

Learning Uncut Episode 128
Learning Transformation at Astra Zeneca – Marc Howells
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

I heard Marc Howells speak at the Learning Technologies UK conference in May 2023 about the learning transformation underway at AstraZeneca – a presentation that was sub-titled ‘enabling us to learn effectively, at speed and at scale.’ I’m excited to have him join me in this podcast conversation so that Learning Uncut listeners can hear first-hand about the work that he has led in his role as Vice President of Global Talent and Development.

A significant theme of our conversation is lifelong learning, and how AstraZeneca has sought to cultivate a culture where learning is a daily habit. I was intrigued by how they worked with a behavioural scientist to experiment with reflection on learning through journaling. They also ran an enterprise campaign called “Learning for Life” and have made great progress on fostering an environment of continuous learning. While individual learning activity is important, Marc also stresses the importance of team learning, organisational adaptation, and innovation.

Another cornerstone of this shift is the democratisation of learning. They’ve sought to make learning resources accessible to every employee, regardless of department, role or primary language. This includes making learning available in 12 languages providing coverage of 85% of the languages in the organisation.

Of course, technology has played a key role in opening up learning and improving efficiency – and there has been a significant overhaul of the infrastructure at AstraZeneca. Imagine whittling down 75 disjointed learning technologies down to an integrated set of just eight. This is a feat that required meticulous planning, solid governance, and a strategy of “going slow to go fast”.

I know you’ll also be curious about how the L&D function itself has had to evolve. Marc explains how they’ve become more agile and now think like a professional services firm - building strong partnerships, horizon scanning, and fostering innovation.

I hope you enjoy this conversation as much as I did.

Michelle Ockers:

Mark, welcome to Learning Uncut.

Marc Howells:

Thank you, Michelle, and thrilled to be here and looking forward to the conversation.

Michelle Ockers:

I’m delighted you accepted my invitation. I did, of course, hear you speak at the Learning Technologies conference and thought this is a story definitely worth sharing with listeners. So thank you for being willing to share the story.

Marc Howells:

My pleasure.

Michelle Ockers:

AstraZeneca is kind of a household name, I think, around most places in the globe. But if you can set the scene for us and introduce our listeners to AstraZeneca, that would be a great place to start.



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Marc Howells:

Yeah, absolutely. My pleasure. And it's interesting you say it's a household name. I think pre COVID, it may not been as much of a household name, but, AstraZeneca is a global biopharmaceutical company. It has a revenue stream of around about 45 billion a year, approximately 85,000 employees across 100 countries. And we service around about 105 million patients with our core portfolio. But that increased to just over 3 billion with the COVID vaccine that we were involved in a couple of years ago. So we have a primary focus on key therapeutic areas, which is, one is oncology, so cancer products, respiratory and immunology, cardiovascular and renal. And then we're also looking at infectious diseases and rare diseases. So they're the areas that the company work in, but it's an incredibly purpose-led organization and you kind of feel it in the work that people do and the passion they have for meeting unmet medical needs for patients.

Michelle Ockers:

I like that anchor around it being purpose-led, because I know one of the things we're gonna talk about is learning culture and purpose is part of shaping a learning culture. Right? What about the workforce? Can you describe the workforce to us and anything that's pertinent to how you approach enabling them to learn?

Marc Howells:

Yeah, our workforce is you could subdivide it into invent, make, sell and support. So the invent would be all of the R&D activities that we have across the globe. We have somewhere in the region of 12,000 R&D employees. We've got over 7000 PhDs in the company. So it gives you a profile of the type of academic depth, of expertise that we have. We have a significant supply and manufacturing organization with over 30 manufacturing sites globally. And then we have a big global sales force and a commercial environment that look at market access, pricing, sales and marketing themselves. And then outside of that, you've got the enabling functions of the normal corporate functions of legal, IT, HR, finance and so on. So that's the sort of makeup, the main basis of the company from a strategic footprint are in the UK, Sweden and the US. But we also have a significant base of people in China, Japan and India as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So the scale of the organization, it's large, right? That would be an understatement.

Marc Howells:

Yeah, AstraZeneca is currently the largest company on the London Stock Exchange. So it's the largest company on the FTSE.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So tell us a little bit about your role then in supporting this diverse, massively dispersed workforce.

Marc Howells:

So my role is, I have the pleasure of trying to think about how we continue to create an environment that is developing, growing our people so that they have the right skills, the right mindset, and feel engaged to support the business strategy. So I have a number of clusters within the work that I do. One is around looking at people and the learning strategy, which includes leadership development, preparing our leaders for what we need to deliver out to 2030. The second piece is looking at our learning technology ecosystem across the organization. So what are all the technologies that we bring together to create the learning insights, the learning experience, and the learning analytics. I also have accountability for the talent strategy, so the succession pipe lining for the company right the way through to

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our C-suite and who's gonna be our next CEO out to the years ahead and trying to find the next candidates in the organization and accelerating their development. And then the last piece is I have an OD practice where we look at organizational development and design within the company, which includes organizational effectiveness in team delivery and team effective to surround that. So I focus on those areas and that's for the whole company. So across all markets, all populations. So it keeps me busy.

Michelle Ockers:

I imagine it would, and then I imagine you're supplemented in terms of the different business areas, the technical skills, the more specialist skill development with other learning and developmental capability teams in the organization.

Marc Howells:

Correct. So my role primarily looks at those areas that are core and common to all employees. So anything that is leader or manager development is applicable to all line managers and leaders in the organization. Anything that is technically specific like science led learning or lean manufacturing leadership, that would be managed by learning teams specifically in the business units that are then tailored to the work of that business unit. But they would then draw down on the support from my function that supports the whole company.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep. And the learning tech responsibility, that's company-wide, right? That's not just around specific skill sets.

Marc Howells:

Correct. Yeah. They're the landscape of all learning tech for the company.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep. So we are talking about work that's been going on over around about a four year period here. We're talking specifically about learning transformation at AstraZeneca. And I understand to kick off the work you actually needed to pitch for a project funding, to undertake learning transformation. So talk to me about that experience of how you built the case for change. Because in that pitch process, not everything that was pitched was approved, right? You had to build the case for change.

Marc Howells:

No. And if I think back at it now, it feels a little bit like an episode of Dragons Den or Shark Tank, whichever is applicable.

Michelle Ockers:

I was thinking Shark Tank, yeah.

Marc Howells:

It's the version in Australia, but it's... Yeah, it goes back to in 2019, we had a revised strategy for the company that was about growth through innovation, and it was looking out to 2025. And as part of that strategy, one of the legs of the strategy was around enabling a great place to work for our employees. And the learning transformation and the enterprise leadership transformation was a component of that great place to work ambition. The CEO and the senior executive team said that they would be putting funding forward for six strategic projects out of around 20 that were bidding. And we had to compile a case essentially to say, if we were to invest and to engage in a learning transformation program, how could we shift the agenda and shift the experience for employees? But how would that create value for the business in supporting that strategic ambition?

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And how would it make people feel about being part of AstraZeneca? And how could it ignite that learning agility, that engagement and help us attract and retain the very best talent? So we had to go in and pitch. I went in and pitched for a sum of money, we had an hour and a half discussion about the business case, the value, how this might be more impactful than some other projects. The funding was getting chipped down as I went through the process, but we managed to secure enough to get us going, and we were fortunate enough to secure 10 million in investment from our board. And that gave us enough to really mobilise and get a proof of concept and to start building some unique offerings through AstraZeneca that would really shift the dial in terms of how people experience learning, how we could shape a learning agenda for our leaders, and also invest in accelerating us from a technology perspective into a space that was more forward looking.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So in terms of the robustness of that business case, at the one end you could, there's almost like a series of motherhood statements you can make about the value of learning and how it helps people and how it engages people and so on and so on through to, at the other end, very precise calculations and financial projections and so on. Where did you have to land with this and how did you build whatever end of that spectrum you needed to be on, how did you build that up?

Marc Howells:

Yeah. I think your description of it is really accurate. And it is very easy to fall into the motherhood and apple pie environment of it, it's gonna feel good, it'll be a nice environment. What we had to look at was how did we quantify the benefit, the value and the impact? Now, engagement is a component of that, but there needs to be, you need to create business value because any dollar we were taking out of the investment pots towards this project is taking a dollar away from investment in R&D that's driving the innovation and the pipeline and the work we're doing for patients. So in this space, what we looked at was we used the Bersin model of high impact learning organization. And for those aware with it, it runs on a scale of one to four, four being the most mature, one being the least mature.

And when we used Deloitte to baseline us on the five component elements of HILO, we found that AstraZeneca was somewhere between one and one and a half on the ratio in terms of impact and quality of the offering and the sophistication of the delivery model. And we found that we were a four on the cost of spend. So we were spending as much as the most mature, most advanced, than we were getting nearly at the bottom of the rating in terms of effectiveness of the impact we were having and the quality of the offering in the configuration. And that just said to us that we need to switch that round to get maximum value, maximum impact, greatest experience, and start to think about how you bring those three elements together. And that's what we set about looking at is, how could we improve the experience, the technology infrastructure, the governance, the data that comes out of it, and the quality and the alignment of the learning solutions? How aligned were they to help people find the very best version of themselves to stay agile, and also to really create that learning agility and a culture of learning in the organization?

Michelle Ockers:

Got it. So you in effect used that Bersin model, which I'll put into the show notes for people, to baseline and say, what needs to shift and to give you a start point. So Marc, in what ways has learning changed most significantly over the past four years at AstraZeneca? And as part of that response, if you can talk to us about how is the learner experience different?

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Marc Howells:

I would say the biggest difference, Michelle, is that when we started out on the journey, we had a small cluster of offerings that were only available in English. Everything was face-to-face, and we had one leadership development offering that was core and common, and we had 75 different learning platforms in existence in the organization, which was just a mess, if I'm honest.

Michelle Ockers:

Maybe something of a record, Marc.

Marc Howells:

Yeah, it's not a record I would want to hold, but that was the reality of where we started. And then when you looked at that on a broader basis, there was inconsistency in any kind of measuring, and the access to learning was very segmented by business unit. So you would only learn about things that were in your kind of sphere or your area of work. And I would say where we've moved to is we've democratized learning, so you can learn about any activity from any part of the organization. If you're on finance and you want to learn about medical affairs, there is nothing to prevent you being able to access it. We've also made learning available in 12 languages across the company, which means that we now have coverage of 85% of the languages in the organization, even though English is the working language of the company. The more junior you go in the organization and into the 100 plus countries, there are large populations, so still English is not a first language or even a second language, and therefore we've made that accessible.

The third piece was we wanted it to be completely digitally mobile, so accessible on any device at any time, meaning that if you had 10 minutes and you wanted to learn something as a little bit of a skill burst, you could do that. But if you wanted to go on an extensive program about leadership, you could also engage with that and it would suit your needs. So we now have 14 different cohort based leadership development offerings, including three that are gender specific, to accelerate the development of women within the organization as leaders. And we also have targeted programs for emerging markets to help colleagues that are in fast growth markets be able to take their skill set and apply it into environments in more mature markets or work in global roles. So we get better diversity in our talent pipeline, people coming from other markets outside of Western markets where traditionally that may have been the dominance.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So I think you used the phrase... You've democratized learning, you've given us plenty of examples of what that looks like. You've increased the range of offerings. You've made them more accessible. You've targeted a few specific areas, the language, and that's no mean feat, right? Like getting things into that number of languages, that's not necessarily an easy thing to do either. So what does that mean for your people and their experience of learning in the organization?

Marc Howells:

So I think, if you go back to the quagmire of learning technology that was there before, one of the things that I wanted to ensure we could deliver was, in our daily lives, we all use our smartphones and the apps on them. And the simplicity of that, on the whole you don't need any kind of instructional training to be able to use an app that's on your phone. They're designed in a consumer style way that is easy to use, easy to navigate, intuitive in how you engage with it. We needed to create the same thing from a learning technology. So we've gone from 75 technologies currently down to eight. And my expectation is we'll land around an optimum of around about 12, maximum 15 if you start including some of the applications that face into it. But this is also about creating a consistent front door to learning, a virtual

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front door into the learning environment for all employees. And when you land in our learning environment now, you go in through Degreed, which is our learning experience platform. But what you find there is enterprise learning offerings. So 25 different professional capability pathways.

There's the 14 different learning cohort based leadership offerings. There's a learning library, a content library that you can search and navigate. But you also find your business unit academy for your technical skills. So you've got a balance of guided instructional learning in leadership and things that the business wants you to learn. You've got a free forum where you can navigate and follow your curiosity and explore different types of learning. And then you've got the technical elements for your role. So we've now built that in a way that was intended to feel a bit like a Spotify of learning experience for our employees. Our adaptive learning technology now recognises what you need to learn, what you like to learn, what you should be learning that you're not learning. And they'll suggest it and nudge it. And it will also connect you to communities of other learners who are interested in similar topics, and they'll go, "Some of your colleagues are reading this article, you might want to follow it." So it's created a different experience.

Michelle Ockers:

It's completely different, and I used to be in the military, Marc, and they used to have this saying, sometimes the general would get up. I was actually in the Air Force, but the people I knew in the army would say, the general would stand there and have a big map of Australia. You know, Australia is pretty big, right? And he'd have his hand over Queensland and he'd say, we're gonna move 5000 troops from here over here to Western Australia. And that's like 4000 kilometres. And he'd just make it look so easy. It's like from here to here. It's almost like what you've described is it's massive that movement from 75 platforms to this really nicely connected environment you've talked about there. Even in four years, that's a huge shift. What was the biggest challenge to reshaping your tech and ecosystem? And how did you address it?

Marc Howells:

Yeah, we use a phrase in the team on a regular basis, which is "go slow to go fast." And that has never been more true than in the transformation program we undertook. The key thing for us was, one, it had to be high engagement with the business. The business had to feel this was gonna create value for them and it was worth supporting. It wasn't an HR initiative. Secondly, we needed strong governance, which had representation from all the business units. So we had an enterprise learning board with representatives, senior vice presidents from every business unit, and individuals that could be advocates influential in helping us engage the business, but could also be a good sounding board and challenge partners for us to kind of be the voice of challenge and go, is that really how you want to go about it, or is that really where we think the value is? And that enabled us to create momentum at a senior leadership population to help us then engage with the other elements of the organization where everybody felt passionate about their piece of the pie that they had been building and developing the technology they'd bought or et cetera.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Marc Howells:

So we needed to build a coalition of the willing that understood that where we were going on this journey would benefit everybody, would improve the experience, would improve the agility, and would put us in a plug and play space for the future. So that, I often use the analogy that, I use a MacBook in a suite of Mac tools, but if I change the wireless mouse on

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my MacBook and they bring out a better version, I don't need to go through a big transformation to switch the tool.

Michelle Ockers:

It's very easy, isn't it?

Marc Howells:

Exactly. I wanted the same simplicity in our technology that meant that we had the best-in-class technology working as an ecosystem, and that I could continually evolve that. And, the journey we've been on has brought us to a great place, but, now I'm still looking at where do we go with the skills agenda? What's AI gonna give us in terms of how we work with that? How do we bring talent marketplaces and the connectivity to all of that aspect, and that plug and play has helped us in that space.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And it sounds like the key to reshaping that tech ecosystem, coming back to your, go slow to go fast, was taking the time to create the vision to get the buy-in and really putting the energy and effort into that, and then using that to be able to go fast when the time came when you had that in place, yeah?

Marc Howells:

Absolutely. And I think it comes back to, in addition to the sort of senior leadership governance board, we had a learning advisory board of all the subject matter experts from the learning community.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep.

Marc Howells:

Because they were the expertise in really understanding how to unpick the current landscape and helping get their buy-in into building the future landscape. The business leaders were there about how to navigate engagement around business value and the case for change, but the real work had to be done with the learning advisory board and that's still in existence. And those guys have been incredibly helpful in bringing ideas and being a voice for change into the business.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep, that governance process, getting a change management right, no matter what size your organization, absolutely critical to making change of this kind of transformative impact, yeah?

Marc Howells:

Yeah, absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

Speaking of transformative change, I know there's something in particular you would love to talk about, and it's one of my favorite topics too, and it's about learning culture. And I think you used the term a culture of lifelong learning during the conference presentation. I was really fascinated when you talked about running a behavioral change trial. I think that was one of your early steps when you were looking at your culture and the culture you wanted to create. Can you talk to us about that trial? What were you trying to do and how did you go about running the trial?

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Marc Howells:

Yeah, absolutely. And to your point about the learning culture, what we were trying to get to was, if you think of the scenario that the shelf life of skills has never been shorter than it is today because of the advent of technology, the speed of change, and as an innovative science organization, we wanted to create learning as a daily habit within the culture of the organization. And that even if the skills are changing, if people are engaged in a habit of learning just a few minutes a day, those small changes would add up to big changes on an accumulative basis. So we wanted to start a trial thinking about, we use a definition of three Es to describe learning in the organization, which is about experience, exposure, and education.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep.

Marc Howells:

So the trial was based on targeting 300 volunteers within the organization who were interested in getting involved in a behavioral trial. We wanted to think about how could we create and recognize learning moments in day-to-day activity to try and switch the mindset away from when people think of a learning intervention, that it involves some sort of classroom environment, a cohort environment, or structured instructional learning. We wanted people to recognize that you could be stood by the coffee machine talking to a colleague, but you could still be having a learning moment where somebody's sharing insights with you. It could be about meeting somebody for lunch and having an exchange of ideas or perspectives about something that enhances your understanding. So what we trialled was we ran an internal marketing campaign about different learning moments to help people recognize learning was happening subtly, and that they need to acknowledge that that was a learning moment. And we also got all of the 300 participants to journal on a daily basis what had they learned, and some reflections on a daily... You know, these small learning moments.

And we used support from an external behavioral scientist to help us think about the messaging and the language. And what we found was early on, people were resistant to the idea of journaling like, "Oh geez, do I really need to write something every day? I've got emails, I'm busy." What we found was as we got past the first week, people started to see the value of being able to look back over four or five days and think, actually I did learn something that day. I'd forgotten I'd had that conversation. And they started to build an accumulative behavior. So by the time we got to the end of the one month trial, we found that over 80% of people had continued the habit of journaling. And the journaling was driving a self-reflection engagement in learning and an active and thoughtful process of then thinking about where do I then draw down on other services and offerings that will help me accelerate that learning or that understanding? And the stimulus of that has fed into a lot of the other work that we've done since. But it was just a really interesting, we knew we're a science-based company. So to run a kind of a pseudo clinical trial on behavior resonates with a scientific population and an academic population.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes, yeah, I can see that. So tell me, obviously the reflective activity itself, the journaling itself is a learning activity. Apart from people's behavior changing around journaling and reflection, did you find any other behaviors, learning behaviors changed as well?

Marc Howells:

I think the main one was people actually seeing an investment in learning as a value add activity, not something that is discussed once a year in a performance review where somebody says, you need to complete an IDP and then by the end of the year let's have a

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look at what you've completed. It was thinking about small behavioral nudges that keep reminding people. If you think of exercise as an example, high impact interval training is often short burst activities. Yeah, there's a piece that says that seven minutes a day is enough to maintain your fitness level if it's a focussed seven minutes versus spending two hours doing something on a long run or gym workout on a weekend, once a week. We wanted to drive a similar kind of mindset that says, this is about brain training and building a learning muscle by short burst practicing on a regular basis. Now, that's also played into how do we think about learning content? How do we think about journaling practices as we build that into our cohort based learning? And how do we also help people have reminders of when they've had a learning moment so that they don't forget something that they've actually encountered?

Michelle Ockers:

Yep, yeah. It's one of those habits. Are you familiar with the work of Charles Duhigg around The Power of Habit? Have you come across that work?

Marc Howells:

Yep.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So he talks about keystone habits, habits which lead to kind of a knock-on impact around changing other habits and behaviors and exercise is one of those examples. But I think journaling and reflection is another one of those that has this knock-on impact. The more you recognize something as a valuable activity through reflection, that is not the reflection itself, but the conversations you've been having or the intentional practice that you've been doing, the more it is likely to lead you to do more of those, which was kind of like where I was getting at with that question around what other behaviors might have shifted. Even the recognition that people, they're starting to recognize learning happens in these other ways is a benefit, right?

Marc Howells:

Absolutely, and there's something that we've done to complement that as part of this journey is we, as a company, we got rid of performance management and ratings, and we've moved to a space of focusing on coaching and feed forward rather than feedback, because it also lends itself to, if you think of psychological safety as the overarching umbrella, we've invested heavily in creating an inclusive, diverse environment, but we also are driving towards equity and belonging. So if you have inclusion safety, that's a great starting point that people have a voice and they feel part of the conversation. The second benefit of that is you have learning safety. So people feel able to invest in learning, trial the practice and feel that there's safety to fail and learn and relearn and continue to play around with that in a safe environment. That then drives to contributor safety and challenger safety. And the challenger safety is the bit where innovation comes out of, because you've got diversity of thinking, agile learners, contributors, and now thinking proactively about how they drive contribution to the business and challenge the status quo. Now the learning behaviors and the leadership behaviors are core to that because they drive that shift and people are practicing and embedding habits that are helping not just themselves move forward, but creating the conditions for others around them to also engage with that. And that's been an important part for it.

Michelle Ockers:

I think the fact that you've got a role in leadership development and in the OD space allows you to look at working across all these different areas to reinforce that cultural shift. Because it's one thing encouraging people to adopt learning behaviors, but if the leadership practices don't support and enable what you've called there a psychological safe space, a space

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where people can experiment, can challenge, then you're not gonna get there just by focusing only on learning behaviors, that those leadership behaviors are really critical to shaping the whole culture, right? L&D can't do this on their own.

Marc Howells:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think this is where the coaching and feed forward becomes pivotal for us. For me, coaching and feed forward, the combination of those two become a kind of line leadership superpower for creating the conditions for psychological safety. Because if you think of feedback as an example, feedback, as soon as somebody says, I've got some feedback for you, most people recoil because even if it's gonna be good news, they're preparing themselves for bad news.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep.

Marc Howells:

Whereas if they think of feed forward, it's like somebody saying, could I offer you some help? The way you respond to that question is very different than somebody saying, can I give you some feedback?

Michelle Ockers:

Yes.

Marc Howells:

And feed forward is being about building a platform of how do you share somebody's strengths and impact in a contribution, and how do you help them think about how they could increase their contribution in the next opportunity rather than looking backwards, look forward. We've invested heavily in coaching capability across the organization. So we've put 400 senior leaders through an ICF accredited coaching program 22 weeks long. I wasn't sure honestly how many people would stick at it for 22 weeks...

Michelle Ockers:

It's a big commitment, isn't it?

Marc Howells:

But people have found it so engaging and so powerful that they get value from it. We've put nearly 4000 leaders, first line leaders through managers coach program. Now, these coaching and feed forward skills are paying dividend in creating that learning culture, creating a culture of safety and allowing people to thrive and creating that inclusivity. So all of these things dovetail together, as you said, it's not just about the technology and learning culture, the leadership environment is pivotal to making it come together.

Michelle Ockers:

It is, yeah. And, I've done a little bit of work with Nigel Payne around learning culture, and one of the really nice distinctions he makes is there's a difference between having a lot of people learning at an individual level and actually having a culture of learning where teams are learning, where people are learning together, where the organization is adapting and innovating and so on. I think this is a nice example of it that you have to go beyond, oh, we've got stacks of people consuming things on our LXP or our LMS, that it's much, much more than that.

Marc Howells:

Absolutely.

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Michelle Ockers:

So you've done this, if we come back to this behavioral change trial, you've done this trial and you've noticed some shifts. Where did you go after that? How did you use what you learned in the trial and where did you take things next in terms of continuing to build learning behaviors?

Marc Howells:

So we used the insights from the trial to think about the nudging behavior. So, the gentle prompting, so that then informed what did we need from an adaptive learning technology that could help surface suggestions for people. How did it help people recognize a learning opportunity when they may not have realized that that was happening? It made us think about, what is the range of content and style of content delivery? So whether it's a five minute quick read video animation to something much more in-depth, but it allowed us to flex the offering and the methodology to meet the response behaviourally from the organization and to think about how we embedded that into our leadership and management development offering. So small pods, self-reflection moments, self-guided, facilitator guided, using technology and face-to-face as a combination. And it's given us this really interesting landscape now of offerings that it doesn't matter what your learning preference style is, we have a way of engaging you in learning in a way that is in the flow of work, is in the language that is best suited to you...

Is agile to your time available and style of learning, and is constantly adapting. So all of our learning content goes through a three monthly continuous improvement cycle. So if you went on a leadership development offering in 2022, in July in 2022, that will have gone through several iterations of continuous improvement based on active learner feedback and business input. And the intention being is that we extend the life cycle of that offering by keeping it current to business and employee needs rather than a moment in time and then hoping it stays relevant, because I know that the world is just moving too quickly. It needs to morph and evolve with the business, but the fundamentals remain the same. And these are all themes that we've derived from the learning trial, but also thinking about the end user experience and what is the value proposition back to the business.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep, yep. I want to come back to ways of working for the L&D team in a moment, or for your area. I do want to touch on something else that you mentioned at the conference around your culture building activities, and that was an enterprise learning for life campaign. Would you like to talk to us a little bit about that, what that was, what that looked like, what that achieved.

Marc Howells:

So the enterprise learning for life campaign was about, again, trying to help people recognize that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to learning, and that learning was for the organization that is constantly evolving, that is pushing the boundaries of science for what we did for patients, we have to think of ourselves as a way of constantly evolving in support of that, so it was engaging people in hearing from people's experiences, what went well, but what did they learn from the moments that didn't go so well, what did they take on? And how did they learn from others? How was mentoring valuable? How is coaching powerful? How do you create a space where learning becomes essentially the only future proof skill you need? Because if you think back to the shelf life of skills, and I was in an event last night and we were talking to a number of technology companies, and in technology companies, the shelf life of skills is less than two years on average, which means that if you're not already engaging and thinking about What's the next skill you're learning, pretty soon you're gonna be fairly irrelevant in terms of your ability to contribute, so it's helping people think about that.

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Now, our industry is different, we've got Biology, Chemistry, Engineering are probably the main areas of focus for us, so we have a little bit more time than maybe a technology company, but we have to help people recognize that that investment in personal growth, in re-skilling, in learning and unlearning and relearning are valuable behaviors, and therefore we had leaders at all levels sharing experiences of their own learning journeys and not just the successes, like you said, it's, how did that work when it didn't go so well? How did you build resilience? How did you engage others, what sources of insights did you gather to help you work through what that looks like from an experience and exposure and education response, and getting people to think about it differently in the three years that I have been core to the messaging around a culture of life-long learning.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep, yep. It strikes me that in order to support your workforce to evolve, the learning and development function has had to do some pretty dramatic evolution itself, and you've talked about running trials, you've talked about a whole stack of behavioral nudging and embedding different things. You must have had to go through a lot of trying things out and figuring out what was working, what wasn't working. You've spoken about these three monthly review of all of the content, there's a lot of discipline that that takes, so your team, no doubt, has had to start working differently, what have been the key changes for the team itself?

Marc Howells:

I think the key from a capability and a skill perspective and probably a mindset point of view, I would say we've had to really embrace agile working, so the approach that we've looked at taking in all instances is really about a minimum viable product mindset. So how do you start with a minimum viable product concept, how do you then think about what is the end outcome you're trying to achieve for the business, how do you use experimentation and proofs of concept? So use the experiment, test the proof of concept, stabilise the proof of concept, draw down the results from it, and when you recognize that there is transferability you scale fast and scale in an agile way that is digital, it is adaptable and is constantly giving a readout in terms of its data so that you can course correct as you go. I think the other elements are, we had to become a lot more commercial, so as a function, what I found is we are a deep expertise in behavioral science, in instructional learning, and thinking about the psychology aspect of it all. We've had to move into thinking like a professional services firm.

So you're leveraging and embedding procurement and IT support as core partners into the organization, building strong partnership with our suppliers and our vendors, but at a level of partnership where we know what their road map in R&D looks like, they know what our strategic road map looks like, and they're not just providing services that we ask for, we're thoughtfully coming together and sharing ideas that are mutually beneficial, but also you start to see the periphery of other services and skills that they have that can be complementary to our journey, so it's really about horizon scanning, and it's getting my team to think about, you are the search lights for the organization on innovation in this space, and how do you spot innovation in the margins? How do you bring it in, put it in a sandbox environment, play around with its... Test its viability for our business model, and then go through an MVP process of trial it, experiment, scale fast, etcetera, where it works, or if it doesn't work, it's kinda take the lessons learned then walk away and take on the next opportunity. The next one was really about building multi-disciplinary teams, so having agility to play in lots of different spaces, but without growing a very large organization.

So again, people can color across the lines, if you like, in the roles that they play, but working as an agile team that people are moving between teams in order to have scrum teams to go after a particular opportunity. But the other piece that's been important is having deep technical expertise in the areas where that is critical is go after building the very best that you can get and make sure that these are individuals that are bought in and are not just

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there from a technical expertise, but they're passionate about the purpose of what we're trying to drive. And I've been fortunate, I've got some incredible people working around me in the team and people that are so bought into the opportunity, the collective imagination of the group has taken it much further than I imagined we'd get to. And that's been a force of nature in terms of when things have got tough and there's been moments where there's been resistance in the business or things haven't quite worked out, that creates a resilience within the team and a passion to kinda dig deep, work together and find a solution, and we've come through the other end every single time. And now there's just a kind of a shared journey that we've all been through. And you can feel that tangible culture in the team.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, absolutely. So if you think back over this period of change, what have been the most critical success factors? What has made the most difference to you being able to, with your team, of course, because it's not just you doing this, the team's really vital. So what's been most critical to the team being able to achieve this extent of change in just a four-year period?

Marc Howells:

I think it kind of goes back to some of the points we talked about, which is, A, it's around having that shared vision and purpose from the beginning and getting real alignment about why are we doing this, what is the value, and visualising what could the end state look, feel and sound like when we get there? So kind of bring in an emotional memory to life, if you like, before we've even set off. The second piece is that ongoing stakeholder support and engagement and the advocacy we've got from the business and from HR, but the business advocacy was absolutely critical and continues to be, if the business doesn't feel it's value adding, you're just in the way. So you have to be, to be like the Jerry Maguire phrase of, help me help you. It's kind of, it's making sure that that stays front of mind, is what we're doing value adding for them, the executive governance board, because you need that top of house buy-in and you need people to see value, not that this is just a soft L&D activity.

This is about unleashing potential within the organization to deliver strategic outcomes. The go slow to go fast, that's kind of, I think I'll have that on my headstone when I'm finally pushing up the days because that's been so critical for us as we have gone through this program and do the right thing, even if it's hard. So there's been times where we've had to take a deviation to go and slow down to engage with the business and slow walk through solving a problem, taking everybody with us. And I can think of, there's one example that we've recently closed out to do with a particular technology decommissioning, it's still taken nearly two years, but when we closed out the decommissioning decision, the business leaders were all in full support that this was the right thing to do and the new technology, everybody was excited about it, engaged with it. Now, if we'd have rushed through that, we would never have landed in the place that we're in now. But now we have advocacy and support fully behind us for where we go next. And these are all sorts of lessons that we've learned.

The final one would be, we're gonna make mistakes. We'll make lots of mistakes. It's just keep learning, keep openly discussing and describing what worked, what didn't work, what could we do differently and how do we apply that to the next opportunity? And kind of dust yourselves off, pick yourself up and keep going.

Michelle Ockers:

It truly is a long-term game that you've had to play. And just not be dissuaded, not be discouraged, not back off challenging conversations, but to have a bit of boldness and confidence and courage to lean into those spaces to achieve kind of that vision that you created, Marc. There is one thing I want to loop back to, we talked about when you were

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making your pitch and putting your business case together that you used the Bersin model and you baselined, have you gone back to that and redone that and had a look at where you are at any point in the last four years?

Marc Howells:

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So we've looked at it a couple of times actually. We're probably in the sort of three and a half and four plus in the five categories, but what we have been able to do is also we've increased the offering by 600%, in terms of what's available, we've done a decommissioning of over 90% of the old technology and we've stood up the whole new technology ecosystem. The population of the company has increased by 20% in a period of time since we started, but we've reduced the cost per learner by 20% and increased the offering by 600%. And what we're seeing is hard tangible measures of the employees that have been through a learning intervention are staying twice as long as the ones that haven't. So it's had a dramatic impact on retention. People that have been through the learning interventions are also 15% more likely to get promoted, and we're seeing a higher level of engagement. So we now have 89% of the employee base are saying they've had a quality development discussion with a line manager and have also had opportunity to improve their skills and capabilities as part of the development culture within the organization. So we're seeing hard, tangible measures of impact right across the organization as well as the movement of the Bersin model. Now, our opportunity is we're now looking at the Bersin and the Deloitte skills based organization to see where we go next and that'll be the next opportunity for us.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Well, that's the thing, the job's never done, right? Because things keep shifting and changing, and if you're working so closely with the business to establish and build your credibility not because you need it to feel status or to feel good about yourself or feel secure in your employment, but because that allows you to do even better things and make a bigger difference to the organization, there's always gonna be work there and always an opportunity to help the organization to continue to achieve its goals. Marc, thank you so much. I know no matter what size the organization is that our listeners are working in, there's going to be something that everyone can take out of that episode and start using in their practice. So thank you so much for your time today, Marc.

Marc Howells:

My absolute pleasure, Michelle. Thanks for the conversation, and yeah, I'm looking forward to hearing the rest of the podcasts.

Michelle Ockers:

Great. Thank you. Bye.

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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.

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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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