

Learning Uncut Episode 111
Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership
Development – Hannah Conkey
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Hannah Conkey is the Head of Learning and Organisational Development at the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria – RACV for short. The nature of work and expectations people have of the workplace and employers have shifted significantly following the pandemic. Hannah observes that people are seeking connection and belonging, that many are tired and there is an increased emphasis on health and wellbeing. Like many organisations the RACV has reviewed their Employee Value Proposition and also recognised that leadership needs to change in light of these shifts. RACV has taken a coherent, strategic approach to updating leadership development. With qualifications in neuroscience, Hannah discusses how insights and approaches from this field and biopsychology have informed their approach. If you would like to learn more about these fields and habit formation check out the show notes for links to some of the resources that Hannah mentions.

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to Learning Uncut, Hannah.

Hannah Conkey:

Thanks, Michelle. Great to be here and thank you for having me.

Michelle Ockers:

Oh, I'm always on the lookout for interesting stories, and I know that you've done a lot of interesting work with neuroscience and biopsychology in your leadership program, so that'll be a feature for us to dig into today. So you are with the RACV, would you like to introduce us considering we have an international audience as well, so people may not automatically know who are listening, what the RACV is. So if you can introduce us to the organisation, what you do, who you do it for.

Hannah Conkey:

Yeah, sure, I'd love to. Thanks Michelle. So RACV is a really well-known Australian brand. We have been around for a very long time and have a strong reputation in the automotive and insurance space. RACV has grown quite considerably over the years and has branched out into some of the home trades support areas. We've got our leisure businesses, so many people will have stayed at our RACV resorts around Australia. We provide lots of different services for the community as well, and also play a really key role in supporting the community and doing some work in that space as well.

Michelle Ockers:

So who are your customers? Who are your... How do you think about your customer base and who you're serving?

Hannah Conkey:

So we have a real mix of customers and members and guests. So the RACV resorts, we have a lot of guests come and stay there. And also some of our members as well. We will have customers and members that have car insurance or home product insurance. We also provide in home services for our customers and members as well. So we have a real mix

Learning Uncut Episode 111

Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership Development – Hannah Conkey

and then we provide services like emergency roadside assistance. We provide lending and finance to customers as well. So there's quite a broad range of people that would partner with RACV or take up our services.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And approximately how many people work in the organisation?

Hannah Conkey:

So we've got a bit of a mix. There's probably around three and a half thousand in RACV. We also have a lot of subsidiaries and associate businesses as well. So probably more around the 5,000.

Michelle Ockers:

So your role covers all of those subsidiaries as well then, Hannah?

Hannah Conkey:

We provide, so what we do is where there are programs and initiatives particularly in the learning or other people's spaces, we provide opportunities for our associate businesses and subsidiaries to participate in our leadership programs or where it makes sense to leverage some of the RACV services that we offer internally. So not necessarily all of them, but some of them obviously make sense to expand out and it also provides a great opportunity. So with our leadership or learning programs for example, it means that we can learn from what they're doing in their parts of the business and also build some really good relationships with people within RACV as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Understand. And would you like to introduce us to your role and your team?

Hannah Conkey:

Sure. So my role is the head of Learning and Organisational Capability. In my team, we've got a real mix of people. I'm very fortunate. I work with an incredible team. We have people in our leadership development space. We look after digital learning and learning design. We've got our contact centre. So we've got our whole learning team that look after our contact centre and provide learning for our retail stores for people when they join our RACV as part of that induction process to really make sure that all of our members and guests and customers have a really great experience.

We also look after things like your induction and onboarding experience. So really as part of RACV's employee value proposition, we want to make sure that people have a really great experience from the time that they're going through the recruitment process through to induction. And then the role-based learning professional, personal development, leadership development all the way through to whether they move on to a different role within the organisation or one of our broader businesses, but really supporting people throughout their career.

Michelle Ockers:

I understand. So we're going to talk specifically about that leadership development space today and your approach to leadership development, which you reshaped. I think we are talking about work you did in 2021, is that right?

Hannah Conkey:

Yeah. So 2021 and then the programs have still continued this year right through to this year as well. So many of them are still in progress, but we've done a lot of work to get them set up over the last year or so.

Learning Uncut Episode 111

Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership Development – Hannah Conkey

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So can you tell us a little bit about leaders and leadership at RACV particularly from the perspective of why a decision was made to change your approach and to embark on shifting things with your leadership development?

Hannah Conkey:

Sure. So firstly, I feel very privileged to work for an organisation like RACV that really sees the value in investing in learning and leadership development as most people will have found working remotely, particularly in Melbourne. So a lot of our employees are Melbourne based, but over the last two years with COVID, we recognised some of the challenges that both individuals, leaders that lead people and employees have faced. We have gone through a bit of a process of really trying to understand what's important to our people. How do we attract the best people, how do we invest in them, retain the best people and look after our employees and make sure that they have a great learning experience and career at RACV.

As we've started to transition back into the office and back to... Well, I wouldn't say back to, as we've started to transition to some different ways of working and different styles of leadership required and leveraging insights from employees through employee engagement surveys as well. We've really been able to get a deeper understanding around what is important to our people, what they're looking for, what we can do in the learning and leadership development space. And that has led to investing in a whole range of learning and leadership development solutions across the business and organisation. So...

A key thing for me was making sure that if we are going to invest in our people, and particularly in the leadership development space, that we're not taking an ad-hoc approach to how we develop our leaders, that we're actually looking at that enterprise-wide what capability do our leaders need and really trying to elevate and lift leadership capability across the entire organisation. I've seen in a lot of organisations, sometimes we send one or two people on different programs, or each individual participates in a program that seems right for them. But there's not necessarily a strategic approach to developing leaders across the organisation. And RACV as we don't have 30,000 employees, we are quite... We have quite a complex business and lots of different parts to the business. So an opportunity where we can bring people in and bring leaders from a range of different parts of the business together has been really powerful. So through insights like neuroscience and biopsychology, I find that there's a real opportunity to look at how we structure and design leadership development, and looking at some of our really high performing leaders, what are the key attributes and capabilities of successful leaders? How do we show up individually as a leader, both in terms of the work that we do...

So even for people that don't have direct reports or lead teams, "How do I show up and lead myself? What's the internal narrative and dialogue that I have when it comes to how I lead myself as an individual, both at work, at home? How do I show up for my partner? How do I show up for my children? How do I show up for my family and friends?" And then, "How do I show up at work when it comes to interacting and engaging with other people? How do I lead my team? How do I lead the business and the organisation, and even extending that out to the community?" So for me, there's been a real opportunity to take a holistic view and explore leadership development and create that collective leadership capability and insight across the organisation to drive real organisational change through the programs.

Michelle Ockers:

Fantastic. There's so much in there. The... What you just said in terms of the angles and the kind of thinking you've brought to the question of, "What does leadership need to look like now?" and "How do we coherently, strategically, holistically develop our leaders?" Can I take you back... You talked about what I would describe as a body of

Learning Uncut Episode 111

Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership Development – Hannah Conkey

listening work that you did to look at what's important to our people, thinking about different ways of working and shifts that were underway. What did you discover through that work? What is different now compared to, say three or four years ago, in terms of what's important to your people with their work, with their expectations of the organisation, with the way they want to work?

Hannah Conkey:

So I think when we look at... People have had to adapt and make changes working remotely, and people have made that change. And they've made changes to their lifestyle and their... The way that they go about doing things. As we start to look at, and have over the last 12 months, particularly around the design of these programs, the piece around connection and belonging, building relationships, having some clarity around, "What does good leadership look like? How do I need to lead people that perhaps are working remotely, or understand the broader health and well-being aspects for leaders and employees?" I think in terms of what has been important is getting to a point where we are really investing people and helping them feel like they are equipped to lead through whatever challenges may have happened but also setting a really clear direction moving forward and bringing people on that journey around, "This is the direction that we're heading in, here's how we're going to support you to get there. Here's a little bit of what the new looks like, and here's how we can help support you and make that transition." And also from an employee value proposition, that people do feel that they're growing, and that they're learning, that the organisation's investing in them.

I think there's a lot of... A lot of organisations will have found that they're losing people, or it's hard to attract people. And we really recognise the importance of investing in our people, helping them understand the bigger picture and the purpose around what we're doing as an organisation, the value that we can add, the huge opportunities that there are, and what a great place RACV is to work. And some of those learning and development opportunities link into that, so having really great leaders that can lead and inspire and engage and motivate and also grow their teams and help create really meaningful careers is probably an important as part of that as well.

Michelle Ockers:

So some of what that means for being a leader, some of that hasn't changed, some of it's kind of enduring fundamentals, right? And some of it has had to shift, you talked about. And it's things that we hear in the narrative, like in research reports and commentary in the industry. Constantly at the moment, we're surrounded by this idea that people are looking for connection, they're looking for belonging, that health and well-being is really important. And people want to live a little bit differently and hold onto some of the positive shifts that they made during the pandemic. So what is different about what this means for a leader? You talked a lot about showing up. What are the implications of what needs to shift for leadership to meet the shifting expectations of people in the organisation.

Hannah Conkey:

I think there's, obviously, what does the world look like now, but I think also in terms of for leaders... And I don't know that this is necessarily changed, but there's certainly... When I talk to different people, there's certainly a sense of people feel a little bit tired, so people perhaps feel that they have better work-life balance, or most people are still working in a hybrid work setting. However, a lot of people are saying that they feel tired.

So when I think about it from a neuroscience and biopsychology perspective, there's so much information coming towards us. There's lots of different perceived pressures and stresses and anxieties that people have to deal with. They're trying to juggle lots of different things. And often, people don't have great strategies around how to balance all of those, so we look at investing in people and helping them be good at their job,

Learning Uncut Episode 111

Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership Development – Hannah Conkey

and people focus on their work and, "How can I make sure that I'm good at my job?" But as a leader, and again, around the leading self and leading others, how do we help equip people to develop and build their skills and the awareness and the capabilities around being effective in all areas of their life? And sometimes that is around making adjustments to things like sleep, even just being mindful and paying attention and being present, so some of that attentional intelligence. Often, we're in meetings and we're trying to juggle what's... Or thinking about what has just happened, where we need to get to next, all the different things that we need to work through and manage, and that can distract people from, obviously, what's happening in the moment.

So where we have a tendency to go through our day, focusing on lots of different things, but never necessarily really being present in where we are at the time, so sort of wherever you are, be there. And that can lead to additional perceived stress or pressure for people, and often is the source of anxiety and stress for people, because they're so focused on worrying about what has happened or what might happen, that they're not as effective at being in the moment to actually deal with what is happening and be curious and listen and learn and then think about different ways that they can respond to those challenges that are perhaps more meaningful for other people and that get better outcomes, because they are able to give it their full attention and work through and problem-solve them in a different way.

Michelle Ockers:

That makes a lot of sense. And you've talked about... You've already mentioned neuroscience and biopsychology as, I guess, domains that you've drawn upon to support people with their leadership development. We're showing up with leading self, leading others. Neuroscience is interesting because it's often misused for marketing purposes, and I think there's a lot of concern around being really careful around what are you actually looking at, what's valid, what's not valid in terms of claims and so on. Can you talk to us a little bit about truly what is neuroscience, what is biopsychology and how they've informed your work? I know that's a massive question, but I'd like to give you some space to just talk to us a little bit more about those two areas, those two disciplines, and how they've influenced the way you've approached leadership development.

Hannah Conkey:

Thank you. So there's probably... Yeah, there's a couple of pieces in there. So when I think about traditional leadership and psychology and approaches, and if I think about leadership development, when we think about the types of business and leadership capabilities that leaders need to be successful in their role, obviously, we tend to look at things like strategy, leading change, managing performance, finance, commercial acumen, leading people. All of those are really key and really important in terms of helping build leadership capability. We want people to have a good understanding of an organisation and also global commercial factors that influence the rate in which organisations are changing and the way that things are changing. Particularly with technology, the world's changing so quickly. What's important to me and why I have such strong interest around neuroscience and biopsychology is often, learning is seen as something that's done over there. We send people to a training program. I've got a real focus around trying to help people move away from training and actually focus on learning.

And neuroscience plays a really key role because it actually gives us some science behind how people are made up, their thought processes, so what we think, what we say, what we do, and who we are, and who we can become. So as a leader, by understanding... And for anyone, really, but I think about leadership in the sense of leading self and others. Neuroscience helps us understand the brain and the way the brain is wired. We're born with billions of neurons, and we can start to think about... As we go throughout our life, from very early childhood, we are constantly taking in information. We're learning new things, we're watching, we're observing the world, we're creating neural pathways,

Learning Uncut Episode 111

Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership Development – Hannah Conkey

and those neural pathways are shaped by our experiences, family values, education, etcetera, and so over time, we've built these thought patterns and we then behave in certain ways based on those.

Neuroscience around learning helps us understand well, there is some science around the way we do things; therefore, one of the most powerful things about learning is if we don't like where we are or we don't like what we're doing, we can change it, and we can change that through learning. The neuroscience of leadership particularly looks around things like emotional and self-regulation. So how do I manage my emotions? How do I manage myself? And that's... Throughout our day, most of us have lots of different things that we're trying to deal with, and perhaps in that fight-flight-freeze mode, and a lot of the time people don't necessarily realise that they are, but they keep going through their day trying to deal with things.

So people often wish that things were easier or they had less challenges or why do I have to deal with this? Why can't this person just do that? Or if only we didn't have to do the end of month reporting. But if we can actually focus on understanding people and investing in them and in building their skills, then those things all of a sudden become easier and that reduces the perceived stress or pressures that people have.

So when we look at the design of programs around leadership, if we can help build self-awareness through some of the psychological or profiling assessments, we help people understand at a deeper level who they are, what drives them, what motivates them, what their strengths are, what their struggles might be, and that provides an opportunity for them to think about well, who am I? What's my identity now? What would I like it to be? What are the habits that I have in place that are serving me well? And then what are some habits that I have that I could actually let go of?

So we go through a process of we're learning all of these new things, but there's a process around synaptic pruning where our brain, if we're not using something, our brain removes those things because it's taking up unnecessary space. And I think about that for example if you're learning a new language, we learn a language or at least elements of it, and then if we don't use it, we forget it. So neuroscience of leadership looks at that deep level. If this is the identity that I want to have, what are the habits that I need to put in place to do that? What are the things that I need to learn? So how can I manage myself better? If I'm under pressure or I've got different things to deal with, what's going on in my brain?

So my brain, I might have threat response triggered, how do I then react to that, and then how would I like to react to that or choose to respond to that? So, understanding that there's things happening in our brain, that then has a physiological impact for us, so then things like being mindful, being aware of our breathing, implementing some of those strategies around, "Okay, I know that this is happening at a psychological level, but then what can I do physically to break or pattern interrupt that, and then think about what's happening, reframe it, reduce the physical response that I'm having to that situation, and then choose how I'd like to manage it."

And then that helps build self-credibility. We feel good about the ways that we're managing things and means that as a leader, if there's lots of different pressures and things happening, I can think about how I respond to things differently. I can be aware of the impact when there's change and uncertainty, what impact is that having for my people? What sort of threat responses or triggers might that initiate for people? How can I communicate more effectively that helps reduce those triggers for people? How can I support them through those changes?

Learning Uncut Episode 111 Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership Development – Hannah Conkey

So there's a lot of understanding some of that, but if we can work out on a deeper level, create that self-awareness and then use that for self-insight, and then take the self-insight piece and put it into self-development both as a leader and for our people, then we're actually building people's skills, knowledge and capability to manage themselves and others better and to get a more effective outcome.

Michelle Ockers:

Hey, that's a really great explanation. Thank you. And the biopsychology element I'm assuming is that piece you spoke about in regard to the physical response to what's happening in our brain and then being able to use physical self-management to help understanding that connection between the brain and the body and what's happening there and using both in conjunction or understanding of both in conjunction?

Hannah Conkey:

Yeah, absolutely, and that's the biopsychology piece is often then where people become unwell because of some of the perceived pressures or stresses or anxiety, and that can lead to physical illness as well, and mental health-related challenges also. So if we can try and build more awareness around that and develop strategies through learning, then we can obviously manage some of those things and reduce the physical impact that it has on us as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So how have insights from these two fields been incorporated into your leadership development programs? Perhaps if you can describe your leadership development programs and how they've been, key concepts, tools, have been introduced from neuroscience and biopsychology into your leadership development programs.

Hannah Conkey:

Sure. So, as I mentioned earlier, we really wanted to build enterprise leadership capability and take that 70:20:10 learning approach to how we structured the program. So we've got senior leader programs, we've got middle leader programs, and then new and emerging leader programs, and right through to our graduates as well. And so how we've structured the programs is through doing some initial self-assessments and 360s to gain that self-insight and awareness, and elements of being able to validate some of that through other people's input as well, so particularly from a... Yeah, with your 360s, and then structure the programs in a way that really gives people an opportunity to do some learning. So when we all participate in some learning, so when we think about...

Your typical leadership programs that would have your strategy thinking, commercial thinking and acumen, change, etcetera, leading people, that we've split the programs out, so that they've got the formal learning pieces split out over six to 12 months, and then so they're participating with a range of people across the organisation that they get that social learning component from, but giving people the theory and the formal learning, having an agreed project that they can work on for the duration of the program, so there's some really practical workplace learning for them to do, so they get the theory and then go away and actually apply it to their roles. Having program sponsors that are really involved in the program and that support the program and can help facilitate some of those check-ins and understand any barriers to success or application, and also having their leaders involved and support the program as well.

Then in-between each of the modules we've had facilitated group coaching sessions, so bringing together small groups and having group coaching. So for the senior leaders we've had... We've partnered with an external provider to design and develop the program and then had some facilitated coaching sessions for the senior leaders. The senior leaders have then facilitated group coaching sessions for the next level programs,

Learning Uncut Episode 111

Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership Development – Hannah Conkey

so they're then able to share some of their insights as more senior business leaders with some of the new and emerging leaders, and it also gives them a really good understanding of... For the senior leaders and it's just some of the different opportunities and challenges that the new and emerging leaders are experiencing as well and how they might be able to affect some of the organisational change. In between that, we've also had a series of master classes, so some of the more bite-size learning that people can participate in. And that enables people to pick up on particular topics that they might be interested in, apply it, and then if they are interested in further developing in that space, then look at doing something a little bit more intensive around that. And then we've had lots of check-ins as we've gone throughout the programs.

At the end of the programs, everyone has had an opportunity to actually present back their projects, what they've been working on, their learning journey, what they have learnt, insights from other people across the organisation around the changes that they've seen from the individuals participating in the programs. And to really start to understand and unpack what's the value in investing in our leaders, how does that translate into business outcomes, self-actualisation, engagement of the people that they're leading and interacting with. And some of the really key outcomes that I've seen and the benefits of the social learning component and that group coaching has been the networking and relationship building and that sort of support that they've been able to generate with each other, so even from a problem-solving perspective, being able to reach out and say, "Well, here's a business challenge or a leadership challenge or a life challenge or something that I'm trying to work through," being able to put that out to a group of five or six people and say, "Here's what it is, here's how I've gone about it or my thought processes, what are your thoughts?"

And being able to get the benefit of other people's perspective and thoughts and ideas around how they could approach things differently. A lot of the time we had some of that confirmation bias, so if we've got a challenge that we're working through, we'll go to people that we think are going to agree with us to validate our thinking, whereas taking that approach and having some real trust across those coaching groups and throughout the programs has meant that people feel really open to receiving feedback in a different perspective and to learning from others. And that people that are sort of sharing a different perspective feel confident, and the intention's coming from a really good place that they want to see the other person or people be successful, so they're taking that individual ownership and accountability to share their thoughts and how they think things could be done in a different way. So I think that has been really powerful to see.

Michelle Ockers:

And have you overtly encouraged people to stay connected to those cohorts after the end of their leadership development program or has that been something that has naturally evolved?

Hannah Conkey:

I think it's something that has naturally evolved. We... One of the programs is still going and hasn't quite finished yet, and that's something that we really encourage, but that's something that the group has identified, has actually probably been the most valuable for them. So even though the theories have been great and the formal learning has been great, what they're all saying is the real value has been the social learning and the application and how they've also been able to make some changes in their personal lives as well, so no, I think it's something that they've individually identified as really valuable and that they'd like to keep going. One of the, I think it's sort of sense of loss as the programs are coming to an end has been people feeling like oh, are we just going to drop off and not continue those relationships and that support. So they've made a really genuine commitment to keeping those going.

Learning Uncut Episode 111 Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership Development – Hannah Conkey

Michelle Ockers:

It's always nice when that happens because people have had the experience and the time to build the relationships, and I can see exactly when you describe this as taking a coherent integrated approach even to the point where across multiple levels of leadership and connecting people from one level to the other and so on, really nice integration and coherence. You talked about having these modules spread out with the group coaching in-between and the master classes if people want to go deeper with something, in terms of the influence of neuroscience and biopsychology, is that something you just kind of threaded through all of the modules? Is that something you specifically had some modules on for instance around self-building, self-awareness, specifically as a topic area? How did that work? How did you weave that into the program?

Hannah Conkey:

So weaved it through the actual structure and design, so recognising how we go about things like building trust, the actual design and structure to give people enough information, time to learn, time to build habits. So we know that if you go to the gym for eight hours and your goal is to lose 5 kilos, that's not going to work. But if you create small but sustainable habits, focus on that 1% and... Sorry, focus on the small things that you do each day, that's what will lead to longer term sustainable change and the outcomes that people are looking for. So we've tried to structure the programs in a way that is brain-friendly and gives people enough time and space where they can learn, they can apply, they can reflect and actually check in and see how they're doing, that they're having conversations with their managers and with their teams and with each other around how they're doing that.

Some of the... We haven't specifically called it out around being neuroscience or biopsychology, but as we've started to build our master classes and the topics for the next 12 months, we're really starting to focus on a lot of the neuroscience and biopsychology topics for leaders and for our employees as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And did you develop this program internally or did you engage an external partner or partners to work on the program development with you?

Hannah Conkey:

So both. So some of the programs, we've designed and developed internally, and then with some of our more senior programs, we've partnered externally, so partnered on the design approach, and then we've had external partners deliver and facilitate or co-facilitate some of the modules as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. In terms of sponsorship and buy-in, this is obviously a big piece of work to develop, roll out, support, sustain leadership development at multiple levels of the organisation, how did you go about getting sponsorship, getting buy-in, building the case, getting the investment to be able to do this piece of work? And it's not just investment in terms of hard dollars, it's also investment in terms of people's time and the investment of time for participants to come on the program and so on, so what did that whole building the case and gaining sponsorship look like for you?

Hannah Conkey:

I think there was a lot of support with... Because we had some data that was able to highlight the need for investing in learning and development and also leadership development. That really created a bit of a platform to be able to say, "Here's what we could do to address those needs." So part of it was putting together... Working with the leadership team to put together a bit of an approach and proposal around what the different leadership programs could look like at each of the different levels and what that structure

Learning Uncut Episode 111

Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership Development – Hannah Conkey

and format of the programs would look like so that we could actually say, "If we invest in people, this is the impact that we could have." So I was really keen to make sure that it wasn't just, "Let's send people on a program, hope for the best, hope that they come back and they apply it."

Providing the opportunity is one thing, but people actually taking up the opportunity to learn and apply it and making sure the program has been structured in such a way that enables people to do that and supports people to do that is another thing. So for me it was making sure that we had a really clear case for the data says that we need to invest in learning and leadership development. If we invest in leadership development, we need to focus on building enterprise-wide leadership capability, not just investing in a few select people.

And then building that leadership capability at all levels of the organisation so that we're bringing about organisational change, we're making sure that all our leaders feel capable and confident to lead through new ways of working, and that they are able to have a direct impact and influence on employee engagement, attraction, delivering on our Employee Value Proposition, retention, and that whole employee experience whilst also making sure that we've got the business capability that we need to deliver on RACV strategy.

Michelle Ockers:

It sounds like that there's probably been other people in the organisation working on some of these bigger goals around new ways of working around EVP, about... Around employee experience, and of course, learning is just one of a number of approaches we can take to support people to work differently, to attract, to retain, so who else has been working on some of these challenges that are relevant? And how have you worked with them or have the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle come together so it's not just coherent within the Leadership Development Program, but coherent across a range of talent attraction, retention initiatives?

Hannah Conkey:

So yeah. I mean, there's a lot of people working in this space and obviously I see that it's really important, and that's right through from our executive leadership team, CEO, our communications team, our employee... So we have an employee experience team. We've got some really incredible business partners that we work with, that help build out those strategic people plans in the organisation for our business. We have some really great leaders across the organisation that are heavily invested and wanting to drive some of these changes and support people from an engagement, reward, and recognition perspective as well.

So there's lots of different people that have been working on these initiatives. Our health, safety, and well-being team, again, big focus around employee well-being, engagement, supporting people, investing in them in a whole range of different areas, and lots of different initiatives in that space as well, and a lot of that also comes back to culture and supporting people to be their best and feel their best when they show up at work.

Michelle Ockers:

So who have you had to work most closely with, or who you have you worked most closely with to ensure kind of alignment and integration with some of the other initiatives going on?

Hannah Conkey:

So I guess my manager. In particular, our business partners, to make sure that the design and the content and the business needs are really clearly identified and that we are really addressing key business needs, the leaders across the organisation, so executive leadership team and general managers, and then really, our health, safety, well-being, and employee experience teams.

Learning Uncut Episode 111

Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership Development – Hannah Conkey

Michelle Ockers:

So has... Have things changed? Cause some of these issues that we spoke about are kind of well-being related issues in the broader sense, not just physical well-being, but also emotional, mental well-being as well, social well-being. And you mentioned health safety, wellness. Have there been sort of complementary initiatives, or is it common language or approaches that are kind of playing across both the leadership development space and some of their initiatives? So that it's not just, "Well, I've done this program that..." So there's sort of coherence more broadly with things going on in the organisation to support people to lead self and others effectively.

Hannah Conkey:

Yeah, absolutely. Our teams work really closely together, and I think collectively, having that focus on building a safety culture and organisation, and particularly around safety leadership as well. So we've been doing some work to integrate safety and safety leadership into our leadership programs, and that's all elements of safety around psychological safety, well-being, physical safety. So that's... There's a lot of initiatives, amazing initiatives that have been put in place to support people to feel safe to come back into the workplace. I think this is something that our EVP has done incredibly well, but really supporting people to feel safe to come into the office in a physical sense.

The travel, the environment, the initiatives that we're running from a people perspective. We've facilitated a number of different team workshops and looking at some of those really psychologically safe initiatives that do focus on the well-being and culture and environment, and as leaders, making sure our leaders feel well-equipped to lead and support their people, and that our people feel that they are being supported by their leaders in the organisation as well.

Michelle Ockers:

I know you've been monitoring a lot of different metrics to try to track the impact of your leadership development program and to look at improving it on an ongoing basis. How have you gone about monitoring impact, and what have you learned as a result of that?

Hannah Conkey:

So this is... Again, this was one of the really important ones for me with the program, was that we would be able to demonstrate the value of the program. So it is a huge investment both of time, resources, financially, to get some of these huge programs like this up in an organisation. So for me, it has probably been a combination of both what we do up front, what we're able to do throughout the program, and then how we measure the value and the impact of that at the end of the program. So upfront, being able to look at what are some of the different data points, both individually and across the business. So things like our employee engagement survey data, entry and exit survey data, then looking at things like 360 feedback, leadership assessments, etcetera, profiling tools, and feedback from other people.

Then as we've gone through the program, so being really clear on what our starting point was, what people wanted to get out of the programs, what the organisation wanted our people to get out of the programs as well, and then having those facilitated check-ins both through the group coaching sessions, having one-on-one conversations with participants as they're going throughout the programs, checking in with people's managers and their peers whilst they're participating in the programs, and those individuals proactively asking people for feedback or receiving feedback. So they've quite openly been able to share that, "This is what I've learned. People are noticing a shift in my behaviour, or the way that I lead, or the way that I have been able to elevate and approach problem-solving or decision-making differently, or things that I'm saying no to that are allowing me to say yes to other things."

Learning Uncut Episode 111 Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership Development – Hannah Conkey

So they're some of the things that we've been doing as we've been going through the program. We've been able to look at, again, what does this mean from a retention perspective? What does it mean from an employee value proposition and attraction? Because we're able to share with people, this is how we're investing in our people, these are some of the career development options. So how has that impacted recruitment and talent acquisition? And then also as we keep going through, we're able to see that learning is really not a driver as to why people leave because we've had such a positive increase that we can see from our employee engagement survey results, they have gone up quite considerably around the learning and development opportunities, around leadership, and as we get to the end of the programs, we'll be able to, again, use some of those data points around how have people gone about delivering on the projects and programs that they had planned.

So because they've all had a group project that they've been working on, how have they specifically applied the learnings from the program or from their peers that they've been able to apply to the work that they're doing? We can then look at 360 feedback again from that broader audience around the shifts, behaviourally, that people have made, the successful achievement of people's KPIs, and ideally we can start to look at, again, things like safety, performance, customer experience, member, guest experience. So there's a lot of different metrics that we can look at, and one of the other things that I've probably been quite pleased about when we start to look at...

When individuals are looking at creating new neural pathways, there is that piece around brain coupling. So when you meet someone, sometimes you meet someone and you just automatically connect. And it's almost like you can... You're bouncing off each other and you could finish each other's sentences. Well, part of the structure and design with this program has been to have that social learning element where you are generating that collective intelligence and that's your enterprise capability uplift. And I guess what's been really great for me was to see towards the end, in one of the last modules of our senior leadership program, was having a group of people, the majority of them saying, here's what we can present back to say, "This is what I've learned, and this is the impact that I can see that I've had, and here's how I've gone about achieving X."

But there's a great opportunity for us to do that as a group. And as a group, we've actually identified some really key opportunities that we think we can actually take back to the executive leadership team and say, "Here are some things that we think that we could do as a collective senior leadership group that we can help drive and bring about organisational change." And we think that we've got a responsibility and accountability to do that for the organisation, for our people, and we don't necessarily think it's something we can do individually, but collectively, if we come together and we work on it together, we think we could achieve some really amazing things.

So I think that to me that's really the delivery then around that building enterprise leadership capability where you've got a group of people that will come together and they've built that collective intelligence and wisdom and capability to really drive some key change. And that's a great thing for the organisation.

Michelle Ockers:

I love the way the program is having this... And it sounds like it was probably like by design, very intentional thinking about, "Well, what does this mean? Not only for the individual development, but for collective development for the organisation's agility, for learning happening at an individual, team, and organisational level." It's really powerful that you've been able to create that. So when you look back at the shifts you've made and at what's in place now, what do you think has gone particularly well and why?

Learning Uncut Episode 111

Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership Development – Hannah Conkey

Hannah Conkey:

I think being able to get buy-in and support up front from the senior leader... Sorry, from the CEO, senior leadership team, the managers and people really being committed to participating in the program, seeing there's an opportunity, and it's a choice. Sometimes we don't communicate well with people around why they're participating or why we've asked them to participate in a program. So being really clear on here's why we want you or would like to invite you to participate in this program. And then people making that choice to get as much out of that opportunity as they can. I sat in throughout the senior leadership program and people put their phones away. People turned up to every session. People created the space, both within the program and the sessions and outside of that to think about their learning to get the most out of it for themselves and to contribute to the broader team going through the programs to coach the other people throughout the organisation as well. So I think people really creating the space to do that and that level of commitment and the social learning and sharing I think has worked really well. And then having those check-ins and conversations throughout the program. And again, we've had some dinners and different things that people feeling that they can give feedback to others and also ask for feedback, and that they're seeing a shift within themselves and others are seeing those shifts, also.

Michelle Ockers:

It's great that it's over such an extended period because people truly have the opportunity to make change, to build relationships, to form new habits. So I think that with leadership development programs, that's one of the opportunities that we have. You said people were turning off their phones, being present. What do you think the key was that helped create that situation where people truly were being present and where they truly were paying attention? What did you do to make that happen?

Hannah Conkey:

It's a really good question. I think to be honest, it actually speaks to the individuals participating in the program. I think everybody that participated in these programs really saw that it was a great investment in them and there was a lot of gratitude for the opportunity. People were really responsive and receptive and really grateful that they had the opportunity to be there and to learn and to grow and could see how this opportunity could make a really big difference for them both personally, professionally, and for their leadership journey. One of the things that we'd really talked about. So I'd had a one-on-one catch up with each individual that was going through the program and their manager. And one of the things that we really spoke about was, particularly with senior leaders, it's often quite challenging to step away from working in the business to working on the business.

And for a lot of people, that was part of their goal. They were wanting to get out of it, around I really want to be able to elevate and apply a different lens and see things differently and work more on the business. To enable me to do that, I need to step away from being in the detail. I need to step away from trying to coming back to that attentional intelligence piece, trying to be in lots of different places at once, be here, focus on learning whilst checking my emails and worrying about what's going on at work or at home or everywhere else. So I think people really understood the need to, if I'm going to be here, I need to be here, I need to be present, I need to make the most out of this opportunity, and I'm not going to be able to do that if I'm checking my phone, and I'm half here and half in six other places. So I've never seen that in any program that I've run or been a part of before, and that's something that really stood out for me, was people's level of commitment to themselves and also back to the business to make the most out of the opportunity that they had.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. I've got a final wrap-up question, and it's a double-barrelled question, but just they link nicely together. How do you learn about neuroscience and biopsychology? And if others

Learning Uncut Episode 111

Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership Development – Hannah Conkey

want to learn more about these areas, what tips or recommendations or resources would you point them to?

Hannah Conkey:

So... Yeah. Great question. Thanks, Michelle. So for me, I'm big on the daily habits and the 1% each day. Something like learning about neuroscience and biopsychology could seem overwhelming for people, but I think it is just breaking it down into that, get some books, listen to some podcasts. Often we think that we don't have time, so I'm big in listening to podcasts because you can replace listening to music or watching TV, pop your AirPods in while you're making lunch or dinner or going for a walk.

So for me, I like to listen to lots of different podcasts. I have studied neuroscience and biopsychology. I would encourage others to. There's some really good podcasts that I can share, but some people like Andrew Huberman. I like James Clear from Atomic Habits' perspective. So the sort of... The small things each day. There's Lex Fridman does a lot of work in the neuroscience and biopsychology space, so I'd really encourage people, YouTube. There's lots of little videos and resources that people can learn about, but it's really just starting to understand how the brain works. There's a really great connection between neuropsychology and neural plasticity, so for learning professionals, it's really just understanding the science that sits behind that, so for me, it's... Yeah, I really try and to make sure that the habits that I have each week and each day reflect the type of leader that I want to be, how I want to show up for all the people in my life, and a big part of that sitting down is writing it down each week, what the goals are for myself.

And I'll do that at the start of each week, and I'll do it every day, and I'll tick the box because it makes that sort of internal motivation system where I'm building that credibility with myself to say, "This is a person that I want to be. I don't just want to think this or know this or do this. This is the person that I want to be, or the leader that I want to be, or the type of learner that I want to be. And so what are the daily habits and things that I'm learning that will help support me to do that, both weekly and daily?" And then just listen to one podcast a day, read one chapter of a book a day, and it's just all those little things that you do that add up.

Michelle Ockers:

Do you have any favourite podcasts in this area?

Hannah Conkey:

I do. So I like... So Andrew Huberman would be one. Lex Fridman would be another. Also, yeah, James Clear from the Atomic Habits piece, and then I would suggest Linda Ray, who has a business, NeuroCapability. So they do a lot of work in the neuroscience space and Diploma of Neuroscience. So Linda was a big inspiration for me in the neuroscience of learning and leadership development. So there's... They'd probably be a couple that I would look at.

Michelle Ockers:

I'll pop links to some of those into the show notes. Thank you so much, Hannah. I'm going to include a link to your LinkedIn profile in the show notes as well if anyone would like to get in touch to find out more about the topics discussed today. It's a lovely example of a really coherent, systematic, very deliberate approach to supporting the kind of shifts in leadership that are necessary in today's environment. So thank you so much for sharing your work and insights with us, Hannah. I really appreciate it.

Hannah Conkey:

My pleasure. Michelle, thank you very much for having me.

Learning Uncut Episode 111 Neuroscience, biopsychology and Leadership Development – Hannah Conkey



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*



Find Michelle on [LinkedIn](#) or [Twitter](#)