are actually accredited practitioners in the strengths profile as well, so they're constantly having these kind of conversations and meetings with their leadership cohorts and teams as well, so that it's a conversation that continues basically. So there is that support that's available for them, and it usually comes

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full circle where they start to say, "Okay, great, we'd like to actually do something with our team to give them access to the strengths profile as well so that we can use that in some of our conversations."

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So beyond that first session then, is there follow-up or check-ins, or yeah...

Brett Archer:

It's recommended to sort of have a look at the profile once a year if people can, because it is a point in time assessments, your strengths may change over time, it's highly likely that some of the core ones will remain, some of those big, realised strengths that you've got. But you might have what are called unrealised strengths, which will change and flux depending on the kind of work that you're involved in as well. So it's recommended that we have a look at it every year or so to do another assessment and bring that back to the front of your mind, so that you can utilise that. So there's that ongoing support, but also we recommend that our people doing that once a year.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so can you give us an example of strengths, are they character traits, are they specific skills? Give us...

Brett Archer:

Sure.

Michelle Ockers:

Bring it to life with a few examples for us.

Brett Archer:

Absolutely. So I might use myself actually as an example. So one of... Or a couple of my top realised strengths, one is spotlight, so it's quite a descriptive word to tap into okay, well, what does that strength actually mean? It means that doing something like this, going onto a podcast with yourself and having the attention on me. It's not necessarily something that it stresses me out, it's something that comes quite naturally to me, it's not something that worries me, whereas for a lot of us, it is like a major worry, that kind of idea of public speaking or being the centre of attention, so that is a strength that I have. Another strength of mine is humour, something that I use quite a lot. It's great to be able to break the ice with a group of learning participants, it's great in terms of networking, diffusing conflict, all sorts of things. One of the things to think about though for your realised strengths is to make sure that they're not over-played.

So you can imagine humour is a great example of that one actually. I am in a people and culture team, so there are certain times when maybe I shouldn't be making jokes about the content that we're talking about, I should be aware of the work that other people are doing as well and not make light of certain things, so being aware of it is important and then using it wisely is important as well. Something that's probably a weakness of mine is time optimisation. So when we think of time optimisation, we're not necessarily talking about planning or organising, those are two other strengths or attributes. Time optimisation is more about okay, getting the most out of this next half hour that I've got, making sure that I cram as much into that as I can so that I optimise my time. Thinking in that way doesn't energise me at all, I find that quite draining and de-energising.

Michelle Ockers:

So does time optimisation always mean packing in lots of stuff? Because time optimisation might mean walking away from your desk and going for a walk for half an hour, because that's the best use of your time at that particular point in time.

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Brett Archer:

I would agree with you on that one. I think it's making the most out of that time.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay.

Brett Archer:

But for some people, it's about when your... I think it's an example that Sue likes to use actually when she... Coming home from work, and rather than just flopping on the couch, which is probably what I'd like to do, actually making sure that if it is optimised in terms of okay, dinner's ready, that's on the stove, this is happening, that's cleaned, right now I can relax, rather than...

Michelle Ockers:

That's so me.

Brett Archer:

Going into it. That's you, it's like... There's a difference between you and I then. So what I need to do then is say to myself, "Okay, well, is that mission critical? Is that a weakness that is something that I should really try and partner with some of my other strengths?" So planner and organiser are strengths that I have, time optimiser not so much. So instead of stressing and worrying about the weakness, instead, I'm going to reframe that weakness as a strength and say, "Okay, well, I'm great at planning and I'm great at organising," so rather thinking about optimising my time, I'm instead going to plan and organise. So just that shift can help you to reframe and work from a place of strength and energy rather than a place where you find things de-energising.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So for me, that all sounds very useful and very interesting, and of course people love to learn more about themselves, right?

Brett Archer: Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

In terms of people saying, "Yeah, that was interesting, I got a lot out of that. Thank you very much," and it actually having an impact and you knowing that this was something that was worthwhile doing from an organisational perspective and it's made a difference, what have you seen, how do you determine whether this approach is working and adding value in the organisation?

Brett Archer:

Absolutely, yep. So what we do is we ask our people. So we have an employee engagement survey, as I'm sure many organisations do, and we pulse that through the year with varieties of different questions, but we do have what we call our manager feedback questions. So the leadership behaviours that we look for and that we train and develop too, I guess you could describe it as a bit of a 180, we ask our people to rate their own direct manager, so there are phrases like, "My manager is approachable, has time for me. My manager does this, my manager does that." So we actually assess those leadership behaviours with our people and get feedback from our people, and what we've seen is from the inception of our leadership development program, when we started measuring those, we have seen consistent improvement year on year, which is great, so it tells us that the work that we're doing around these different types of conversations, it's not just strengths, that's one piece of our broader leadership development program, has had an impact.

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We have watched our leadership scores increase. If ever they start to plateau, then that's a signal for us to re-look at the things that we're measuring and say, "Okay, well, are they still fit for purpose? Do we need to evolve our leadership model anymore?" And we've got that wonderful diversity in our people as well, so we tap into that and sort of co-create our leadership development programs with our leaders and with our people through listening to them as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, it's interesting isn't it when we talk about has a part of our work had an impact, it can be sometimes difficult to unravel which parts of it have had an impact or whether something else outside of the work we're doing with our learning initiatives has had an impact, but I think it's important for us not to shy away from looking at the data and using that as an excuse not to go there and have some smarter conversations, better informed conversations using the data we have available to us. So it sounds like you are doing that.

Brett Archer:

Yeah, and it's always a challenge isn't it? We have this conversation again and again about how we assess the effectiveness of the work that we're doing, and that correlation versus causation and Kirkpatrick's model as well. So looking at those things I think is important, but when you deliberately look at those specific behaviours, then you're more likely to be able to measure improvement and what you're actually trying to achieve through your learning and development initiatives.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, I think the other interesting element in terms of value and benefit here, or an indicator is that you have leaders asking to roll out the approach for their teams.

Brett Archer:

Yes, I think that's great. It's one thing to have that lovely executive level sponsorship, that sort of top-down support for the program, where we've got our directors and senior leaders talking about it and actually doing it for themselves as well, but to see that grassroots ground-up approach whereas you said, people are asking for it certainly tells you that if you're onto something quite special.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Now, you spoke earlier about looking at organizational strengths and what's energising our people, do you want to talk a little bit more about how you move from looking at individual strengths to organizational strengths and apply the same sort of principles around the strengths-based approach at that level?

Brett Archer:

Yeah, absolutely. So again, even for our approach to leadership development, when I started at SBS, we sort of did more of a traditional approach, which is grabbing a select group of senior leaders and sending them away on a special program, then they come back and apply some of their learnings to projects, etcetera. But when we started to have a look at leadership development, as anyone who's a people leader is part of our leadership development program, we had some challenges that we had to overcome. So we started to look at, "Okay, well, what are some of our organizational strengths? What are some of the things that we do really well and things that we have that maybe other organizations don't necessarily have?" So one of the big standouts, apart from our people and the diversity, which I've already spoken to, are things like physical assets. We have a couple of television studios sitting right there. [chuckle]

They're obviously used and booked for all the wonderful programs that we do, "But why aren't we using that for some of our leadership development or for

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some of our learning and development initiatives?" We've got some amazing on-screen talent as well, presenting the news, presenting our programs, "Why don't we get them involved in some of our leadership development and learning and development programs?" So we started doing things like, instead of having our learning participants come into a room and have a session that's facilitated or doing something online, "Let's bring them into our television studios, let's actually book the studio and have our cameras and our audio engineers and stage directors, etcetera, all poised and ready to make our own little sort of internal television show." So we have our facilitators come on, we might also do a bit of a contra-arrangement, where we're happy to sort of film the content.

If they're happy for us to use it internally, we'll provide them with the footage so they can use it to promote their services, if they like, and work together to create something that's quite special, and then that helps to tap into the asynchronous nature of some of the learning that we need to do with things like shift workers, contractors that might not be necessarily on site at the time that we produce that content. So it's just an example of thinking laterally and going, "Okay, well, how else can we do this?" When we have a look at our talents and people, we've got some amazingly talented people, apart from our on-screen and on-air talent, we've got some amazing subject-matter experts, "Let's tap into them, let's have them present some of our content." So when it came to things like rolling out COVID safety training, so not a topic that we necessarily wanted to go through, but obviously necessary, "But how can we leverage some of our strengths?" So we actually tapped into our comedy team. So they actually helped us to create some videos, and they very cleverly discovered that the 1.5-metre message that we had to get across to people happens to be almost the exact height of Kylie Minogue. So instead of talking... [laughter]

Instead of talking about being 1.5 metres away, we're saying, "Okay, make sure you are one Kylie Minogue away from your colleagues." Which was wonderful and great and got everybody talking about it and engaged with the learning as well. So what I talk about in our session is sort of encouraging people to think about what are their organizational strengths? They might not have on-screen talent or a television studio, but you might have something special, you might have people within your organization that are advocates for learning or have hidden talents that you can sort of expose and help to use in some of your learning and development.

Michelle Ockers:

So I love the one Kylie Minogue away from each other. You know what that reminds me of? Do you remember when the airline, the aircraft safety briefing videos used to be really dull?

Brett Archer:

Oh yes.

Michelle Ockers:

And then all the airlines cottoned on that no one was paying attention because they were just really dull information dumps and they started doing some really interesting stuff, like Air New Zealand had the All Blacks do theirs. And now that you sometimes see really clever and interesting videos, safety videos on aircraft.

Brett Archer:

I think our Kiwi neighbours were leading the charge on that one, but it's a great example of, you know what, coming from a place of strength as well. It's positive, it's great learning, need not be dry and boring, we can actually make it engaging as well, as long as it's relevant, you can spice it up with, yeah, sure, humour, comedy, fun. It's why a lot of us got into this space because it is enjoyable to help people learn and you can have fun with it at the same time.

Michelle Ockers:

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So when you started looking around at organizational strengths, like some of the examples you shared for a broadcaster are kind of obvious, right, in terms of using your studios, using your talent. Was there anything that it was less obvious, anything that you might not have twigged to, unless you consciously ask that question, "What are our strengths?"

Brett Archer:

Yeah, I think so. There's two things that come to mind. First is actually, sort of surprisingly, but it's our learning management system. So...

Michelle Ockers:

Hang on a minute.

Brett Archer:

Yeah, yeah. So... [laughter]

Michelle Ockers:

Your Learning Management System? You have an LMS you love.? [laughter]

Brett Archer:

Yeah, I actually do, which is wonderful, because again, we talked about how... I'm a one-person team, so I can't be everywhere and I can't do everything. But what I can do is train others in the organization, again, others that have that passion or their role sort of dictates that they're doing some learning and development as well, to be able to upscale them to become administrators of our learning management system. So we actually have administrators dispersed throughout the business that can create their own content, that can create their own learning on our platform. We've got gamification that we can add, we've got a robust sort of reporting, etcetera. So when you stopped to think about how we are utilising the platform, we realized we could use it better. And it is actually a strength that we've got, it's a really easy-to-use platform, probably the easiest LMS I've come across. But again, it all depends. If you're in a much larger organization, chances are you've probably got a more integrated system, you might have some restrictions that might not be a strength, so something to be aware of, I guess. The other thing that comes to mind is our relationships. So SBS has some pretty deep connections to the communities that are our audiences, and we have inclusion know-how because we are so diverse and because we are so unique in that respect, that is definitely a strength that we have.

So we've actually created an inclusion program. So we've spoken to Peak bodies, we have developed some content in consultation with organizations like the Diversity Council of Australia, Pride in Diversity, Australian Workplace Equality Index, Champions of Change, University of Queensland, all sorts of different bodies to create some really engaging short films, animations, interviews from people that have real lived experience with things like disability or people from different cultures, etcetera. And we're able to create some content that we can then on sell to Australian organizations, big and small, and any of that funding that we raise goes back into our programs as well, so sort of leveraging our diversity and our inclusion know-how from a learning perspective. So it's sort of similar to some of the work that we do with SBS Learn, which is like an outreach program that we've got for educators, teachers from primary all the way through to high school, leveraging some of the SBS content that we've got for learning and linked to the Australian curriculum. So having a look at some of our strengths, it's in our DNA is inclusion and diversity, so let's tap into that yet, and let's utilize that and get the most that we can out of that.

Michelle Ockers: Right. And is there any relationship between the... Is it like the whole is a sum of the parts? Is there any relationship between the range of individual strengths and the organizational strengths?

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Brett Archer:

Yeah, so I think when you're thinking about your team and the way a team works within the broader organization, that's where you can tap into individual strengths a little more, I think. So for example, if there's one particular team member that has a strength and really loves and enjoys one part of the work that you do, you can start to sort of re-organize your team so that that person takes more of that work on because they are energised by it and they love it, and then other team members are able to have their strengths kind of shine. When you're looking at the strengths of the organization, thinking about things like, "Okay, well, what do we do really well? What do we enjoy doing? Can we uncover hidden talent?" That's I think where maybe the individual strengths can come to the floor. I've got examples of colleagues and friends, they are really passionate about video production, they make their own sort of YouTube videos on the weekend, and edits and make their own content.

And that's something that you can tap into and say, "Well, we actually need to make a video for this learning program that we've got," and you'd be surprised at them, they'd be leaping out of their seat saying, "I'd love to do that." So if we can tap into that, that's some content, that colleague or friend, that video that they created from a learning perspective actually ended up being picked up by the marketing team and even made its way on to the news in terms of the product that they were highlighting. So I think the individual strengths are important for how a team works together, and they can have an impact organisationally, but I was thinking more broadly about, "Okay, well, what are the strengths that we have as an organization?" It could be something quite left of the field too.

Michelle Ockers:

So it's more taking the concept of strengths and thinking about that at a higher level when you look at your organization, and...

Brett Archer:

That's right, yeah. That's exactly what.

Michelle Ockers:

To look for untapped resources or opportunities.

Brett Archer:

Yeah, who has knowledge that they can share, who's passionate about something, but also like you said, organisationally, what are some of the things that we can do that others can't necessarily?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, yeah. So when you look back... We'll do a couple of wrap-up questions. When you look back at the work you've done with the strengths-based approach, what's gone well and why?

Brett Archer:

I think the approach of having our team go through the actual accreditation of the program so that we can live and breathe the model was quite good, having that, again, executive level sponsorship and involvement and participation in the program was really important as well.

Brett Archer:

And look, I think for our success more broadly, just treating anybody who has a direct report as a leader with... We are the ones that are often the ones to say, "Look, you don't need to have a position of management to be a leader." So let's walk that walk a little bit more or walk that talk I should say, and actually expose more of our people to

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leadership development content because you're going to see benefits from that approach as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And in terms of the most significant challenge you've had with this approach and how you've addressed it, have there been any significant challenges that needed to be addressed?

Brett Archer:

So yeah, we've always had this need to have that asynchronous learning, but I think that's been even more heightened recently and continues to be a challenge. You want to make sure that any kind of virtual approaches you take still have that same level of impact and cut through, I guess. It's a little trickier over the webcam and the microphone. It can be done, but you need to, again, think differently and think about, "Okay, well, what are some of our strengths that we can use here to make sure that this content lands with our people?"

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. I think the engagement piece, virtual, is definitely something for us to work on as learning and development professionals. The other thing I notice, you don't have the availability of meeting rooms constraining the number of meetings anymore. I think that used to be a natural break on how many meetings. It feels to me in the organizations I'm working with that people are actually spending a lot more time in meetings now, because you've got unlimited number of virtual rooms you can have meetings in at any point in time. So I think the time thing and how busy people are and competing for time to do things synchronous and live is a challenge.

Brett Archer:

Yeah, yeah. And I guess training could be seen as, "Oh, gosh, it's just another meeting." And it's tempting as well where you don't have the limitations of a visible room to say, "Okay, well, we can get everybody in here. Let's get about 30, 40 people in the room," but we just need to be very conscious that that size can be done, but it's more of a webinar sort of one-to-many approach, and we just need to be quite clever about it, "Okay, well, when do we actually need this to be more intimate? When should we be trying as best we can to do things in-person versus a virtual approach that's engaging, versus something that is more of a one-to-many approach and using fun tools like polling and Q and A through mobile devices, those kinds of things as well."

Michelle Ockers:

Being discriminating. So what tips do you have for others who might want to get started with the strengths-based approach?

Brett Archer:

Sure. So I would recommend that people do look into it. Shop around with the different providers that are out there in terms of models, if that's something you'd like to do for your people. But even just for yourself, have a think about it, "Well, what are my strengths? What are some of the things that I feel that I'm good at? What are some of the things that I enjoy doing? And can I do more of that?"

Similarly, you might find yourself quite exhausted at the end of the day. Stop and reflect and think, "Okay, well, what was I doing today? What was draining? What was taking my energy? Could I actually do it, but it just took my energy? Or is it something that I really don't enjoy doing at all?" And try and minimize that if you can. And then more broadly for your organization, can you uncover some hidden talents? Ask around, see who you have on your side who's engaged and an advocate of learning, who has knowledge and skills that they can share. Because when it comes down to it, learning is not just our

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responsibility, it's everybody's responsibility in the organization. So I encourage you to think laterally and think about existing assets that you could use whether they be physical or digital that could be repurposed for learning, and what makes your organization special that you can really highlight to make sure that you're learning and development really lands and is on point for your people.

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Michelle Ockers:

Good advice. Thank you. So I will find and put links for the Gallup StrengthsFinder and the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology into the show notes. Are there any other resources you would recommend for people?

Brett Archer:

Yeah. Sure. Have a look at the Langley Group. They are the ones that can help you with the strengths profile in Australia. More broadly, think about the topics of positive psychology and what's out there. I don't have any specific resources for that.

Michelle Ockers:

I'll take a little look around. I normally do take a little look around and pop some related resources in the show notes.

Brett Archer:

That would be great. I might do the same as well. All right.

Michelle Ockers:

And you know what else I will pop in the show notes, there was a conversation I had with Hayley Curcio, who is an L&D practitioner in Australia. I think she's recently moved roles, but she has qualifications in positive psychology and she has brought that approach into her work. So I think there was an Emergent Series Podcast conversation with Hayley.

Brett Archer:

Wonderful.

Michelle Ockers:

So I will include that as well for people to dig into.

Brett Archer:

Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

I'm sure she talks a little about it there as well.

Brett Archer:

Oh, that sounds amazing. I look forward to that.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So, Brett, thanks for your time. I look forward to seeing you in Sydney on the 8th and 9th of November at the innovation and tech... L&D Innovation and Tech Fest Conference. It'll be fun.

Brett Archer:

Yes. It certainly will be. And if anyone's heard this Podcast, please don't be a stranger, come over and say, "Good day," and introduce yourself. I look forward to seeing you and all of our colleagues. It's fun to be in person, isn't it, these days? [laughter]

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. It sure is. You talked about getting a bit of energy, and I know I'm one of those people who can certainly do the spotlight thing and be amongst people, but I like to go and retreat and replenish my energy afterwards. [laughter]

Brett Archer:

Recharge. Yeah.

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Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. So we'll also put a link to your LinkedIn profile with the show notes if anyone would like to get in touch with you, to find out more...

Brett Archer:

I'd love to connect.

Michelle Ockers:

About anything we've talked about. Thanks so much, Brett.

Brett Archer:

Oh, my absolute pleasure. Thank you for having me.

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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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