

Learning Uncut Episode 127
Advancing L&D: The New Learning Uncut – Michelle
Ockers & Ravina Bhatia
Hosted by Laura Overton



Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to a special bonus episode of Learning Uncut. I've invited Laura Overton to be the host of today's episode and I'm going to hand over very quickly to her to interview Ravina Bhatia and myself, co-founders of Learning Uncut, about what she calls 'a sparkly new Learning Uncut.' Let's take it away Laura.

Laura Overton:

Thank you for inviting me to host this special episode of your podcast. And I get to interview you guys for a change about some exciting new things that are happening at Learning Uncut. Michelle, can you just tell us a little bit more about that?

Michelle Ockers:

They kind of aren't new and they don't feel that new, Laura, because Ravina and I have been working really closely for the past two years on a number of projects, working with clients together, and it just feels so natural and right given the amount of time we've spent working together over the last two years, that we should bring together our two businesses. And whilst people are already used to Learning Uncut as the name of the business, the name of the podcast, which is why we've decided to keep the name Learning Uncut. It actually is a brand new business that brings together Learning Uncut and what is Ravina's business, Learning Tribe, in a way we think it's natural. Ravina, you've talked to some of our existing clients about this change and you're getting really good feedback about it, right?

Ravina Bhatia:

Absolutely. I think they're really excited about the change. It felt very, very natural to whoever heard about the change. I keep saying change, but I'd like to probably say about really this coming together of these two businesses. And each person that I spoke with recognized the skills and expertise that comes together as a result of us working together, and they want more of it, which was really exciting to hear, as well as reaching a broader base of clients. I think we all... Both of us, Michelle, we worked in different spaces with different types of clients, and bringing that together, not just clients, but also organizations that we've worked with in the past, and bringing that together to combine that into this new business is, I think, a great opportunity, not just for us, but also people that we work with, because we truly see an advantage for that in the services that we provide and so on.

Michelle Ockers:

It just feels like a natural next step. It's almost like, if I can use what may or may not be a good analogy, like we've almost been living together for two years and we've decided, "This is the marriage," or "This is the wedding," and now we're getting on with the marriage. It just seems like, when we started talking about it, we'd both been thinking about it anyway, because we're spending so much time and enjoy working together so much. There's so much complementarity in the way we think, the way we work, Laura.

Laura Overton:

Sounds so exciting. It's a case of like one plus one is going to equal to 10 rather than 2 in terms of bringing everything together. And I really get what you're saying, Michelle, about you're enjoying working with each other because I know I have really enjoyed working with both of you. I'm just wondering for the listeners who perhaps don't know one of you better

than the other, would you mind kind of maybe sharing a little bit about you personally, about your background in Learning and Development and just how you got into this field? Ravina, I would love to hear a bit more about your story.

Ravina Bhatia:

Sure. Okay. So I always knew I wanted to do something in the world of communications, and I didn't really know what. And I sort of first fell into the world of training, really stand-up training right out of high school really while I was doing uni. I loved it. I really enjoyed it, so that led me to Learning and Development as it is known today or as we see it today. And while I fell into it, I didn't sort of go looking for it, I stayed because I absolutely loved not just the profession, but our ability to enable careers, our ability to really help people develop, of course within the organization, but also beyond the organization, the change that I saw. So that was really my journey into the way that I fell into it. And then I just wanted to learn more and more, do different things, do things that... Started out with training, moved into Learning and Development.

Right after that, moved into content development. I didn't even know there's something called instructional design. I got nominated to attend training on instructional design, and my first question was, "What is that?" And then I was told what it was, and I went and attended it, essentially. So it was by osmosis. I've really grown in this space. This is all that I've ever known. I've only worked in this space and no other space. And then along with working, so, clearly learned from experience, but I've also tried to pick up learning, pick up courses, certification to enhance my skills. I'm a bit of a nerd, so I like to do that, understand the why. I'm very, very curious. So I kept doing that. I had the ability to... Or not the ability, I got the opportunity to work on creating a diploma course for a university, which was not something that I ever thought that I would do. But doing that from scratch, creating that, and along the way, picking up things, such as graphic design, picking up other complimentary skills as I went through my journey has led me to where I am today.

The only thing that I've probably made a conscious decision of doing was to work internally in an organization and then work in consulting. And that has really helped in, firstly, getting an inside view of what happens within an organization, what happens with the decisions we need to make, and so on and so forth, but also the outside in view, which is when you're not working within an organization and when you're working in a consulting capacity, what do you need to do? And that's really... All of this has come together to get me to, firstly, setting up my own business, and then of course, this new business venture with Michelle. So that's my journey in a snapshot, Laura.

Laura Overton:

You know what, Ravina, I don't think I've ever met somebody like myself who has actually fallen into Learning and Development straight out of university. So, I was really excited to hear that, and also the way that you're combining so many different disciplines in your thinking. I think that's so powerful today to bringing that marketing discipline, the business discipline, the consulting discipline, to really make a strategic difference. And that's really exciting. I mean, Michelle, everyone's used to listening to you on the podcast, but not many people, perhaps, know your story. Did you come straight out of school and into Learning and Development, or what was your path into this field?

Michelle Ockers:

No, I didn't come straight out of school into Learning and Development. I actually joined the Air Force when I had finished school, which not everybody knows about. Those who've worked closely with me have a sense of how structured I am, and they think I picked it up in the Air Force, but I think it may have come from my German mother and grandmother, that sense of structure. They were both very disciplined. So I spent the first 16 years of my

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working life in the Air Force. I was involved in the logistics area, which is pretty broad in the military. It's a pretty encompassing role. The last big role I did was working on a project, buying a fleet of aircraft, actually, from the UK, from British Aerospace. And my job was to make sure that the whole support infrastructure was set up, which included training. And of course, in the military, everything is structured. So the whole approach to training was very systematic in terms of the analysis and the curriculum, and everything was very formal.

When I left the military, it took me a little while to find my feet in terms of my professional direction. I kind of used project management to pivot a little bit, which has been really useful. It's one of those highly transferable skills. But I ended up working in project management in training projects. And when I had a child, I started thinking about, "What is it that I've really enjoyed doing? If I'm going to go back to work," which I knew I wanted to do, "What is it that's really given me a sense of meaning, a sense of purpose? What's brought me the most joy in my career?" And it was all those times I'd seen people develop and grow. When as a leader, someone in my team had almost moved out of my team because they've outgrown the team or they've gone for promotions or even left the organization and gone on to something else. That was my inner voice saying, "This is the area for you to focus on," which is what brought me into Learning and Development.

But then a huge shift for me, around about the time I met you, Laura, and it wasn't coincidental, in 2014, I decided to start really exploring Twitter, of all things, because I got sick of going to conferences and people saying to me, "Are you on Twitter? You really need to be on Twitter. It's the place to be if you want to learn stuff about Learning and Development." And I guess unlike Ravina, my learning has been a lot more through people and through experience than necessarily through formal courses around Learning and Development. So that just opened up a whole new world to me, of being connected to some really practical thinkers, practitioners, discovering, learning through the flow of work, learning through experience, learning through our networks and this radical transformation in my own professional development, and practices that I could bring into the organization to find what works. So that's my pathway into Learning and Development. And I really haven't looked back since that period where my whole perception of what learning really is absolutely flipped on its head.

Laura Overton:

So, Michelle, I think what you've been saying there is the fact that you're learning through community, but you live and breathe through community, you've won awards for your thinking around community, both in Australia and globally. And I think that's really exciting. And yeah, I've just completed some research with the CIPD. And 88% of us as Learning and Development practitioners, we are in this because we think it's a meaningful career where we can really contribute and add value back into our organization. So, I'm super interested, Ravina, about what the new, sparkly Learning Uncut is going to be able to do for those who are so attracted into our industry, whichever path we've come from. Can you give us a brief overview of the support and help we might get from Learning Uncut moving forward?

Ravina Bhatia:

Absolutely. One of the things that we do really well, and I'm going to be tooting our own horns or whatever you'd like to call it, a little bit over here. But these are really some of the traits that differentiate us. And we've heard. Our clients tell us that these are the things that they like, the reason why they work with us. And the first is that true partnership. One thing that we really, amongst the many, that we really pride ourselves on doing, and clients may or may not know this actually, is we are able to recognize, or we make sure that we take the time to recognize, where will we be truly able to make a difference? Which means, who is it that we can help? Where will our skillsets make a difference, and where will our skillsets maybe not be as useful, maybe you should talk to someone else. And that's a very

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conscious conversation we have, as well as decision that we make. And we do that keeping the organization, the client in mind.

So, I think that if a client comes to us or if we're working with a business, it's because we truly believe that we can make that difference there, that conviction there. We're not doing it just because, well, we need the business. So, that's one. We then take the time to take a human-centred design approach, which is really, as I was talking to you earlier about, just a user-centric approach at the end of the day to talk to people in the organization. And not just the people who've come to us or the clients whom we work with, but really the end users of it, the end receivers of it, everyone who's going to be involved in it, to give us additional perspective, to help us truly validate, one, what we've heard, but also to make sure that we're working in the right direction. We use a co-design approach in many instances, in a lot of the work that we do together. And not just co-design, but where we feel co-design might not work, we go, "Alright, we need to pivot here and this is what we need to do."

And that happens when we realize that this is a situation where we need, instead of an ask approach, we need a tell approach, we go ahead and do that as well. And then finally, there's so many, I'm just picking the ones that we really do well together. The ability to challenge each other as well as the clients. So, often, you'll find in conversations, whether it is amongst ourselves or with a client, we are not afraid to ask why. We don't hesitate. We ask, "Tell us why, tell me more." We also ask each other that. So, if we've come up with a solution and that might be a solution borne from one of our minds, we'll ask each other, "Tell us the rationale behind it." "Okay, maybe not. Have you thought about that or the other?" This is another example I've seen. And that really brings with it that ability to have diversity of thought versus just one person's way of thinking or one person's viewpoint. And all of these things, of course, makes it really enjoyable to work with each other, but more importantly, helps us provide a service or get out a product that is truly valuable. And if I might use an industry word, peer reviewed, almost. So those are the things, Laura, I think that people can look forward to and should look forward to.

Laura Overton:

Right. Because actually, it's through partnering, it's human-centred, it's radical candour, and it's kind of really being real with your customers. And I guess, Michelle, that's kind of a theme that you've had running through the podcast for quite some time now. How do we become practical? How do we become relevant, in terms of what we're doing for people? And I know you work in strategy, but Michelle, perhaps you can maybe give us one or two examples of some specific, practical, relevant things that you've been doing directly with your customers that we can perhaps expect more of in the new Learning Uncut.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, absolutely. It's interesting, I always have a... I feel like through the conversations I have with the podcast guests, for people who are listening to the podcast and have listened to episodes before, that they kind of would have a sense of where I come from as well, based on the kind of things I like to dig into, which is always around this business connection and starting business first and making sure what you're doing is going to matter to the business. And that's always a place we start with our strategy work. So we do a lot of work on organizational learning strategy. They tend to be bigger projects, take a longer period of time. But the way we do them is to take a coaching approach. So rather than us do the work for the client... We can do that, and we have with some clients. We had one global manufacturing organization where we did quite a bit more of the thinking and the work, the hands-on work with them.

But I've had other organizations where we just coached them through using a toolkit and process that we've put together, creating an organizational learning strategy. And it leaves

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them in a much better place in terms of their own skillset. They've built the relationships. So a lot of the... How do you get results in an organization in Learning and Development? A lot of it's through your relationships with the business. So we try to support the clients, the L&D teams and leaders we work with to build relationships as they shape strategy, have those really high quality conversations with the business to dig into the data for themselves, with us guiding and supporting them, reviewing their work, giving them feedback to really set them up with something that they can really own with the business and sustain long term.

So, more strategy work, definitely. We've been doing quite a bit on operating model, and by that, we mean not just, how are you structured, and who do you work with in the business, but also looking at, what learning approaches are you using? Where do you need to shift some of those? Where do you need to rethink some things? To borrow from one of our favorites, Laura, Adam Grant. What should your technology stack look like moving forward? Obviously, your org structure, not just for your L&D team, but like this extended model, who are you working with in the business? What's their role? How do you work with them? How about your external partners? So nutting through some of that stuff to actually get traction, and what skill sets do you need? So, we're continuing to work on skill development.

Through Learning Tribe coming now into Learning Uncut, Ravina has done some awesome work looking at skill development portals and skill development toolkits, which look not just at courses, but using resources and of course connecting through people and creating connection in the organisation to help people learn things. So there's a really nice, neat approach that we've got for skill development in organisations as well, beyond Learning and Development. I'm really excited about that as well as some of the other stuff. We're doing a lot of workshops as well, internal workshops too, on specific areas like evaluation or performance consulting with L&D teams at the moment.

Laura Overton:

Absolutely real, absolutely practical and really addressing some of those things I think many of us in Learning and Development are really struggling with at the moment. And I guess I know that because of looking so many years at the evidence around our industry. And Ravina, I know that's one of the things that pulls you and Michelle together, isn't it? You want to have this kind of outcome, business-impact approach with your work, but also the way that you're going to be informed by evidence that's around you as well. I mean, as we draw to a close, would you want to share us a little bit more about what that evidence-informed approach means to you at Learning Uncut?

Ravina Bhatia:

What does that evidence-informed approach mean? So it is using evidence to really personally understand the problem rather than hearsay. So it's really embedded in every single step that we take. So, before or at the time that we start working on something, during, while we're working, it's embedded in the plan, in the process. And I'll probably give you an example of something that I'm doing as well to talk through that as well. And then after the fact as well to, once it's in place, what can we do to know that this is working? What's the evidence that we have? So for example, I'm currently working on an L&D, Learning and Development management system for a hospitality client in Australia. Before we started the process, one of the first thing was really to understand what are the pain points. And not just from the people who've come to me and said, "We'd like you to do this for us." Trying to understand the why. "Why are you asking me to do this? What are the pain points?"

Because I truly believe that unless you know what the pain points are, well, how do I know what pill to give you? How do I know how to treat it, how to solve for it, and so on and so forth. And having that, not just taking that data that is informing the way that I need to

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proceed or the solution, etcetera, what needs to go into the solution, running ideas past people. So I've had a conversation with Michelle to go, "These are the problems. What do you think the impact is? What am I not seeing?" So having that ability to have, again, evidence, not just of what I'm hearing from inside the organisation, but also outside the organisation, to bring those two together. And then finally, when you're working on a, to take a test and learn approach, ask people, taking that user evidence to go, "Is this working? Will this solve for it etcetera or not?" So that's the second step that we're doing. And then finally, when we have this in place, we have a six-month experiment lens on it.

And there we're going to check where we are going to evaluate, what we really said that this is the solution that will help us, is it helping us and is it really solving for those pain points that we said it'll solve for? So that then brings all of it together, if not, we keep making fixes along the way, changes along the way, even for the way that we're prioritising the way that we... What will we do first? What will we fix first? What will we do second? We're using what is called an effort impact analysis. Again, another evidence-informed, human-centred design approach to not just go finger in the air, "I think that is important." But really looking at what will truly make that impact and that difference, and letting that guide our prioritisation. So it's embedded in our approach, it's embedded before we start working on a project and also in the measurement and the evaluation of the success of it, after the fact as well.

Laura Overton:

I love this. I think the fact that we've got data and we've got people and we're outcome driven the whole time when it comes down to business impact, the fact that you're looking for solutions that are practical and relevant and also strategic, allowing us to be more strategic as a profession as well, I think it's really exciting. But I'd like to, as we close off, come back to this idea of partnering, which I know is so essential to the two of you. Michelle, tell us, let us in to the secret. Why is Ravina such a great partner for you in this process?

Michelle Ockers:

At a practical level while Ravina and I share some skills there are others that are complementary. For example, she is all over technology for learning and how to smartly make the most of the technology that is available to you in an organisation, as well as when and how to build out your tech stack.

There's a couple of specific things that I particularly love about how Ravina works. one of them is this kind of continuous improvement mindset. She talked before about challenging, and I feel like I'm constantly being stretched in really good ways by Ravina. After everything we do, every session we run, every step of a process, Ravina is on WhatsApp, "Okay, time for a debrief." And then we have a talk about, Ravina says, "What went well? What can we do better? What are we going to fix for next time? What are we going to change? What are we going to try?" So I just feel like that the pace at which my practice gets better and the work we do with our clients gets better, has just gone through the roof because of that challenging and that continuous improvement. I've never worked with anyone who's been just constantly in the flow of continuous improvement, which is learning, right? That's what it's all about. So that's one of the things I love.

Another thing I love about Ravina is the aesthetic sensibility she brings to both our business and the work of clients. She is able to help create a strong, clear visual narrative around a learning strategy, a case for change, or a campaign. She is also a champion of User Experience – for example, ensuring that a service or online space not only looks attractive and appealing but is also easy for people to use and really helps them to do something that is important to them. Her philosophy is that people should love and enjoy what they see.

Laura Overton:

Well, that's lovely. And Ravina, what about Michelle? Tell us about why Michelle makes such a great partner for you.

Ravina Bhatia:

So for everyone who's listening, I'm sure almost everyone who's listening and is absolutely besotted by Michelle is in awe of the work that she does. And the feeling that I get whenever I've gone anywhere with Michelle, whether it's a conference, whether it's just people looking at her with awe, and I feel the same about Michelle. She's a leader, a learning leader in the true sense. I don't like the word thought leader very much, and that's why I just say learning leader. Leading in the way... And for me what that phrase means is leading in the way that she thinks, leading in the way in imbibing all of those things that she sees around and hears around her into practice. And that by therefore impact my practice too, when I'm working with her. So I feel really fortunate to be able to work with her. Second is her commercial mindset. And when I say commercial mindset, really looking at every business. I don't mean our business, I mean at every business that we are working with, what's the commercial impact? How will this impact the top line, the bottom line, and ongoing? And that ability to continue to come back to that, and when I say commercial, I'm not just talking money, I'm talking goals, objectives, strategy, all of that, what is commercially important to that business?

And really getting to the heart of it. She is able to just cut through the noise, get there and bring us back to that conversation any time that we waver. So that's another one. And then really use the examples from the real world around her. There's a lot of exposure that Michelle has by virtue of this podcast, by virtue of being in this industry for a long time and being... Really having that working knowledge, seeing that, seeing how she learns and applies that in practice and not just learns and knows the stories, but applies that in practice.

Laura Overton:

It really does sound like a partnership made in heaven. And Michelle, to your point about getting on with the marriage. Finally, I know that this isn't going to be a closed relationship. It's not just going to be the two of you.

Michelle Ockers:

No.

Laura Overton:

And so Michelle, before we close off, what kind of organisations, individuals in our amazing profession, do you believe will be the best kind of people for you guys to partner with moving forward? In this open relationship that you've got, who else do you want to invite along for the ride with you? So it just will be great to hear how we can get involved with you.

Michelle Ockers:

Anyone who's open to experimenting. There are certain hallmarks that we look for, and when I think about some of the organisations that we are in constant communication and conversation with and have done work with before, that business first and really getting business first. Anyone who's got a progressive take on the industry and believes that we're stronger together. And by together, I mean, I'm not... I hate using the word ecosystem, it's such an overused word, but that there are so many different perspectives in this industry that we can bring together and we can form strong, long-term partnerships. So it's really that business first, it's looking in an exploratory way at how we can work collectively to be of service to clients, to organisations, where the fit is really right. Yeah, I mean, we're not trying to be everything to everyone. And in particular, while Ravina has incredible design skills, learning experience design as well as graphic design, and a great team that is now part of

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the Learning Uncut team to support a lot of that, no, we're not getting into the business of doing a lot of design and development work for programs, for instance.

But certainly always looking out, keeping our finger on the pulse for who we think has got it right, who's doing a great job with their design development and getting good results with the organisations they work with, to be able to refer people to as well, and to potentially work alongside. And individuals as well. We have kind of friends of Learning Uncut that we stay closely connected to, who we think are leaders in the field. We love people who are able to help us to think differently, to stretch us, to help interpret the research for us. Laura, Learning Changemakers is up there, but there are many others. And the heroes for us are always those in the trenches doing the hard yards in the organizations and making a difference. And we love supporting people who have courage in the profession, people who are willing to stretch themselves and have high aspirations to make a difference. They are our kind of people.

Laura Overton:

So if we find some people who are strategic, who want to be more practical, more relevant, more human-centred, more evidence-informed, all of those things, who want work in partnership, Ravina, where do we go? How do we sign up? And how do we connect and engage with you?

Ravina Bhatia:

So if you're interested in working with us or you'd simply like to find out more about us, the link to our website is in the show notes. You can also simply type learninguncut.global into your browser window for our website. You can also find us on our LinkedIn pages. So, however you choose to reach out, just reach out to us, we'd love to work with you.

Laura Overton:

Thank you, guys. And just on behalf of all the listeners, I just want to wish you both the very biggest success in this new venture. We need you, all the Learning Changemakers out there need this kind of practical advice and partnership, and really excited to keep in touch with how things are going. Thank you so much for inviting me here today.

Michelle Ockers:

Oh Laura, thank you so much for being such a strong supporter and encourager over the years and for hosting the conversation with us today. Much appreciated

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 co-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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