

Learning Uncut Episode 51
Jem Mills and Bianca Zingus – What Happened Next: Co-Created Change
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

In January 2020 two 'What Happened Next' episodes were published where I spoke with previous guests to find out what had happened over time with the solutions or body of work they discussed in their original episode. I've decided to publish one or two bonus 'What Happened Next' episodes in each Australian school holiday period. Welcome to this What Happened Next episode.

My guests are Jem Mills and Bianca Zingus from Social Futures who are a community service organisation that run programs to bring about positive change in local communities.

Jem was my guest in episode 13, which was published in November 2018. He is the Senior Manager of Practice Excellence at Social Futures. In episode 13 we spoke about the use of a co-created change management approach. Jem also discussed the use of experiential and social learning strategies to design and implement this approach and the use of reflection as a key part of organisational practice. It's well worth listening to the original episode.

Bianca Zingus was a participant on the Change Conversationalists program that we featured in episode 13 and has since joined Jem's Practice Excellence team.

This episode is an example of a change in ways of working being piloted or seeded and then advocates of the approach continuing to apply the new way of working to address other issues or opportunities in an organisation. Having been part of the original co-created change program, Bianca saw the opportunity to apply the process to improve a program that she was working on called Connecting Home. In a single day co-created change workshop 34 improvements were identified to the program.

One interesting part of the process which we didn't discuss back in episode 13 is consensus-based decision making. Jem describes how this works and Bianca gives us an example of a specific change to the Connecting Home program which people really bought into because they had made the decision through this consensus-based decision-making process to adopt the change.

Enjoy this discussion of what happened next with Jem and Bianca.

Welcome back, Jem.

Jem Mills:

Thanks very much, Michelle. Great to be back.

Michelle Ockers:

And welcome, Bianca.

Bianca Zingus:

Thank you, Michelle. Glad to be here.

Michelle Ockers:

Learning Uncut Episode 51
Jem Mills and Bianca Zingus – What Happened Next: Co-Created Change
Hosted by Michelle Ockers

I'm very pleased to have you guys. Jem, can you please briefly recap who Social Futures is and the work that the organization does.

Jem Mills:

Of course, so Social Futures is a community service organization. We run a number of programs, 24 programs in fact, across a range of needs in the community. So, youth programs, Youth Mental Health. In the disability sector, we help to roll out the NDIS and we also run a number of homelessness programs as well as a few others. We were born in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales. We now have western New South Wales, Orange, Dubbo, Bathurst, Broken Hill, and some of our programs cover large areas of New South Wales, about 85% of New South Wales with consortium partners. All about positive social change in our local communities.

Michelle Ockers:

Thanks, Jem. And today, we're going to find out what happened next with your use of the approaches we previously discussed, particularly co-created change. And Jem, you've brought Bianca along as a colleague today. Can you please introduce us to Bianca and let our listeners know why you invited her to join us?

Jem Mills:

Of course I'm very pleased to introduce you to Bianca Zingus, who is the Practice Excellence Coordinator in our team. So since we last met Michelle, the Practice Excellence team has grown dramatically from being me on my own, to there being five of us. Bianca is working very closely with me, in all things Practice Excellence doing a similar kind of role. The advantage of bringing her in is that she, in her last position was working in the program, where we did the change management approach that we're going to discuss today. So she has a dual role if you like in today's interview.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, and Bianca, how long have you been working with Social Futures?

Bianca Zingus:

I have been with Social Futures coming up to five years in February Michelle, so it's just over four and a half.

Michelle Ockers:

What do you most enjoy about working in the organization?

Bianca Zingus:

I'm most of all, first and foremost, I guess, you know, I most enjoy working with the people that we work with. I wholeheartedly believe in what we're doing here at Social Futures. And more specifically to my role, I'm really enjoying working in an organization that has a team that's dedicated to inspiring curiosity within the organization. I've never really worked anywhere that has a specialised learning and development team. And it's just really great to be a part of that.

Michelle Ockers:

Jem, when we spoke in November 2018, Social Futures was undergoing a period of rapid growth. In two years you tripled in size from 96 to 300 and you were anticipating further growth. Has this continued? And if so, what's driving it?

Jem Mills:

Learning Uncut Episode 51
Jem Mills and Bianca Zingus – What Happened Next: Co-Created Change
Hosted by Michelle Ockers

So luckily for us, Michelle, we've consolidated for a period of time around about 300 mark. We are still planning to grow. And obviously, it's subject to government funding, and we have irons in fires that we hope that will come in next year, but we've had an opportunity in the last year or so to really lay some of the foundations we need to have in place in order to be ready for that growth when it kind of comes so I'm actually quite glad to be able to say that it hasn't continued at the same pace. And indeed, you know, the larger team we have with Practice Excellence inside a dedicated branch is part of that foundation that we've had the opportunity to put in place.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And I know that the rapid growth was presenting a quite a few challenges to the organization and was one of the catalysts to you deciding to adapt open source change management, which you call co-created change. Bianca, in the last episode with Jem we talked about the co-created change management process that had been introduced. And I understand you were part of the project that Jem talked to us about, which was Change Conversationalists, is that right?

Bianca Zingus:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

Can you talk to us a little bit about your experience of change management in that program, and how it differed from any past experiences you you'd had of being part of change in organizations?

Bianca Zingus:

Yeah, sure. So you know that particular experience with co-created change, you know, to me, it was a very democratic process. So it involves calling on the collective intelligence or you know, what our team now refers to as the wisdom in the room to address certain issues and to solve problems that that program was facing at the time.

I think particularly with community services work decisions or ideas that are developed by leadership teams that are not working directly with clients, it doesn't always translate well, to the people on the ground or those who they're supporting. And so one of the reasons I think the co-created change process worked so well within Connecting Home at Social futures is that it called upon the expertise of all levels of our group or organization rather than just those of the top.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. It feels like it's part of this broader movement in society towards a more people-centred approach and involving people more in experiences and changes that are relevant to them. So it feels very aligned with where we're heading.

Bianca Zingus:

Yeah, definitely.

Michelle Ockers:

Jem, I believe that you'd like to illustrate how the use of the approach evolved by discussing another project at Social Futures that it's been used on and Bianca is going to help you to do this. Jem, if you can start by introducing the project to us.

Learning Uncut Episode 51
Jem Mills and Bianca Zingus – What Happened Next: Co-Created Change
Hosted by Michelle Ockers

Jem Mills:

Sure. Yeah. So it's great that we've got Bianca here because she was actually working in one of our programs, Connecting Home, at the time that we just finished the Change Conversationalists initiative that we discussed last episode. Now three of the people that were in that Change Conversationalists initiative were working in that program. And the manager, who was one of them, came to me and said "Look, we need to address a bunch of issues in in our program and we really want to use a co-created change management approach." And so we had three key individuals working in that program who were able to socialize the wider staff group into co-created change management and we were able to utilize it to address a number of issues that the program was facing, and Bianca was working in at the time.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so what were the issues? Are you able to talk a little bit about what the issues were that needed to be addressed?

Jem Mills:

Absolutely, yeah. So this particular program - it would be fairly well known across the country that homelessness is a really significant issue. And one of the things that locally we're experiencing here was that the need was greatly underestimated in the design of the program at the State level, and this has been acknowledged openly, throughout with funders and providers alike. And so this is putting an awful lot of pressure on to the work on the ground and straining the, if you like, the kind of the system that the program was kind of working to. So they actually wanted to look at all the different changes that could be made to make the whole program run more effectively and seamlessly and to help the staff to work in ways that would be much more conducive to their own well-being and what have you. So it was pretty much a kind of root and branch shift from some quite large changes within the program to some quite small ones as well. So there's things like setting up some group work for the clients, thinking about the way the intake process worked, thinking about the way some of the outreach teams worked. All in all, we made 34 separate changes to the way the program ran.

Michelle Ockers:

okay. And with the co-created change process, as it was described, when we last spoke, it was more about the implementation of a change rather than the design of a change, would that have been right in terms of the way you had started off using it.

Jem Mills:

So the hallmark, one of the defining features of co-created change management as we read, is that the people who are going to be tasked with implementing the change are the ones who sit in the room to help design that change. And so the way it works with this program is first of all, you have to get some senior leadership buy in and the Exec manager was really great in terms of drawing the, you know, the parameters of the change, he basically said, "You can't exceed the existing budget. No one's jobs can change" and a couple of other kind of criteria and then was able to sit back and say, "Within those parameters I'll green light anything you come up with." And so we were then able to go to the rest of the staff group and go through a series of processes where they identify what the key priorities as they saw it that needs to be addressed in the way the program was working. And we took them through a series of processes whereby they generated some ideas and it all culminated in a single day, a change workshop, where we use the co-created change management approach to actually generate a series of proposals based on their own data. And we agreed, like I said, every single one of them by the end of the day.

Learning Uncut Episode 51
Jem Mills and Bianca Zingus – What Happened Next: Co-Created Change
Hosted by Michelle Ockers

Michelle Ockers:

Right. Bianca, what was your role on the project?

Bianca Zingus:

So my role, I wasn't part of the Change Conversationals group. I was in the program in which the day that Jem's talking about was involved with. My role was really a participant in the co-created change day and making those decisions that we felt made better our program. I think it's important as well to note that it didn't stop on that day. It was very much a process following that, in which there were follow up meetings. As well as sort of, I guess, analysing the changes that we've made, and looking at if we can make more changes or whether or not they're working. Yeah. So that way Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Talk to us about your experience as a participant in the change process then. How did you get involved? And how were you, if you like on boarded or briefed, made aware of the change process and get the work underway?

Bianca Zingus:

Yeah, absolutely. So my manager at the time, as well, as a close colleague of mine, were both part of those change conversationals' groups. So they would come back and during our team meetings or more informal interactions, they would explain to us the process and what was going to be happening, what co-created change was about So, you know, I think even as a participant who wasn't involved in those first initial meetings, I was very much aware and involved with what co-creating change was and what we were going to be doing within our team.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so what activities did you undertake? Obviously, you attended the workshop. Was there pre-work before the workshop, anything you needed to do to get ready for it?

Bianca Zingus:

It was mostly conversations, meetings in regard to the workshop and what it was. I think it was really important for us to understand exactly what co-created change was prior to going into the meeting so that we really felt as though we could be a part of it.

Jem Mills:

I can come in there as well, Michelle. We worked with the managers, and they had a variety of subgroups working towards the workshop. Each little team within the program was invited to prioritise the ways of working they felt needed to change. There was also around some email validation of those points and some prioritisation by the larger group via email. Some of the team members who had specialist interests, things like domestic violence and mental health and that kind of stuff, elected to pull together some of the regional statistics in order to inform the change workshop. And so there are many aspects of the actual change workshop that was that was co-created itself, let alone the actual kind of by the time the change of discussions happened on the day as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Right and coming out of the workshop it sounds like you had a series of options for making changes to achieve the objective of reducing some of the pressure on workers and ensuring that you could meet the demand for your services.

Jem Mills:

Learning Uncut Episode 51
Jem Mills and Bianca Zingus – What Happened Next: Co-Created Change
Hosted by Michelle Ockers

I would actually express it even stronger than that. So we went through a consent-based decision round right at the end of the day. And I'll never forget it because we used consent-based decision making to agree 34 specific proposals, and I had to go ahead and have a stiff drink and a lie down afterwards. And it's quite intense. So we had subgroups on the day who went off with a small number of specific issues. And they came back with a specific proposal about how to address in a new way, that way of working. So for instance, one was around helping people in the program to be more equipped in order to hold down tenancies in the private rental market. And there was a whole sort of mini process proposed for that. And that was one of the ones that went through, one of the 34 the went through the consent-based decision-making process. So by the time we finished the day, there, there were like 34, outline project mini projects coming out that were going to drive this change.

Michelle Ockers:

You've used to term there I'm not familiar with Jem – consent-based decision making. Can you describe what that is?

Jem Mills:

Sure. So consent based decision making comes from sociocracy, or holacracy. It's a way of ensuring that a large group can make a decision quickly. So you'll be very familiar, Michelle, that if you try and get a group of 30 people to agree on something by consensus, it can take you all day and you might not even get there. So with consent-based decision making, the discussion is quite structured, but it gives everybody a chance to be heard, and to have their say, in whether or not a proposal gets up. So I'll just very briefly take you through the kind of steps that make it different from consensus discussion. So it starts with a proposal, a very specific proposal. So somebody has to come up with a proposal - "We propose that we are going to do X, Y and Z." And then you have an objections round where everyone in the room gets the opportunity to raise - no, sorry, you have a clarifications round first, so everyone in the room gets the opportunity to clarify, ask clarifying questions to make sure they completely understand what's being proposed. And once everyone understands, then you go around again, to see if anyone has any objections, any specific objections and their grounds for that objection. If there are objections, then the people making the proposal go away, take those objections into account, and come back with a renewed proposal. And you keep going around that cycle until you're ready to do a consensus vote. And the consent is based on the rule "Can I live with this?" So you're not being asked "Do you think this is a good idea?" You're being asked "Can I live with this proposal" and if the answers to that questions is "yes" it gets up and it's passed. So that's, that's how it's different from like a consensus discussion.

Michelle Ockers:

Bianca, coming out of that workshop there were 34 changes. I'm assuming you got involved in developing and implementing at least one of those changes. Do you want to pick something you were involved in after the workshop and describe what your role was and how that change was developed and implemented?

Bianca Zingus:

Yeah, absolutely. So one of the big changes that we implemented after that day was to do with our intake process. And so previously, there was one person rostered on to complete intake assessment for the entire region within that program. So that program covered quite a large area in the Northern Rivers from Tweed, which is the Queensland border, down to Grafton in the Clarence Valley. And as you can imagine, that role is particularly overwhelming, especially when there's only one person doing it at a time. I think, you know, thinking back to why our managers were so keen on having this co-created change day was

Learning Uncut Episode 51
Jem Mills and Bianca Zingus – What Happened Next: Co-Created Change
Hosted by Michelle Ockers

because there was significant you know, the intake process particularly was having some negative consequences to staff wellbeing. So, when we were talking about this particular intake process, we decided as a team that it would be best to have another person on, rostered on, so there was two people doing that role at a time. How we sort of came to decide that was that everybody as a team volunteered to put aside one day a fortnight to be rostered on to that role. And I think, you know, the reason why that was successful and continued is because everybody on that day did participate in that consent-based decision making. You know, I think if we had just said, everybody from now on is going to do one day a fortnight of intake assessments it probably wouldn't have landed as well as it did. So I think that was a really good example of how successful that day was and the changes that we made.

Michelle Ockers:

It's a nice example of how being involved in a change and having a say in the decision-making shifts how you feel about that and your willingness to engage with the change rather than being told how to do something.

Bianca Zingus:

Absolutely. And I think having an understanding of why it's needed as well really empowered the team, you know, to work together.

Jem Mills:

It was interesting that, it took a while, for the teams to really trust that. I remember on the day of the beginning of the day, Bianca, you might remember this. It's almost like people were waiting to see what the catch was. We had several rounds of a conversation that went along the lines of "No, you've already decided what this is going to be haven't you?" And we were like "No, honestly, we haven't. We're going to design it today." I took a little while to get over that hump.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, definitely. So Jem, how has the way you use the co-created change process changed from your early use of it?

Jem Mills:

So I think the moving forward, we've used it with a couple of other kind of projects, but it's particularly useful where, if you like the change might have significant impact on the workers involved. And if it's a kind of awkward, tricky one, to work out the parameters of, I would say that where you have much larger changes, it becomes a bit more tricky to, for the organization generally to take on wholesale. So I think we're still at the stage of determining when we feel comfortable to use it and when not. And so going through that journey ourselves because it can be quite a long, big process that is seemingly quite a heavy time resource. Of course, the rationale is that you save time down the track because the change is much more likely to be successful. But I think in a fast-paced changing environment it's a challenge to come to trust that sometimes for large organizations.

Michelle Ockers:

Understand. And what impact do you think using the approach is having on the organization and I think if you can think about that, from the perspective of culture, as well as any other impacts and you know, learning as a fundamental value in the idea of a learning culture. How do you think the co-created change management process plays into building a learning culture?

Jem Mills:

Learning Uncut Episode 51
Jem Mills and Bianca Zingus – What Happened Next: Co-Created Change
Hosted by Michelle Ockers

Well, I think people experience it as being aligned with our values, and particularly our value of inclusion. But also, I think the idea that, Bianca use the phrase earlier on, you know, the wisdom in the room. So I think there is a real commitment to understanding that we have a genuine resource of information and expertise amongst our staff group. And so I think it really, it really helps to look within teams, look within people and value and recognize and go looking for the expertise in the room. I think that that helps. I think one challenge that we've definitely had is that you have to keep explaining the parameters of co-created change management. If anyone's thinking of adopting it out there, I would I would counsel them to be really, really clear that this doesn't necessarily mean you're going to be consulted on everything. And I think so people can sometimes, if they process it in a hurry think this suddenly means that the whole organization is being run as a democracy. And that's not the case. I go back to the definition that says, if a change is going to affect you directly, then you will be involved in planning the implementation of that change, not whether or not the change happens, because most of the time, we haven't got a choice ourselves about whether or not the change happens.

Michelle Ockers:

So Jem, it sounds like the process is not yet at the point where it's self-sustaining, that it still needs a fair bit of support and facilitation for it to be effective with any particular change in the organization.

Jem Mills:

And I think you're right and obviously know with as organizations grow, and you get staff turnover, and you have to constantly refresh these ideas, and you're constantly faced with new challenges for them as well. So yeah, to me, it seems like it's like a lot of learning and development things, there's a constant nurturing of the knowledge.

Michelle Ockers:

There is. It's such an interesting body of work, you're undertaking at Social Futures with reflective practice and the approach that you bring, and I look forward to continuing to follow your work, Jem. So if anybody would like to follow up with Jem or Bianca about co-created change, or any of the ideas they've talked about in today's episode, we'll pop a link to their LinkedIn profiles in the show notes. Thanks so much for your time today Jem and Bianca.

Jem Mills:

Thank you very Michelle

Bianca Zingus:

Thank you, Michelle.

About Michelle Ockers

Michelle Ockers works with business and learning leaders to realise the untapped potential of learning in organisations. She is an organisational learning strategist and modern workplace learning practitioner. Michelle works with organisations to develop and implement transformative organisational learning strategy, and to build the capability of their learning team. She delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events. Michelle also mentors learning professionals at all career stages on career planning and professional development.

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:



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Learning Uncut Episode 51
Jem Mills and Bianca Zingus – What Happened Next: Co-Created Change
Hosted by Michelle Ockers

- *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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