

Michelle Ockers:

I'm excited to have Di Hickman from the Australian Public Service Commission on the show to discuss their organisational wide learning strategy. I'm often asked if it's possible to create a single learning strategy that can cater to the needs of a diverse workforce across a large complex organisation. This example demonstrates that this can be done - and done well. The Australian Public Service has successfully developed and implemented a learning strategy that is generated significant buy-in and business impact across the organisation in the 20 months since it was launched. With a workforce of over 150,000 people the task of unifying learning across 150 different agencies served by separate L&D teams seemed daunting; however Di and her small project team managed to accomplish this task. In this episode Di shares the process they used to develop the strategy and the impact it has had so far. It's a fascinating case study and one that I'm particularly proud of as I helped the APS to develop and launch this ground-breaking strategy.

Michelle Ockers:

Hello Di, it's lovely to be talking with you again.

Di Hickman:

Hi Michelle, it's lovely to be working with you.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, welcome to the Learning Uncut Podcast. Di, you're from the Australian Public Service, Australian Public Service Commission. Do you want to talk to us a little bit about the Australian Public Service, who they are? Give us some feel for the scale of the organisation and what they do and who they do it for.

Di Hickman:

Yeah, sure. Yeah, so the Australian Public Service or a lot of people call it the APS, it is made up of about 150 Australian government departments. We have 150,000 staff located around Australia and even indeed the world working in organisations like the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. So, the Australian Public Service is made up of organisations that people would be familiar with like the Australian Taxation Office, Services Australia, Bureau of Meteorology and our role is to serve the Australian community as well as our government.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so it's our national government body basically.

Di Hickman:

Yeah, that's right, federal. Yeah, it's at the federal level.

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, and I think the fact that there is 150 different departments is well worth people noting right up front. So if you think about, the topic we're going to talk today is creating a whole of organisation learning strategy for what is really a very diverse set of departments, Di. When you think about the kind of range of functions, give us examples of some of the diversity that we'd find across the APS.

Di Hickman:

Yeah, that's right. So the functions of the APS are really diverse. We have policy, regulatory, service delivery, operational. So we've got people in the armed forces, as well as people in Centrelink and Medicare offices, Taxation Office, the customs people who are working in the Australian Border Force. So there's a really diverse range of functions and also roles. So there are a lot of common type roles, but then there's also a lot of specialist roles within the Australian Public Service as well. So we've got solicitors and accountants as well as project managers. So all sorts of different things.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, and all sorts of different work environments as you just pointed out as well. So what does that mean for how L&D is structured to support the workforce across the APS?

Di Hickman:

Yeah, so learning and development is devolved. Each department actually has their own human resource area. And so some of those teams manage learning and development within their agency. But you've also got business teams who may be progressing a particular policy or service area that have funding to do learning and development within an agency. So it is quite devolved. But then you've also got centres of excellence who may be building capability beyond their own organisation. And a good example of that is the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, their diplomatic academy. So when they're developing language capability, they might be doing it for people outside of their own agency.

Michelle Ockers:

And your role sits inside the APS Academy, is that right?

Di Hickman:

Yeah, that's right. So the Australian Public Service Academy is actually within the Australian Public Service Commission. So we're a central policy agency. And we look after public service leadership capability and integrity as well as supporting APS workforce management across the APS. And so I'm working in the Australian Public Service Academy that was established in July of 2021. And we work with APS and industry partners to build the skills and knowledge, which are, I'd say, unique and core to working in the public service. We call it public service craft. And so it's the things that, are the capabilities or the skills and knowledge that people take with them from role to role, or from agency to agency when they're working in the public service.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, and what's the relationship between the APS academy and all of these devolved L&D teams across the APS agencies?

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

Di Hickman:

Yeah, so there's a couple of... We work on a couple of different levels. One being the Australian Public Service Commission and the academy being a policy agency we certainly have a role in organising the L&D ecosystem, if you will. So that is the APS Learning and Development Strategy that was released, as well as working with agencies to amplify learning that does build that public service craft. Well, we have a central role within all of the agencies, but it doesn't necessarily mean we do all of the design work. It could be that the Australian Taxation Office has a really great offering to build a particular capability, then what we're looking to do is amplify that through the academy so that people in any agency can actually access that learning.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, great. So part of it is a joining up or connecting the dots kind of function as well.

Di Hickman:

Yeah, that's right.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, we've spent a lot of time and I've done this very purposely, setting the context because it's really important for some of the things we're going to talk about when we talk about even the concept of starting to develop a learning strategy for the whole of the organisation with this highly devolved L&D model, and with no direct line of authority in it for most of the L&D activity between the academy and the rest of the team. So we'll circle back to that. So we are talking about learning strategy today. And as you mentioned, July 2021, the APS Academy was stood up and your learning strategy was launched. In your own words, what is a learning strategy? What are we talking about here?

Di Hickman:

Yeah, in my mind, a learning strategy is basically the plan for how an organisation is going to build the critical capabilities that it needs to build in order to achieve its objectives, that's in its simplest form.

Michelle Ockers:

So Di, why is it important to have a learning strategy?

Di Hickman:

Yeah, I think it's important to have a learning strategy because it provides you with a really clear map of where you want to go and how you're going to get there. For us, an independent review of the Australian Public Service was conducted in 2020 and it identified the need to develop a learning and development strategy to try and drive greater consistency and cooperation of learning and development across the Australian Public Service. The research that was undertaken for that review indicated that people's experience of learning and development in the APS really differed greatly depending on where you worked, who you worked for among a lot of other things. And so the learning strategy really set out the kind of the guideposts to improve the system of learning and development in the public service and really clarified individuals and organisation's responsibility in order to achieve the strategy objectives.

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So we're talking about getting more systematic, trying to create a more consistent experience for 150,000 people spread across 150 departments with their learning and clarifying roles and responsibilities across that. That's a pretty big ask. What were the highlights of the brief that you were given? And you were of course on the project team to shape the strategy. What was the brief you were given and what outcomes were being sought?

Di Hickman:

Yeah. So I think one of the biggest drivers was the independent review of the APS. It was certainly about creating a more consistent and cooperative system of learning and development. And another thing was the parent strategy being the Australian Public Service workforce strategy that was released earlier in 2021. That workforce strategy actually called out that there were some critical capabilities needed for the Australian Public Service workforce. Things like data, digital learning agility, among other things, were called out as being really key to the Australian Public Service delivering on its objectives in the coming years. And so the learning strategy was really needed to be able to build those capabilities APS-wide because we couldn't continue to do that in isolation in individual agencies. We actually needed to have a more joined up approach to capability development.

Michelle Ockers:

So there's a very clear focus there around capability building with a number of critical capabilities. And people listening to this all around the world, L&D professionals will be going, yeah, we need to build those capabilities as well, right? But the context is very different here because of the scale of the organisation. The project team that was stood up to do the work. Do you want to talk to me briefly about the project team and who they were?

Di Hickman:

Sure. Yeah. So the project team was pretty amazing, but we were a little, we were small. So it was led by a colleague by the name of Kate Jacey, who had experience in organisational development in the international banking sector. Kate's a really deep thinker and strategic mind. And I'd say what the value that Kate brought on top of the things I've already mentioned is her ability to create a really strong authorising environment and just map out our stakeholders and make sure we're engaging with all of the right people. So she really set us up for success.

The team also included my colleagues, Nate Riley and Natasha Linfield, who had a lot of experience in human-centred design research and learning and development. So we made a really good team, I have to say. Michelle, you were also a really big part of that by providing us with the approaches, the tools, the templates, leading a lot of the engagement and things that were really important to have you a part of the team.

And another really big part of the team was the working group that we established. We had learning and development leaders from across the Australian Public Service who were with us each step of the way in terms of the scoping, the planning, the research, the drafting. A really wonderful colleague at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Mary, I remember towards the end, you'll remember this, Michelle, when Kate and Nate and Natasha all took different roles and it was basically you and I working on the strategy at the end. And Mary came in and helped with some of the drafting and took on some of that work with us. So it really was a team effort.

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, that working group was quite critical. Do you want to talk a little bit, given that very devolved stakeholder environment about the role of the working group and how you worked with them on the project?

Di Hickman:

Yeah, so as I mentioned, we established that working group even before you came on board. We had them on board. There was no point doing this strategy to the APS. We had to develop the strategy with the APS. We really needed APS insights and expertise. We couldn't stay in our central position and develop an understanding of the current state of learning and development in the APS. So we really needed them to bring in the APS insights and indeed their L&D expertise. They were really helpful in testing what was going to work and what wouldn't and also helping us with the research and engagement. So not only did they bring the APS in, but they helped us reach out to the APS and reach into agencies. So when we wanted to undertake, for instance, some interviews with individuals in agencies, the working group were really helpful in setting those discussions up.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, I love what you said there about you couldn't do this to the organisation. I picked up the saying and it was based a lot on what I saw in the experience of working with your team, Di. A learning strategy is something you develop with the organisation, for the organisation, and it needs to be owned by the organisation. And the only way to do that is with really strong stakeholder engagement right from the start. Right?

Di Hickman:

Yeah. That's right.

Michelle Ockers:

And you mentioned the HCD research. We're going to come back to that. I think that was critical as well. So I'm tossing up whether we talk about the strategy first or the process to develop it first. What do you think, Di?

Di Hickman:

We could talk about the strategy first.

Michelle Ockers:

Let's go there. Let's go there. So the strategy launched 20 months ago now as at the time we're talking right now. Describe the strategy and we will include a link. This strategy has been published publicly, a strategy and action plan. So we'll put a link in the show notes so people can go and see it for themselves. It's an incredible resource that the APS has published and made available for people to take a look at, Di. But describe to us, what do you think are the key components of the strategy? Maybe if we look at the Strategy On A Page and the elements of it, that might be a good place to start.

Di Hickman:

Yes. In essence, the strategy describes the vision for learning in the APS is a really nice summary

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

of what that looks like. One of my favourite elements of the strategy are the six key principles that we developed and we really tested that with our stakeholder groups. I wouldn't say we impose those principles. I'd hope that people look at those principles and see their own language and the feedback that has been incorporated in those principles. But those six key principles are driving learning and development decisions and they really are the things that as an L&D leader now in the APS Academy, I come back to and I have my team come back to them all of the time. So the principles are really important. And then in order to achieve those principles, we developed four pillars of action.

Michelle Ockers:

So Di, can you give us an example of one of your principles and bring it to life maybe to give an example of a decision that it's helped to guide.

Di Hickman:

Sure. So one of the principles is that we optimise technology to enable access to high quality learning and support for everyone, anywhere, anytime. That's probably something that I can think about most recently, so what that's doing is actually driving us to increase the amount of learning that we're doing that's tech-enabled. In the past, the default solution to learning was a face-to-face workshop here in Canberra. And so that by calling on that principle, it's really helped us to get support and break through some ICT and other barriers, and challenge decision makers when we are proposing a different solution. And so a really nice example of that is a digital magazine that we actually released a couple of weeks ago to support APS induction. It's called APS Companion.

It's the first time this technology, a digital magazine, has ever been used in the Australian Public Service. And what this does is that it enables, it's basically teaching people to fish rather than feeding them a fish. So it's enabling anyone coming into the APS now to access all of the key information and resources they need to work, lawfully and ethically in the Australian Public Service, they've got that resource available to them all of the time instead of things being having to kind of dig through an e-learning or attend a workshop that they may not necessarily be able to attend. So that's probably the most recent example of how those principles are really driving our decisions.

Michelle Ockers:

And my understanding is you had to work pretty hard to get that tech accepted into the ecosystem.

Di Hickman:

We had to work incredibly hard. Yes. But this is the benefit of this strategy and the accountability that we've actually built into the strategy and action plan is that people really... We really have to... People have to get in behind it and have to support it, and answer why they're not, to be honest if they're not supporting things like that. So, yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay.

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

Di Hickman:

It was worth the fight because we've had a lot of great feedback about it, I've got to say.

Michelle Ockers:

Excellent. So you talked about vision, you've talked about principles and you started talking about action pillars. Tell us about the action pillars.

Di Hickman:

Yes. So we developed four pillars of action. And in each of these pillars, we basically described the key drivers for change in each of the pillars. And I think that was really important because we had to provide some evidence about why we need to change, like, why this is important. And so that was a really important element of the pillar. We also described essential areas of focus as well as a detailed action plan in each of the pillars over a three-year period. So we've described what needs to happen and who's responsible for implementation under each of those pillars. And then another element of the strategy and action plan, that is worth sharing is the work we did on the indicators of success and the benefits realisation plan. So that we had a plan for implementation and we stayed on track and we measured progress as we go. So it wasn't just a strategy that was going to gather dust on a shelf, it was a real, a live document with really practical steps to achieving the objectives of the strategy.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. You mentioned the action pillars. What are the four areas of action you cited?

Di Hickman:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Let's just run through those briefly.

Di Hickman:

Yeah, sure. They are capability and that's about how we are going to build the critical capabilities that were called out in the workforce strategy. But to be honest, the strategy is almost like specific capability-agnostic.

Michelle Ockers:

Which it should be. I love that about it.

Di Hickman:

Yeah. I think that it was really important that no matter what the future holds for us, the strategy and the actions that we are taking will enable the APS to adapt to whatever the new skills are that come at us that we need to respond to with the other pillars and the way we're managing learning and development in the APS, I think we can meet those challenges.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

Di Hickman:

So capability was certainly one of them. A big area of focus is learning agility and building people's ability to learn no matter what the topic, to be honest. The other one was around governance, and that was establishing some really clear governance mechanisms to ensure that we are a more cooperative and joined up system of learning and development in the Australian Public Service. Technology was the third pillar. And that was about, I remember you used to say, "Technology should be the enabler, not the saviour of learning and development." And it's certainly, it's certainly been really helpful in that regard.

We're certainly thinking about utilising the technologies we've got, not looking for the silver bullet, but just thinking about how we can use what we've got available, and leverage new technologies in much better ways. And the fourth pillar is culture, and it's about the culture of learning in the APS and thinking about the responsibilities of individual players in the system, in terms of taking up their responsibility. And that goes to one of the principles of the strategy, which is that we share responsibility for learning between individuals, managers, and leaders.

Michelle Ockers:

Great. Thank you, Di. And I think it's worth noting that you talked before about, being a system of L&D, and these are four critical areas. They're not about developing specific programs that will equip you to develop learning experiences, solutions and resources and make them available to people no matter what the particular domain or subject area is. Right? Which is the whole idea here.

Di Hickman:

Exactly.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So it is enduring and it is building the ecosystem, the muscle for L&D and capability building across the organisation in your context. So, 20 months on, you've launched this strategy and we're going to talk about how you did it in a moment, in terms of how you created the strategy. But you've launched this strategy to the organisation, with the organisation. What's happened with the implementation? What's shifted? What are you seeing?

Di Hickman:

Well, I'd say we're on track. Many of the actions have been implemented and we're staying on track despite many of the people involved originally in the development of the strategy and even in the leadership positions across the APS around L&D and HR. Many people have moved on, but the way the strategy was implemented and is being implemented is sustainable. And so that is demonstrated in a number of ways.

I'd say the language around continuous learning has been adopted by senior leaders, and we're really changing mindset about what a broader range of ways that we build capability in the APS is certainly something that is really obvious. I think we have better governance. We established a Learning Board to improve decisions and take more strategic approaches to learning and development across the APS.

They're making decisions about when there is an emerging issue or an emerging capability that

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

needs to be built, they're thinking about it more strategically. And we are approaching it differently than we had in the past. The APS Academy was established and we're certainly partnering across the APS now to provide APS-wide learning. So there's certainly a lot more examples of the increased sharing and the decrease in duplication of effort across the APS when it comes to some of those common subjects and common capabilities that need to be developed.

Some other things include, I think I mentioned before, greater variety of learning experiences. We've certainly extended our focus beyond courses and people are recognizing and valuing the opportunities that occur to build capability through knowledge management, knowledge sharing, the sharing of resources and things like that. The academy...

Michelle Ockers:

You've got a continuous... Sorry for interrupting, but I think this is a really nice point to talk about your Continuous Learning Model, which you've created to both communicate the range of ways in which learning happens. And you talked about this mindset shift and your senior leaders starting to use the language continuous learning, which is sort of anchored in the model that you've developed. Do you want to talk to us about that model?

Di Hickman:

Yeah, sure. So we call it the APS Continuous Learning Model, and we actually tested some other models with people in the APS when we were developing the strategy. And we actually decided that we needed a model that not only L&D people are comfortable with, but the APS workforce in general. And so we came up with the Continuous Learning Model that I would say you describe in plain English. And so the way we describe continuous learning is that, we say that people are using a broad range of methods to build their capability continuously, which includes learning through work, learning through resources, learning through people, and learning through courses. And so we haven't... We're not ever saying that you can't build capability through courses. We just want people to extend their focus beyond courses and think about how you can build capability basically, at the point of need and be more agile and be more responsive.

So if we continue to focus solely on courses, then they're costly and time consuming to build and roll out. Whereas if we can focus on some of the other methods that are kind of, they happen more frequently, they're easier, quicker to build, and they're actually able to be accessed at the point of need in the flow of work, then it helps us to adapt and respond to change a lot quicker. So, it's really interesting because a lot of agencies have adopted that and are using that language in their own learning and development strategies within their agencies.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, and I'd encourage people to take a look at that model. It's on page 20 of the APS Learning and Development Action Plan. There'll be a link in the show notes. I just love the use of plain language, right? Rather than, it's really an adaptation of what we talk about the three E's, experience, education, exposure, and so on. But it's just really plain language. You can learn through your work, you can learn through other people and so on. So I love the way that was made really approachable and simple and clear for people. And I think it's also a really nice anchor for anyone in an L&D team who is designing and developing and perhaps had been used to meeting a demand for courses and maybe struggled a little bit to move beyond courses in their own design and development work. But creating a shift and anchoring around this, I think it

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

serves everyone, right?

Di Hickman:

Yeah. And what we've found since the release of the strategy, it was actually one of the key actions was that the L&D teams told us that they absolutely agree with the Continuous Learning Model, but people in the APS will need some support to think beyond and to design beyond the courses. So in 2022, we actually developed and released what we call the APS Learning Quality Framework, that really supports people to build a broader range of learning experiences aligned to the Continuous Learning Model. So it has some really clear, it's got four standards and some really clear guidelines that people can follow and actions that they can take to achieve those standards aligned to the Continuous Learning Model.

Michelle Ockers:

We'll put a link to that one. In fact, we'll just put a link to your whole learning and development page on the website.

Di Hickman:

Sure.

Michelle Ockers:

There's a second great resource there. Yeah. So let's take a step back then and talk about, now we've kind of talked about the shifts that are happening, what's in the strategy, in the context of the APS. Let's just talk briefly through how the team developed the strategy and perhaps what was really critical or important in each of those key steps to actually end up with what's been a really great take up from a change management perspective and adoption perspective. So at a high level, Di, you broke the project down into a series of stages almost. How would you describe those? Walk us through those.

Di Hickman:

Yeah. I think it's worth explaining that the... It was developed over 18 months and we were right in the middle of COVID.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes.

Di Hickman:

And so at times, that was a blessing and a curse, to be honest. So sometimes, because a lot of our partners in the working group and agencies were actually deployed to COVID responses, we actually had to pull back on engagement and work. But that actually gave the core project team time to do some really deep research and thinking as well. So that wasn't such a bad thing. But in terms of the steps, I've already mentioned establishing the working group. That was really, really important. We undertook desktop research. We certainly looked for scholarly articles, but we found that articles from practitioners, people working in the industry, in L&D, on the latest approaches to L&D were really valuable for us. We also undertook analysis of some key data sources that are already available to us, such as our annual staff engagement survey, the APS Census, and things like learning and development evaluation data from different learning

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

experiences that were available.

We did external benchmarking. You introduced us to some amazing L&D leaders in the private and public sector organisations such as banking, resources, pharmaceutical. And I would say that that external benchmarking really helped us paint the future state picture. Because they were somewhat ahead of the game compared to us. And so I found those discussions really, really helpful. We did use the research, we interviewed employees and managers about their experience of L&D in the APS. We spoke to people Australia-wide in a range of locations, a range of roles and agencies. That was really important data.

Michelle Ockers:

So, Di, that's a lot of research, right? And that takes time. In my experience working with many other organisations on learning strategies, everyone's keen just to get to creating the strategy, and it's a big rush. In retrospect, was it worth taking the time to do this research? And how has it helped?

Di Hickman:

Yeah. Absolutely. By the time we were drafting the strategy and releasing it, it was almost the worst kept secret. There was nothing in it that people didn't know about. We'd done extensive consultation and engagement with a really broad range of stakeholders across the APS, that there were just no surprises. Everyone had been involved and really felt like it was their strategy. So it was certainly worth the investment and the effort because we produced the evidence base to develop the strategy that people couldn't argue with.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. Yep. And I believe we tested, from recollection, we tested, we created or you created a research summary. And then we just tested that with stakeholders to say, have we understood your world and what's happening in your world with L&D, properly? Have we interpreted the research? Have we captured the things that are working well and the things that most need to be addressed? So it was that sort of testing before you used it to create a strategy.

Di Hickman:

Yeah. I think that was really important. And another element of that was that we were demonstrating that we were listening because we were adjusting. So we were checking our thinking, have we got this right? And when we were getting feedback that it needed to shift a little bit, we shifted it. So it goes to that point I made before, I hoped that when people opened up the strategy, they actually saw their words reflected in the strategy. Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Yep. Hence the reason to do all that testing and getting the feedback and shifting the language as well as the insights. Right?

Di Hickman:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

So, Di, how did you then move from research and testing the research into creating the strategy?

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

And what did that process look like to actually create the strategy?

Di Hickman:

Yeah. So what we did was we basically took on all of the data that we gathered through all of those sources. And we developed a value proposition. We developed personas, and we even started to craft the different pillars, the objective. So we just drafted something for people to react to. But to be honest, things went really quickly once we had done that. Because we'd done so much work in the lead up that it was almost like at that point when we got to socialising the drafting, we were basically checking our understanding. And there was generally a lot of support and agreement with it. So then it was just a matter of developing the draft and getting sign off, which was a really important step. And getting that formal sign off was really important.

So we talked a little bit about the Australian Public Service Commission. We're a central agency, and we really operate from a position of influence, not authority. And so we took a step for this strategy to actually get formal sign off from our Chief Operating Officer's committee. And again, that wasn't a process of, "We've nearly developed it, please sign it off." They actually gave us quite a lot of comprehensive feedback on the strategy and particularly the actions where we'd assigned responsibilities to different contributors to APS L&D. So that sign off process again really set us up for success because we made sure that what was in the action plan was actually going to be supported and implemented. So that was a really important part of the strategy before its release.

Michelle Ockers:

And you created a separate action plan as well. You talked a little bit about the action plan. So the two went up for review and approval at the same time, I believe?

Di Hickman:

Yeah, that's right. They did. Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

So not only was it a strategy, it was also how are we going to bring it to life? How are we going to make it happen? And who needs to be involved, which is beyond just the APS Commission and the Academy, right? To make it happen.

Di Hickman:

That's right.

Michelle Ockers:

So you were seeking sponsorship.

Di Hickman:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

So you said that the Advisory Board is still in place. So we are well and truly in the Sustain phase now, if you like, of making sure the strategy remains relevant and useful to the organisation, making sure it is bought into and used, what's been critical to maintain momentum and commitment?

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

Di Hickman:

The detailed implementation plan was critical. So not just doing the strategy, but actually including the action plan with responsibilities for each pillar was absolutely critical. And then good governance ensured a shared responsibility for implementation as well. So establishing the Learning Board who really believe in the strategy and they're accountable for its success has been such a good thing, because they're really driving the implementation APS-wide. They're reaching into agencies and asking for examples of adoption of the principles of the strategy. You know the Learning Board is working with the APSC and we showcase examples of excellence in innovation in learning and development across the agencies from time to time. So that's been amazing. And also, and so accountability is really, really important. And the other thing is having dedicated resources to drive implementation.

And the final thing that I'd say in terms of maintaining momentum and commitment since the launch is the maintenance of those strong relationships we'd established through the working groups. So we continue to work together on things and that's really successful at a number of different levels. So we continue with the learning and development community of practice that is now 900 people strong across the public service. And then we have different levels of L&D leaders meeting across the APS.

Michelle Ockers:

It really is a connected system now, right, Di?

Di Hickman:

It really is. Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep. The Learning Board - who is on that board?

Di Hickman:

Yeah. The Learning Board, it's a really interesting makeup. It is made up mainly of Chief Operating Officers in APS agencies. So they're key decision makers in Australian Public Service agencies. But we also have deliberately included people, learning and development leaders from the private sector outside of the APS, just to help us push our boundaries and challenge us a little bit.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, that's really interesting. Bringing the outside in which you started on working on the strategy, bringing the outside in with all the research that you did, right? The benchmarking conversations, and now you continue to bring the outside in.

Di Hickman:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

Fantastic. So, Di, when you reflect on the success that you've had, and quite frankly, it's daunting, right? Being told a whole organisational learning strategy in such a devolved organisation, and I

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

see this objection being raised with other large distributed organisations I work with. Well, there's too much variety. It's too hard, it's too many people to get on board for us to have a whole organisational learning strategy. But you've shown that it can be done. And when you think about what's really helped what the critical success factors have been, what do you think those critical success factors are?

Di Hickman:

Yeah. I think establishing that authorising environment and case for change upfront at the start was really, really important. And the other thing would be governance around implementation and doing that in a sustainable way. So being really realistic and clear about expectations has been important. And so I think underpinning that is the time and the effort we took on the research was really important. So not thinking that we had all the answers at the start. I mean, I've been in learning and development in the Australian Public Service for a number of years, and to be honest, I thought I knew the system pretty well, but the research was so important for us to understand the reality of it, and it was different to some of the assumptions we'd made. So I would say in summary, it's the research, but also the accountability or the authorising environment around it are so important. Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

When you look back on what you, how you have grown as an individual through this process as a learning and development professional and the shifts in your own practice, your own strengths, what's your reflection on that? How have you grown over this period of time in the last sort of four or five years working on strategy?

Di Hickman:

Yeah. The big lesson for me is that, it is just being authentic and it being okay that you don't have all the answers.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Di Hickman:

I think that's probably the biggest lesson in this and that learning, and I'm talking about personal learning or as a leader as well, that learning and taking time to learn and seek answers is just so important. It's probably one of the biggest, biggest areas of growth for me. And also how I'm leading my team is really different as well. That I'm really applying the principles of this strategy as a team leader, to be honest. And so when we talk, when we have our regular conversations about performance, and I don't wait till the annual review to have them. I'm having them every week with my team. But when we talk about development and building capability, we are just approaching it in such different ways now.

And I'm really thinking about how I can support my people to build the capability they need. And simply, to talk about it really simply, instead of them looking for courses to build their capability, we're actually talking about all of the different experiences that they can have through work is really important. And experts and people they could connect with are really important.

Michelle Ockers:

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

Yeah, drinking our own champagne, how important is that, right?

Di Hickman:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So, Di, what tips do you have for others who are interested in creating or refreshing their own learning strategy?

Di Hickman:

Yeah. I would say take the time and effort to learn from others, and so engage and collaborate with others. So don't work in isolation. Don't impose your strategy on your organisation. It might be quicker and easier. And to be honest, I'm probably I'm a person who likes to get results pretty quickly. But if you don't take that time and you don't bring others with you, then no one will feel that it's their strategy. They won't adopt it. So I think that taking the time is really important. And another thing I'd say about bringing people along with you was how important it was, we did the top and bottom approach. So we needed senior leaders championing the strategy, but we also needed business teams and people working in L&D to implement it and adopt it. So it was really important that we... That you do take that time to really think about your stakeholders and the different needs of the stakeholders. So that was important.

The second thing I'd say is build the case for change through your research, you really need evidence to support your strategy. And the final tip that I'd give people is the work that we did on not only the action plan. So building, developing an implementation plan or an action plan is really important. But I also think the work that we did on our communications and evaluation plan to stay on course has been essential as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Di Hickman:

So we didn't just release the strategy and forget about it. We continue to monitor progress and adjust. There are some things, of course, that we can't realise or we haven't realised them yet. But it's certainly keeping us on track majority of the time.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you very much, Di. Lovely to have a conversation with you. It was such a pleasure to work with you and I learned a lot through this project and it helped me to really consolidate my own approach to learning strategy and shift some of those approaches as well. So thank you for that experience. I'm going to include a link to your LinkedIn profile if anyone would like to get in touch with you to explore, to do a bit of benchmarking of their own, Di.

Di Hickman:

Yeah. Perhaps.

Michelle Ockers:

And explore anything that has been discussed in today's episode. And of course that link to the

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

APS L&D site, the public site where there's a whole stack of resources, you get a really good feel for some of the approaches that have been rolled out through the strategy. Thanks so much, Di, for joining us to share your work and insights with everyone.

Di Hickman:

Oh, Michelle, thank you. It was a delight working with you, and it's been lovely to be here today. Thank you.

Learning Uncut Episode 120

APS Learning Strategy: Scale and Impact – Diane Hickman

About Learning Uncut

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

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

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

About your host, Michelle Ockers



Michelle is the founder of Learning Uncut. She is an experience, pragmatic organisational learning strategist, L&D capability builder and modern workplace learning practitioner. She also delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events.

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

- Australian Institute of Training and Development Dr Alastair Rylatt Award for L&D *Professional of the Year – for outstanding contribution to the practice of learning and development*
- *Internet Time Alliance Jay Cross Memorial Award – for outstanding contribution to the field of informal learning*



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