

Learning Uncut Episode 113
Listening: A Critical L&D Skill – Shaheen
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Listening is a critical skill to increase the impact of Learning and Development professionals. Our guest, Shaheen, shares her personal journey with deep listening and how that has increased her effectiveness in her work. We weave this theme in with the story of Project Oxygen Mask, a mental health campaign conceived after noticing her own mental state and listening to others in the organisation to understand their experience. The campaign, designed in conjunction with a mental health expert in her organisation, HireUp, was run quickly and lightly on Slack. Full of great tips and resources to help us all improve our listening practices, I expect that most of us will find something we can use personally and professionally in this episode.

Michelle Ockers: Welcome to Learning Uncut, Shaheen.

Shaheen:

Hi, Michelle. Thank you.

Michelle Ockers:

I can't believe it's only a little over a week since we met, at the time of having this conversation.

Shaheen:

I know, and so much has happened. I'm with you.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes, yes. It's that time of year, though. So I saw you speak at the L&D Leadership Summit last week about listening and Project Oxygen Mask to bring to life some of your thoughts and experiences with listening, and I was immediately struck with your story, and I thought, "This is worth sharing on Learning Uncut," so thank you for accepting the invitation and helping me to make the recording happen so quickly, much appreciated.

Shaheen:

No, thank you for having me. It's a pleasure.

Michelle Ockers:

So let's start with an introduction to Hireup, which is the organisation that you work with, and its people. Tell me a little bit about the organisation.

Shaheen:

Sure. So Hireup is an online platform that helps our clients, who are people with disabilities, find support work that fit their needs and their shared interests, etcetera. So essentially, at its heart, Hireup is about putting choice and control back in the hands of the people with disabilities. And I think for anybody who's kind of new to the sector or to the Australian disability laws, this is a far cry from what it used to be. So pre-NDIS days, just for some context, the money for any support of people with disabilities would go to agencies and then the agency would just allocate a support worker who would come to the house of the person with disability and help them with their support work.

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And that just wasn't working for either the client or the support worker for a variety of reasons. But that's also the starting point for the Hireup story, where Laura and Jordan, who are our co-founders, had a younger brother, Shane. And Laura often talks about how Shane was born with quadriplegic cerebral palsy, and so he used... He had a wheelchair, and he would need support from the moment he got out of bed to take a shower, get dressed, have breakfast, etcetera.

And Laura often talks about how the bell would ring at 7:00 AM every morning, and they just wouldn't know who was at the other side of the door. And as you can imagine, for some of these things, which are really intimate personal needs, you need that sort of... You need that sort of connection. And really, the quality of life that Shane had depended on the person who was there on the other side. And Michelle, if you think about how we lead our lives and how we design our lives to be always around people we enjoy working with or spending time with, why shouldn't everybody have the same opportunity?

And for me, that's kind of the core of Hireup. So, while in my official definition, I'll tell you that we're a tech start-up working in the impact space, for me, it's a lot more than that, and now, having kind of lived in pre-Hireup for the last one year, that for me is what really stands out, is just this passion within Hireup to not just make Hireup work well, but basically lift the standards for the disability sector across Australia. So we have an amazing government relations team that works with ministers, for instance. We have an incredible comms team that works with media outlets, where we profile bloggers and advocate for disability and things like that, so yeah. Hireup is, for me, an amazing organisation that's working for people with disabilities across Australia.

Michelle Ockers:

It clearly taps into a sense of purpose and makes a difference to people's lives, and it's really... Fortunately for myself, I've not had any direct experience with disability in terms of family or friends, so there's much of what you just shared that I was unaware of. And that is actually, when you think about it, quite surprising in terms of the lack of choice over something so important as who's going to provide such close personal services to you.

Shaheen:

Spot on.

Michelle Ockers:

So the NDIS, you use that acronym, and of course, in Australia, we know that means the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Can you talk just a little bit, without going into a lot of detail, about how that changed the landscape for disability services in Australia, and what that's meant for a company like Hireup to be able to operate.

Shaheen:

So what NDIS did was it basically took the power from the agency and started to give economic power to the person with disability. So based on the customised circumstances of the person, they would receive a certain amount of money, and so now, the economic power was now in the hands of our clients, and they could spend it with whichever agency they wanted it to, as opposed to being locked in with an agency. So that was the main difference, where now, with the money in their hands, everybody... All of the other agencies had to lift their game, because it now became a market.

Michelle Ockers:

So is Hireup an agency in the sense that your employees are support workers or are you more like a market provider matching people who, I don't know, either work for themselves

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or work for someone else, another organisation with clients. What are the kind of market mechanisms that you facilitate?

Shaheen:

A bit of both. So yes, support workers, our employees, and that's the other thing that Hireup is trying to change is the gig economy. With so much of our workforce now in the gig economy, our contractors, our contract employees, so they get all of the insurance required for their work. They get all of the employee benefits, but that's on one side. That was just me feeling really proud for the work that we've done in the gig economy. But to answer your question, the tech platform allows our clients to match with the support workers. But yes, these support workers are also our employees.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. That's really interesting when you think about what happened during COVID with government support. And some of the funding that people who were in an employee-employer relationship were able to access that was not available for those who were working gig economy or casual. So I can see that the ethical approach is really important to the company culture, so it gives us a nice grounding in the origin story for Hireup. Talk to me a little bit about your role in your team, assuming you have a team. Sometimes it's just a team of one that I'm talking to on conversations.

Shaheen:

At the moment I am a person, a one-person team but I sit within a wider people and culture team who are incredible. There's about 10 of us in the wider people and culture team, and we support about 300 support office employees.

Michelle Ockers:

And what's your role? What's your title and your role? Describe sort of the remit of it.

Shaheen:

So I am the L&D manager, so I take care of all learning and development. My remit at the moment is to focus purely on what we call the support office, which is all of the employees. We do have a separate team that looks after our support workers and their training and development. They do not have an L&D manager at the moment, so I kind of consult with them. And I love that because it's my way of being really close to the community. But the remit for me is the 300 employees who work in our support office.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So we're going to talk about Project Oxygen Mask, and we're going to weave in this theme of deep listening throughout the story. So can you talk to me a little about what Project Oxygen Mask was and why it was important to Hireup?

Shaheen:

Sure. So I think the biggest thing that struck me when I joined Hireup, I'm coming up to about a year now, is just the quality of workforce that we have, they're smart, they're intelligent, and they're incredibly purpose driven. And because we work with clients who need our support, often the people that we hire are really, really empathetic. And what that means for me is I need to make sure that their mental well-being is taken care of. For instance, setting boundaries is a really big one for me. We often hear of stories of people staying up late at night or working on weekends, because if our clients don't find support work, that impacts their life. So the people that I work with are really, really driven by the impact they're having. And so I take it upon myself to make sure that I'm having an impact on their lives and supporting them with their mental well-being.

Shaheen:

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Project Oxygen Masks started off with kind of just me waking up one day in January and going like, how is this the end of January already? But also the last few years adding up being like, I've been on the same treadmill, 2022 feels the same as '21, felt the same as '20. And so I then started to think about all of the conversations I had had with my people as I went around the organisation and figuring out that probably I wasn't the only one feeling that way, and hence had a conversation with our people partner and decided to launch Project Oxygen Mask. All of that happened in about a week.

Michelle Ockers:

That's one thing in a smaller organisation, is that often you can move more quickly because you've got fewer stakeholders to engage. Particularly as I know we're going to talk about something that didn't require a lot of investment, so there weren't too many barriers to actually getting started. But before we do that, I want to explore a little bit further the listening piece. Because you mentioned there's some conversations wondering, being curious about are other people feeling the same thing? So obviously you've explored that. But I think the story about listening for you starts well before that, that you've been kind of going on this personal journey around listening. And I will share a little of my own background with listening after you talk about what's triggered this interest in listening for you and what that looks like and what that's meant for you.

Shaheen:

Sure. We are all on our journeys, aren't we, Michelle?

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely.

Shaheen:

So my journey started off with Barack Obama. Not that I ever met him at the White House, but I was reading an article about him and the article talked about the charisma and charm that Obama is so famous for. And part of me just went like, this is a great leadership trait. Like, how can I look at this, dissect this and replicate it for my own leaders? And so I started to look deeper into it and it turned out to be simply his listening skills and being present and mindful of every conversation he's having.

Whether it was somebody in his household or whether he was talking to the head of another state, Obama would give everybody the same level of attention, and that struck to me as being an incredibly powerful skill to have as a learning professional, as a leader, as somebody who works in corporate, as a human being living their life, right? So that started off my journey with trying to be more present in conversation, trying to focus on what was being said, what was not being said, and so yeah, that's kind of been my listening journey. A few years after that, I was trained to be a coach. In my last role I was a learning consultant, and as you can see all of those roles require really, really deep listening and asking questions, clarifying things. And I will say I do think that the reason I'm successful in some of those roles is because I had started on my journey around listening and focused more on that.

Michelle Ockers:

How did you improve your listening? What did you do to get better at listening?

Shaheen:

I think the first thing was simply being more mindful and being more aware, so every time you're speaking with somebody and there's stuff happening in your head, you kind of bring yourself back to, "No, let's focus on this person because what they're saying is important." I'll be a bit nerdy and throw in some stats for you Michelle.

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Michelle Ockers:

Please do.

Shaheen:

So Oscar Trimboli, who is a podcaster and an author of Deep Listening, he talks about what he calls the neuroscience of listening, so he says, "We speak at 125 words a minute and we listen at 400 words per minute." So this is when you listen to podcasts at 1.2x or 1.5x speeds is because you're trying to catch up with what you're listening, but then when you can't do that and you're talking to a person in real life, you fill up that space with extra words in your head while you're thinking about your meeting and your weekend plans. So for me to improve my practice was really just to focus on being more mindful about what's the conversation happening rather than thinking about how I will respond to it, that has pretty much been the biggest part of my listening practice.

Shaheen:

And then I think the next level up from there was the more I listened and the more questions I asked, I started to notice the returns that got, and you can instantly see conversations change when you ask a question or if you paraphrase something back. And this happened a lot in some of my coaching sessions where they'd be like, "Oh, I hadn't realised that, but now that you put it that way, dot, dot, dot", and I'm just like, "I'm just playing back to you what you said." But listening deeply, connecting those dots, and playing back often is such a powerful way of connecting dots in our head that people haven't done originally. So I think once I started to notice the value that listening added to my work and personal life, I've just started to give it more and more of my attention and time.

Michelle Ockers:

It's so interesting that listening was part of Barack Obama's secret to charisma, that by being interested, we become more interesting. It's just fascinating. Did you engage any other people to support you to improve your listening?

Shaheen:

That's a great question. No, I did not. Yes, no, I did not. Now that I think about it, potentially could have had an accountability buddy maybe, would've been a good idea.

Michelle Ockers:

I ask because I have been grappling with listening, consciously, for around 15 years now. And I find I like to operate at pace, and that whole thing, there's always those two conversations going on. And I find it very challenging just to sit still and be 100% present, and there have been times when I've been working in teams when I've asked one of my team members to support me in meetings if they notice me jumping in before people have finished speaking or clearly not paying enough attention. We sort of had a secret signal that this person would send me just touching his glasses in a certain way, and I even took to taking a bottle of water around to meetings with me and just consciously when other people were talking having a sip of water to stop me from talking, and even now the mute button is my friend.

Shaheen:

Yes. I love those tactics, they're so great. And yes, I think we just do what we need to do. For me personally, I'm very comfortable with silence, and I think that helps me a little bit listening 'cause I don't feel like I need to rush in. And I myself a marinator, I don't... If when somebody asks me a question or talks to me, I don't jump into a response, I kind of think about it. I bet it works both ways, but that's just who I am naturally, and so I often give people in the space, so I'm not uncomfortable with silence, and I think that sometimes helps me naturally with listening.

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Michelle Ockers:

If it feels like there's a linkage between listening and curiosity as well, because we're thinking about the questions we want to ask rather than the assertions we want to make, and what else might we want to find out if we're listening well. And I think particularly in our work in this goal to generate higher business impact, I come back to Steven Covey, "Seek first to understand and then to be understood." I think sometimes in learning and development, we get it the wrong way around, we say the business doesn't get us, firstly, as if we are separate to the business rather than part of it, but secondly, well, why don't other people get us? And I think it starts with flipping it, and if we take the time to listen deeply and to understand the people that we're here to serve in our organisations, I think their perception of our value and our ability to create value and impact for them rises dramatically as well. So I know we've spent a bit of time talking about this and I think it's such a superpower for probably anyone, but particularly for learning and development people.

Shaheen:

100%, Michelle, 100%. And I think that being curious is such an important jump-off point for listening, for learning, for so many other things, and I think I very much agree with that. I think one of your previous questions was also about, how did I start my journey with listening even within Hireup, was when I first joined, I spent about five weeks of my time just going through the design thinking process and spent a big chunk of that listening in formal and informal ways. So when I say I launched the campaign in a week, that moved really quickly because I had done the listening and almost intuitively knew what the organisation needed. I feel like if I hadn't done that work upfront, figuring out the objectives and the outcomes and who my audience was would have taken a much longer time. So there's definitely, I think, real value in having really deep understanding of what the business wants. And as I think you put it really articulately, what is it that we can do to help the business rather than what can the business do to help us.

Michelle Ockers:

So in terms of listening as a foundation for you to be able to figure out how to run the campaign for Project Oxygen Mask then, it's... This is longer body of listening, developing a deeper understanding of the organisation and its people. And then you talked about there was this week where you noticed something in yourself and you thought, "Well, are others feeling this? Is this something that is a need to be addressed?" What did that listening look like during that week from the time you thought, "Are others feeling this?" to the time you said, "Well, here's what we're going to do about it."

Shaheen:

There were a few micro steps in there, I would say. So this is a bit of a warning to not just use a sample size of one when you're deciding learning initiatives, that sample size of one being you. So I did try and make sure that I spoke with a couple of people to not just launch into an initiative because I thought it was a great idea. I, as I said, spoke with people partners, I think business partners or people partners, what do you call them, are essential for any sort of listening within the organisation because they're probably the people who are closest with their ears to the ground, so running the idea past them was one of the things that I did. The other thing that I did was working with... We have a mental health coordinator within our organisation, and while I was designing and thinking about this idea, I ran the idea past her and had a bit of a consultation to say, "Where do you think our people are? What are some of the mental well-being issues that they might be facing? How do you think we should handle this?" So that was a part of formal listening, if you know what I mean, that I did. And then the third piece was around working with our people experience team. So again, checking in with them, running the idea past them, seeing if it was a great idea, and yet pulling in all of those formal and informal ways of listening to figure out if I was on the right track really.

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Michelle Ockers:

Okay, and let's move then into Project Oxygen Mask. What were the outcomes you were looking for? What was the change or the impact you were seeking to make with the campaign?

Shaheen:

So as I said earlier, I work with a bunch of really smart people. And the idea with Project Oxygen Mask was not training or learning that they really needed, it was more of a reminder. It was just a way to tell them that you need to take care of yourself. You need to put the oxygen mask on yourself first. So that was literally my biggest outcome, was I wanted people to walk away with the feeling that they have the right to take a step back when they need to, and they need to take care of themselves first. Again, whenever we'd have conversations around self-care, for instance, I heard so many comments about how people struggled to find time for themselves. I think the other piece that I just want to quickly touch on is, a lot of our support office staff have also been support workers in the past or are carers for their family or their friends or people with disabilities, so there is almost this, "I can't take care of myself because I need to take care of this other person, and I feel guilty for taking care of myself." I think that's almost a universal human nature, but it's just a lot more ingrained within the folks at Hireup. So for me, the biggest outcome was just a reminder to say, one, we care about you, and two, remember to take care of yourself because that comes first, and you can't support other people if you can't support yourself first. So, those were my biggest outcomes.

Michelle Ockers:

So what does taking care of yourself look like then? If you were to look around the workforce and go, "Yes, this has been successful and people are actually taking care of themselves," what would you see?

Shaheen:

That's the crux of my evaluation pieces of it, and that's tricky with any mental well-being campaign, because we're trying to change attitudes and mindsets, and that doesn't happen in four weeks. So I wasn't expecting a big change. It was more of a, do what you need to do now, in the moment. So I don't really have a great answer for you, Michelle, for that one, just because it's not something that we could measure in four weeks, and I always knew that. It was a very in-the-moment campaign.

Michelle Ockers:

It almost feels like it's something that we all need to constantly be reminded of, right? That having the knowledge, because we all know how to take care of ourselves. We all know we need to exercise, we need to sleep well, we need to get proper nutrition, we need to do meaningful work, we need to connect with other people. For me, that would be the core elements. And I don't always take care of myself according to those elements. So, this idea of being reminded in the moment, that was what you were aiming for here. So what would the design elements... What did the campaign look like and what tools did you use to support it?

Shaheen:

Yeah, so we designed... As I was saying, this was not a training piece per se, it was simply a reminder piece. And so I had to think about, "What's the place of least resistance?" And that was a Slack channel. So at Hireup, we use Slack like email. I never get any internal emails, which is amazing. Everything happens on Slack. And so we designed a campaign, which was a nudge campaign, so we would post two reminder posts every week for four weeks on Slack. So that was kind of the structure and that's the first design element. The second design element, tone. So, as I often say, mental well-being is a really tricky space to work in,

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and so I didn't want my tone to be pretentious or facetious, so I had to be really careful with it.

Now, interestingly, Hireup is actually a really fun place to work in, so we still have a lot of the start-up vibe, lots of people know each other. There's costumes and videos and jokes happening on Slack all the time, and I think tying this back to the listening piece, that was part of the listening, to figure out what the vibe of the organisation was. And because the vibe of the organisation is quite fun, that's the tone we took. So at the conference, I shared the snapshot of 'The Shining' twins, which is what we launched our campaign with, because 2020 felt the same as 2021, felt the same as 2022, and it was just a great visual of how we were feeling and what we were drawing attention to.

So yeah, just keeping the tone light and fun and engaging, but at the same time, what I was also very conscious of was, this couldn't just be a "Take care of yourself." I needed to give the tools and frameworks and mental models for people to actually be able to use it. So a lot of the content was actually really tangible, actionable steps that people could take. So we shared TED Talks, we shared frameworks, we actually had like a crowd-sourced post. One was like, "What's your favourite way to get through isolation?" 'Cause that was a thing at the time. So, getting people engaged. So there was a variety of content, it was all played out in different ways.

Michelle Ockers:

So what were your observations about what worked best? What were people engaging with most? What do you think was most impactful, if you like? Which are really two different questions; engagement and impact, so let me wind that back. What were people engaging with most? What worked in terms of generating engagement?

Shaheen:

Anything that was visual worked quite well. So for instance, I posted my favourite tool for mental well-being is the circles of influence and control. So, just reminding people to use this tool and take five minutes to do the exercise where you fill in and almost download your brain about everything you're worried about in the circles of influence and control and using that as a first step to set boundaries and not be stressed about the million things that are going wrong in the world at the moment. That worked quite well. Engagement was also quite high on some of the TED talks we posted because they're such great quality anyway, and there's a particular one by Guy Winch on 'How To Practice Emotional First Aid.' I received lots of anecdotal, really good feedback on that TED Talk.

Michelle Ockers:

And how did you go about doing the curation for the program, finding the right resources, figuring out which ones were most appropriate to use?

Shaheen:

So one of the things about this campaign that I should probably step back and also mention is that this is part of a bigger mental well-being strategy that I have. So when I joined Hireup about a year ago, I almost kind of instantly knew I needed to do something in mental well-being, so I sat down with one of our contract counsellors/psychologists who works with our frontline teams, and she's been at Hireup longer than me, and she knows our people inside out. So I sat down with her and said, "Okay. What are the problem spaces within Hireup around mental well-being? What are some of the initiatives we can set out for that? What's the outcomes we want for this?" So this fits in kind of that bigger strategy. So, once we had that entire structure in place, I knew what were the problem spaces I wanted to target, and essentially, every Slack post was trying to work through one of those problem spaces. So, boundaries, as I said, for instance, was a big one, emotional first aid. COVID was a big thing on people's minds, so that became the topic for one of our posts. So

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yeah, it was kind of this mixture of everything that I thought needed addressing and then providing tangible frameworks and models to help address them.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. What I like about the approach is, it was very agile. You were able to just put it into action fairly quickly, right? And of course, mental health and well-being are important topics that many organisations are grappling with at the moment. And I know some of the conversations I have with other L&D professionals, they're looking for more complete solutions and training for people and something that takes probably a longer time to design. But this was something that was fairly light touch. But because there are so many good resources available now, because we are so mindful of it, you were able to move fairly quickly on this. So as a participant, what did the experience look and feel like for the participants?

Shaheen:

It was a simply... It was a fairly simple experience for our people, Michelle. So Slack is kind of... It's just something we keep open at Hireup because there's constant messages, and I posted these on kind of what we call the general channel, so everybody is automatically enrolled within our general channel, and they would see the post pop-up. I had sent the expectation that this post would come out on every Tuesday and Thursday, so people knew what to expect. There was consistency around it, and people would then interact with it. What I also did though was set up an intranet page with all of the resources in there. So as we know, mental health is also about just-in-time support, so if people needed to go back and re-look at some of the resources, there was an intranet page where all of the resources were stored.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And what was your favourite resource for yourself?

Shaheen:

I am biased to the circles of influence and control, I think. It's so easy to kind of just get carried away with everything that's happening. And I recently had to put this to use myself, because my passport needed renewal, and as you know with Australian passport lines, that [0:36:38.0] _____ they're longer. It took me about three months to get my passport renewed and I'm flying out overseas in two weeks. And every time I would start to freak out, I had to say, "This is out of your circle of control, Shaheen. Calm down." But it's a guided practice, and I just use that model every day of my life.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. I'm a big fan of mental models. They help us to challenge and reframe how we're looking at the world around us.

Shaheen:

Definitely. It's one of my favourite things.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So I will include a link to that particular model, and where I will look for it first, and I bet it's there, is on the ModelThinkers website. Have you come across ModelThinkers?

Shaheen:

I have. I'm subscribed to their newsletter, and I get a new one every week. I love it.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. It's a brilliant resource. They do a good job with that. So Shaheen, I know we've touched a little bit on value and impact and how you discern that, and

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very conscious that this was more of a reminder, making people mindful, prompting them, "Are you looking after yourself? Here's a little resource you might want to look at." How do you, looking back, know whether the program achieved what you had wanted it to achieve? How do you determine that?

Shaheen:

A lot of it is anecdotal feedback that I received at the time. Oxygen Mask has now become part of our lens of Hireup, so that's one way that I know it was paid attention to and people absorbed the content, but there's one particular story that really stands out to me in terms of impact, it being... This was about two or three months after the launch of the campaign, and I remember walking out of another training session and I saw this person walking up to me, and they had a big smile on their face and they just said, "Shaheen, I really wanted to thank you," and I'm going like, "I don't know who you are." And they said, "I really wanted to thank you for Project Oxygen Mask." And then they said, "I really needed to hear that." And for me, that's impact.

In fact, even about a month or so ago, I got a message on Slack from somebody who said, "I'm going through a really tough time with my family at the moment, and I went back to one of the TED Talks you had mentioned, and re-looked at it," so for me, that's what I mean by having impact. I think often as learning professionals, we don't get to hear these stories, but just the fact that people Slack me and ping me and tell me these stories is a really good indicator that things are having the impact that I really wanted it to and as I said, because this is part of a bigger strategy I have in mind. What I'm trying and hoping to do is just slowly change mindsets and attitudes around self-care within the organisation, so it's a longer journey, but we've made the first step.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So what next then on this journey?

Shaheen:

A few things. I think you used the word Agile a few minutes ago, and that's really where a lot of my... I'm a one-person team, and I often try and run campaigns that are low touch, but high impact, that's key for me, but also Agile. So what's the organisation feeling in the moment that I can help with? So whilst I have the strategy and I know what initiatives I can try and I need that to be in response to how people are feeling. So we have coaching peer circles planned, we have some self-care sessions planned where we don't just list out, these are the things they can do for self-care, because as we talked about, people know that it's about setting your own action plan. So you know what works for you might not work for me, so finding an action plan that works for you.

We also have a great mental well-being committee that runs some of these campaigns, so I work very closely with them to insert kind of any L&D consulting hat that I can with some of the initiatives they run. We just had our Hireup conference week where we spent about four days coming together and talking about our strategy, the way forward, having some fun, it was so much fun. But one of the elements that we also talked about there was mental well-being. So we had like stretching sessions, we talked about the science of self-care, and just looking at the uptake for some of these things, again, is one of those going back to listening, that's a way for me to know, because there's 200 people out of 300 signing up for this session that we have, people are interested in it. So again, it's like I said, it's simply being more responsive to how the organisation is feeling in different moments of time, and then using initiatives that time with that.

Michelle Ockers:

I like the responsiveness, which gets back to the listening theme again, right? And so one of the bodies of work that I'm involved with is something called the

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Emerging Stronger initiative that I work on with Laura Overton from Learning Change Makers and Shannon Tipton from Learning Rebels. And we work with a number of tools, one of which is an experiments framework, and the idea of trying things, short sharp things or having a hypothesis, if I do this then that, if I run a campaign to remind people to take care of their mental health thing, as it's top of mind, they are more likely to do something with their mental health, for instance, just sort of framing a quick hypothesis and then running some experiments, doing some short sharp things and to see what happens, and it...

Shaheen:
Love that.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, it's a nice framework, isn't it? And sometimes we talk about test and learn in learning and development, that's not a saying we were using much three years ago, test and learn. We're talking more about pilots, which it is much bigger than test and learn, so it's almost like you're talking sort of test and learn and watching, listening, being responsive to what's happening in you in the organisation and being able to get something up and running quickly in response to the needs that are emerging, but also then having this evergreen set of resources, so I really like the approach that you're taking. Another thing you mentioned there, which again, I'm hearing a lot more of in recent podcast conversations, is the idea of coaching peer circles. And again, no one was talking to me about that on the podcast a year ago, but it is just popping up, particularly in leadership development, and I think it reflects this sense of wanting to connect, wanting to belong, that has kind of risen up. I think it was always there, but it's just gaining a resurgence and we're very much more conscious of it as a result of what we all had to go through with COVID and the isolation and looking for that sense of connection and belonging again.

Shaheen:

Yes, and I think that also stems a bit from my coaching practice because I don't always have the answers and getting people together in a room where everybody is sharing their ideas, I think there's just so much value that you can get out of that, as opposed to like one person standing in front of the room and telling them what they do. So it's really powerful, I think, in a way, for not just social connections, but also social learning and in the world of mental well-being where there really are no experts. So everybody is just doing their thing, it helps, I think, to learn from others and what are your hacks, what are your tips? What's your advice? There can be so much just cross-fertilisation of ideas.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. One of the other Emerging Stronger lens we use is the community lens, which is all about seeing things differently by tapping into the diverse perspectives and skills of others. So I think that's just what you described there and just what we're seeing with enabling more P2P coaching in our organisations and P2P support, so I love that. And we are running some round tables for each of these lenses over the next five months, so I'll pop a link to the round table, it's sort taster of one or more of the lenses, so...

Shaheen:

Sign me up, sounds great.

Michelle Ockers:

Oh, excellent. I will make sure you get the link, Shaheen, that's wonderful. So let's circle back to listening as we wrap up the conversation, Shaheen, but before I do that, before I ask you a reflective question, is there anything we haven't talked about in terms of Project Oxygen Mask or you work on supporting your workforce with mental well-being that you'd like to touch on before we talk a little bit more about listening?

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Shaheen:

I think we have covered most of the things. I think the one thing that we did slightly touch on this was kind of thinking about these things critically in terms of, "What's the impact I want to have?" And one of the challenges, as I said, was for me not having those stats and metrics to go back to, so a lot of the feedback that I did collect was anecdotal. So I think that's just something we need to keep in mind, and as much as I love data, there's as much value in understanding like, "What is the outcome I want to have of this and how will I measure this?" Is it just stories, and it's okay if it's just stories sometimes.

Michelle Ockers:

Stories are data as well, in fact, one of my favourite authors, Brené Brown, I don't know if you've ever come across Brené Brown. Oh well, I'm going to introduce you to Brené Brown as well. I'll have a separate conversation with you on that, but one of the things she says is "Stories are data with soul."

Shaheen:

Yes. Oh that's so beautiful, yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, it's a lovely, a lovely thought, isn't it?

Shaheen: Indeed.

Michelle Ockers:

So Shaheen, we always like to wrap up with some tips for others who are listening to the podcast. What tips would you have for others who either want to get started or to do more with deeper listening? I'm taking notes by the way, for myself, yeah.

[chuckle]

Shaheen:

I think the first one, as I mentioned when we were talking about kind of my listening practice, was to just work our way to have a better listening practice and kind of going back to Oscar Trimboli again, if you just Google him, he talks about five different levels of listening. So listening to yourself, listening for content, listening for context, listening for what's unsaid, and listening for meaning. So I think just kind of working your way up through the ladder of getting a better listener is one of the easiest things and one of a more personal thing to do. From an organisational point of view, I think it's also important to listen to the right people. Often we think that we need to sit in our tiny L&D corners and work by ourselves but we don't have to. I have leaned into so many people since I joined Hireup because they're all experts in their areas, and rather than me trying to solve everybody's problem, it's often about speaking to the right people, asking them their perspective and helping them, letting them help us.

So just finding the right people and speaking to them, I think it's a great way of organisational listening. And then we also again touched on this, but I am a big fan of asking questions with curiosity. It's, again, I think what ties back to my coaching practice, but I think the more we can be curious about things and approach all our conversations with a wonderment and ask questions, it's a great way to get more information. When we were talking about the neuroscience of listening, I mentioned that we speak at 125 words per minute and we listen at 400, we also think at 900 words per minute. So if you're only speaking 125 of them, we are just never going to be able to express ourselves fully. And so one of the things that I do quite often is ask for people to elaborate, ask for more context.

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What do you mean? Why are you saying this? What else? And that just gets the conversation flowing and you can get deeper into the conversation, and I've often found those are the really powerful questions to start to understand the context of the other person. And often that conversation then just turns into this rich conversation where you're finding out the problems, you're finding opportunities, you're developing ideas, and that's the really interesting space to be in for me so I think that's kind of... That's the thought I'll leave you with Michelle, is like, how can we ask questions, how can we dig deeper to get all of the great benefits that we can just by listening deeply.

Michelle Ockers:

Lovely space to leave us with Shaheen. Thank you so much. I will put a link to your LinkedIn profile with the show notes, and of course, we'll be featuring this episode on LinkedIn as well, so if anyone would like to get in touch with you Shaheen, they'll have your contact point through LinkedIn to be able to do so. Thank you so much for sharing your work and your insights with us today.

Shaheen:

Thank you Michelle, it was a great pleasure.

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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 experienced, 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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