

Learning Uncut Episode 52
Garry Ridge – WD40: A Learning Obsessed Culture
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

What does a learning-obsessed culture look like? How do you build a learning-obsessed culture? It's my absolute pleasure to bring you a conversation with Garry Ridge, the CEO of WD40. This is an organisation that was described as having a learning-obsessed culture in a Harvard Business Review article. I first became aware of the absolutely extraordinary culture of WD40 through the work of my friend and colleague, Nigel Paine, for his book Workplace Learning where he included them as a case study. He calls the chapter with their case study 'Lubricating Learning.' Nigel and I ran a Building Learning Culture programme in 2019, a public programme and one of the organisations that we look to illustrate what truly is possible to inspire participants in the programme and to help them to identify some of the strategy tactics they could use to build learning culture is WD40.

It was a real thrill when I asked Nigel to introduce me to Garry with a view of inviting him to be on the podcast, and Gary responded within 15 minutes of my email reaching out to him, to say yes, he would love to be on the podcast. His generosity in speaking about leadership, about his own approach to leadership, about WD40's culture and how learning happens in the organisation is evidenced by the wide range of videos and articles he is featured in publicly available on the internet. Some of the best of those are included in the show notes for this episode.

We cover Garry's personal learning practices through to practices for learning across the organisation. You're going to love the maniac pledge. You're going to love the idea of learning moments, and how learning moments are often spontaneously identified and discussed at WD40. The learning moment takes away the fear of failure and is ingrained as part of the way that work gets done in the organisation.

For those learning professionals who are listening, Garry has some advice for you if you do aspire to adopt a learning culture, but you don't yet have the good fortune to have a leader who truly values the power of learning. His words will give you courage, confidence, and the impetus to keep on going. Enjoy this magnificent conversation with Garry Ridge

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to Learning Uncut, Garry.

Garry Ridge:

Good day, Michelle. Thank you. I was delighted to be here with you today.

Michelle Ockers:

You're joining us from the U.S. at the moment?

Garry Ridge:

I am in San Diego, sunny San Diego.

Michelle Ockers:

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Lovely. Garry, I expect that many listeners like me will have a can of WD-40 somewhere in their home, garage, or workplace, so we probably all feel we know who WD-40 is, and what they do. However, I think there's a lot of people may not know about WD-40, including the fact your employee engagement is in the 90s, which is just extraordinary. We're going to share more about WD-40 today. Can you start with telling us, when people say who or what is WD-40, what do you tell them?

Garry Ridge:

Well, I'll tell you two things, too. Actually, WD-40, the product, is at the outcome of learning, and here's why. Back in 1953, there was a problem with condensation and corrosion in the umbilical cord of the Atlas Space Rocket here in San Diego, and the company was back then called Rocket Chemical Company, and the chemists got together, and they started to work up formulations to solve this problem.

Garry Ridge:

39 formulas didn't work. The 40th one worked, and that's why it's called WD, Water Displacement 40th formula. Today, we're a global company. We create positive, lasting memories by solving problems in factories, homes, and workshops around the world. Our just cause is to help make life better at home and at work, and it's just an exciting organization. 93 percent employee engagement. 99 percent of our employees say they love to tell people they work at WD-40 company. We're a public company. We're listed on the NASDAQ stock exchange, and I started with WD-40 in 1987, in Sydney, Australia, which is my hometown.

Michelle Ockers:

1987. That's 33 years, is it?

Garry Ridge:

I've been here for 33 years.

Michelle Ockers:

How has the organization changed in that time, and maybe a little bit about your own journey. Did you come into the organization as a CEO, or did you move into a different role?

Garry Ridge:

No, I was working actually for the licensee of WD-40 in Australia, a company called Hawker Pacific. They were part of the Hawker de Havilland Group. They were in the aviation business. In 1987, their license was coming to an end, and it was the early stages of WD-40 really thinking about how could they be a global company? My dad worked for the same company for 50 years, believe it or not, and he was an engineer. When I said to him, "Hey Dad, I've been given the opportunity to work for WD-40 company," he said, "You can't go wrong with that stuff, son," and I guess he was right.

Garry Ridge:

In '87, I actually opened the Australian subsidiary of WD-40, and from '87 through to '94, I worked out of our Sydney office, but primarily in Asia, as we started to look at building our distribution model there. In '94, I was asked if I'd like to move to the United States and take on the responsibility of our global expansion as the vice president of international. We packed up our toys, and we moved to San Diego. Then in 1997, the then-CEO retired, and

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for some reason, they thought this one-time Aussie guy from Australia would be the right person to help take the company to the next level.

Michelle Ockers:

How has it changed since that time, since you took on the helm?

Garry Ridge:

Well, when I started as CEO, about 80 percent of our revenue was in the United States, and we were a quarter of the size we are now. Now, 65 percent of our revenue is outside of the United States. We've really focused on global expansion. We have really focused on becoming a learning organization. One of the key pivots in my life was, once I became CEO, I realized I was consciously incompetent, and I decided that I'd go back to school. I went back to the University of San Diego, and I did a master's degree in leadership. That's where I met my now dear friend, my co-author, and my mentor, Ken Blanchard, the One Minute Manager.

Garry Ridge:

In fact, I was on his board of his company for 10 years after that. I really learnt the value of learning and servant leadership, and so we've become very much a servant leadership organization. I really do treasure what Aristotle said in 384 BC. Aristotle said, "Pleasure in the job puts perfection in the work," and our job as leaders is not to be in charge. Our job is to take care of the people in our charge. That's what we've been working on.

Michelle Ockers:

What does servant leadership mean to you, Garry?

Garry Ridge:

It means that empathy is much more important than ego. If you think about the leaders who have failed, it's where ego, and the word ego means self, and empathy is about others. It's a balance between being tough-minded and tender-hearted, but always knowing that if we can dedicate ourselves to bringing out the best of others, we will bring out the best in ourselves.

Michelle Ockers:

You know, there's a lot of talk about new leadership, and leadership in the digital age and so on, but it feels like servant leadership is timeless, right? It's enduring.

Garry Ridge:

I don't think there's anything that gets old about treating people with respect and dignity. There's a great book written by Robert Fulghum, *Everything You Need to Know You Learned in Kindergarten*. If we just did everything we learned in kindergarten, say "please," and "thank you," pick up after yourself. If you go out at night, take a friend. Don't steal. Clean up your mess. If we just adapted those into business, we'd have great businesses.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. Perhaps everyone would have engagement in the 90s, then, Garry.

Garry Ridge:

Maybe. That'd be great.

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Michelle Ockers:

Let's talk about learning. What does the word learning mean to you?

Garry Ridge:

It's really the opposite of curiosity. You may remember this. Way back when I was in Australia, and I had come home from school, I used to turn on the TV, and there was a guy with curly hair and a white coat, Professor Julius Sumner Miller. He was also the Cadbury's chocolate guy, and he used to do weird things like suck boiled eggs into bottles. But he always ended with this thing. Why is it so? I think learning is about that, and here's my equation. Education is when you read the fine print. Experience is when you don't. When you put both of those together, you get learning. From learning, you get knowledge, and from knowledge you get wisdom.

Garry Ridge:

Learning to me is a combination of the education and the experience. You've got to have both of those together. Then you get true learning.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. You yourself, what does learning look like for you? What drives you to keep learning, and what do you do to keep learning?

Garry Ridge:

Well, I teach. Best way to learn is to teach, so I'm an adjunct professor at the University of San Diego. I'm involved in a number of different groups. Marshall Goldsmith, I'm not sure if you're aware of Marshall or not. He has a group called MG100 that I'm a member of, which has a number of different people in it, everyone from Whitney Johnson, who wrote Disrupt Yourself, to Chester Elton, who wrote The Carrot Principle, to many other people.

Garry Ridge:

We share our learnings around, so teaching, learning, and asking myself this question often. Why do I believe this to be true? I think that's a strong question that we should always be asking. Why do we believe this to be true? That really does spark the appetite of learning.

Michelle Ockers:

Garry, you talked there about some of the people you surround yourself with, and the groups that you're a part of. I think that's an important part of learning, is who we surround ourselves with as well.

Garry Ridge:

Yeah, there's nothing like a group of reasonable people in a room debating and learning together. One of the things that I loved about the master's degree I did at the University of San Diego, it was a cohort-based group. There was 25 of us in the cohort, and I called it living, learning laboratory, because not only did you get the advantage of the academics that are there, but we all had our different learning experiences that we were able to share amongst all the subjects, with the exception of statistics. I didn't like statistics very much.

Michelle Ockers:

I empathize with you on that. Let's move from the personal to the organizational. There's a really nice HBR article which was based on an interview with you, which I'll pop in the show

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notes, that described WD-40 as having a learning-obsessed culture, and you talked earlier about being a learning organization. Why is learning important to an organization?

Garry Ridge:

Well, it discovers the opportunities. We say at WD-40 company, we don't make mistakes. We have learning moments. We invented that learning moment, and a learning moment is a positive or negative outcome of any situation that needs to be openly and freely shared to benefit all people. Once you take the fear of learning away, and I think there's a lot of fear in learning, because it normally starts with what did I do wrong?

Garry Ridge:

What we say is, there's nothing that you really do that's wrong. There are just some things that are better than others, apart from if they're illegal, unethical, those sorts of things. We talk about the learning moment a lot, and if you're in any one of our meetings around the world, it wouldn't be a few minutes into the meeting, where someone would say, "You know what? I have a learning moment about that. Let me share this with you."

Garry Ridge:

Taking fear out of learning and giving people permission to be able to share what worked and what didn't work as well is really where the true value, we think, of learning comes from.

Michelle Ockers:

Language is so powerful, isn't it?

Garry Ridge:

Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

I sometimes talk to people about learning moments, and for me, I kind of had adapted the idea from safety moments, when you work in manufacturing and mining and aviation. Safety moments are part of building a level of safety consciousness and safety behaviour. What I'm curious about with learning moments is whether that's something, like a safety moment, I see so often built into meetings, or in almost a structured way. Do you have rituals around regular team meetings, for instance, where there's a question around what have you learned this week, or what have you improved with your work this week, or something like this, or is a learning moment something that arises more spontaneously when people realize there's an opportunity?

Garry Ridge:

I think it's embedded now. It's become so much part of the way we are, it's embedded. We're always looking and talking and searching for the learning moment, and so early on, 20-some years ago when we first started thinking about this, it wasn't so embedded. But today, it is, and through the organization, we have a number of different programs and opportunities. We have a thing called our Leadership Lab, and Leadership Lab is a three-course, three-year internal leadership program that's all about learning.

Garry Ridge:

We have another lab called Tribology, funnily enough. Tribology is actually a word, and it really means the study of friction, so our product development and our product knowledge

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group is called the Tribology group. We do have to give these things meanings and names, so that people can actually grab onto them and say, "I'm part of that."

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. Yes. What other practices do you have in place to promote learning across the organization? You've spoken about learning moments. You've spoken about the learning lab. Are there other things that are just part of the way that business gets done that build a learning culture at WD-40?

Garry Ridge:

Yeah. You'd probably be aware of the after-action review, which is a disciplined way of looking at an outcome, and then peeling back the onion to see what was it that we wanted to achieve, what actually happened, what can we learn from it? We have another thing called measure, learn, react. We measure something, we learn from it, then we react to it. Yeah, there's a whole ... Again, any organization can develop what's appropriate within their sphere, within their culture, and again, our culture is very, very important to us.

Garry Ridge:

Culture to us is pretty simple. I have an algorithm. It says culture equals, and the equal sign means happens when, values plus behaviour close parentheses consistently. One of our values in our organization is we value making it better than it is today, and that really, as a value, drives again, what are we doing to make it better than it is today? One of our values is we create positive, lasting memories in all of our relationships. When we're doing product development, and we have more than the blue and yellow can, then we can ask our question, help us understand what positive, lasting memory this product or this service is going to deliver?

Garry Ridge:

If we can't answer that question, we haven't had the learning we need. We have learning from our end users. We study the behaviours of our end users, and one of the great products that has launched also now in Australia is a thing called EZ-REACH. If you think about the can of WD-40 you have, instead of putting the little red straw in it, it actually has an eight-inch metal flexible straw already attached. If you're an auto mechanic or working in the farm, you can bend that straw to get the product exactly where you want.

Garry Ridge:

That came out of learning, because we observed people in workshops looking for the problems that they had to see if we could solve them with some solution from that learning.

Michelle Ockers:

I think customer research like that is a classic case of learning that we may not recognize as learning, and it struck me too when you were talking about values, by your making it better than it is today, well that's learning, but it's just not called learning, and I think there's something very powerful about finding other words that describe what real learning is, so people get out of that mindset of, I need to be in a classroom to learn, because that's just not true. Most of our learning happens if we're conscious of looking out for the opportunity and how to make things better, right?

Garry Ridge:

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Yeah, well, 70 percent of the learning, the best learning is osmosis on the job. One of the things that we love to do is give people experiences. Remember, I said, education and experience?

Michelle Ockers:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Garry Ridge:

We give them experience. We've got a number of global work groups that work together across the world on different projects, so they're learning through that. They're learning how to deal with different cultures, they're learning how to interpret different markets. They're learning how to be better virtual communicators. It's all there, that we believe is really, really powerful.

Michelle Ockers:

How much of that learning is left to chance, and how much of it has some sort of consciousness or deliberateness around it to extract the learning from the experience?

Garry Ridge:

Oh, I don't think there's a lot of chance. I think it's very deliberate. Again, if you're not focused, and don't have a desired outcome, you won't get it. The book that I wrote with Ken Blanchard, which the title is Don't Mark My Paper, Help Me Get an A, and what we're about is helping people get A's. What does that really mean? It means, do we understand what we expect from each other? What do we have to do together to help you get to that stage of learning? It's really, really important.

Michelle Ockers:

What then is the role of the manager, which is one of the most important relationships people have in the workplace, is with their manager. What's the role of the manager in a culture that encourages ongoing learning like this?

Garry Ridge:

They are the pivot of the learning. We call ourselves a tribe, and I was fortunate enough to, as we were developing this tribal cultural state, I studied, in fact, the indigenous Australians, and the Fijian Islanders, and I looked at what were the attributes of those groups years past that allowed them to survive or not? Now, let's look at that. Let's pretend now that we are sitting in a circle at an indigenous Australian meeting two thousand years ago. We're out in the middle of the outback, near Ayers Rock, and we were observing. What would we be seeing?

Garry Ridge:

We'd be seeing the tribal leader teaching the young tribe members to throw a boomerang, because if they couldn't throw a boomerang, and be efficient at it, then they would actually die, because it's the tool of survival. Our job as a leader is to be the ultimate learner and teacher. Our job is to be ... We call all of our managers here coaches. We don't have managers. Everybody's a coach, and coaching is another form of leadership. What's the job of the coach? Not to play on the field, but to be active on the sideline and in the locker room, observing, and then helping teach the players what they need to know to play their best game, or bring resources to them to do that. The leader is truly an enabler of teaching.

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Michelle Ockers:

How do you develop your leaders, then? Most companies have leadership development programs. I think you referred to some of that earlier with your lab. How do you develop them, and develop a thirst for learning amongst your leadership team and your managers?

Garry Ridge:

Many different levels. The master's degree that I took at USD, I've now put 33 people through that, so we have 33 people in our organization with master's degrees in leadership, whether it be Leadership Lab, we have a support program that supports our tribe members to take on different forms of training and development. There's a whole suite that you could pick from, a la carte, if you want. Then, the formal side of it as well. But then again, experience is always very important.

Michelle Ockers:

As a leader, you're obviously a coach. What is your approach to coaching? How do you go about coaching?

Garry Ridge:

The first thing I try to do is understand what's on someone's mind. The best first question of coaching is what's on your mind? The next question is what else? Because coaching is helping someone solve their own problem. A coach doesn't solve the problem. He helps someone else solve their own problem, and in a lot of cases, folks really don't understand, or haven't had the opportunity to stand back and think about what the problem is. They've got caught up in the messy middle of it all, if you will, as I call it. Helping them get clarity around what it is they want to solve. Bringing resources to the table, if needed, and then being there to check in with them on how their progress has gone along the way.

Michelle Ockers:

I'm really curious about the Maniac Pledge. I've seen a YouTube clip where you talk about the Maniac Pledge, and there's lots of resources I'll share in the show notes. You've actually shared, very generously, a lot of your thinking and practices. Tell us about the Maniac Pledge. What is it, and what's the point of it?

Garry Ridge:

The Maniac Pledge is really a pledge of permission. It says, I am responsible for taking actions, asking questions. I'm not there to blame someone else if I didn't know. If I know something that someone else should know, I'm responsible for telling them. I have no right to say that I should have got there sooner. It really birthed many years ago when I'd been out traveling around the world. I think I got back to my office in San Diego, and one of the tribe members at that stage was obviously upset because there was something that they hadn't been told about.

Garry Ridge:

On reflection, I thought, well, why didn't they ask? We hadn't given them permission. We wrote the Maniac Pledge. We said, "Here it is. This is your permission, so you now not only have permission, but you're responsible, if there's something you don't know, you ask, and if there's something someone else should know and you know, it's your responsible to tell."

Michelle Ockers:

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It's really powerful. It's almost like a ritual or a symbolic thing to say, "You know, we're anointing you with permission."

Garry Ridge:

Correct. It's funny that we have to do that, isn't it? But people are afraid.

Michelle Ockers:

It is funny. Where do you think that fear comes from?

Garry Ridge:

Ego, probably, of their leader. But I have people that I meet in the offices every day that will say, "Maniac Pledge?" I'll say, "What do you want? Ask me whatever you want. If I have the answer, I'll give it to you. If I've not, I probably can find it somewhere." You know?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Yep. I wanted to ask a question about values. You talked about some of your values, and of course most organizations have values, and I've been in organizations where the values have been meaningless. I've been in other organizations where they've been very alive and very real. What does it take to actually create and build a set of values that actually mean something, that actually translate into behaviour, and they're not just empty words sitting on a wall somewhere?

Garry Ridge:

Consistency. A lot of people get prerequisites and values mixed up. Honesty, integrity, they're not values. They're, you've got to have those. Firstly, there should only be five or six of them. They should be hierarchical, so they don't compete with each other. Ours is a hierarchical. Our number one value is we value doing the right thing. Our number six value is we value sustaining the WD-40 economy. We will make decisions that are not necessarily financially beneficial to the organization, because we want to do the right thing. I'll give you an example of that.

Garry Ridge:

We're very proud of the fact that our products have no cancer-causing chemicals in them at all. We made that pledge a long time ago. There are raw materials out there that do work as functionally as well as the ones that we use in our product. They're less expensive, because some of them do have carcinogenics in them. We choose not to use those, because our number one value is we want to value doing the right thing. Our number two value is we value creating positive, lasting memories in all of our relationships, and we don't think that having carcinogenics in our product could create too many positive, lasting memories.

Garry Ridge:

The values have got to be hierarchical, and then each one of our values actually has a written paragraph of what it means. This way, our values can travel all around the world into any culture, because sometimes doing the right thing left to people's interpretation may be a little different in Brisbane than it is in Beijing, than it is in Beirut, or London, or San Diego. If we clearly define it, we give people that safety. Values are the written reminders of the only acceptable behaviours in the organization, and they're not restrictive. They're there to set

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people free, because at our company, you can make any decision you want, as long as you use our values as your guidepost.

Michelle Ockers:

They want to become principles for making decisions, and of course, if they're not reinforced and supported, particularly by the leaders, they fall apart as empty words.

Garry Ridge:

Absolutely. Values equals the way we do things around here. That's what it means.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. I'd like to circle back for one moment to the learning moment, that wasn't deliberate, and talk about. Let's get a little bit granular with it. Someone's in a meeting, and they say, "Ah, I've had a learning moment." There's something they've learned, they share with the meeting. How does that get shared around the organization, or how does that then get disseminated to relevant other people, if indeed it is something that is relevant to other people, as opposed to a personal learning moment? Do you have a system for that?

Michelle Ockers:

I think some organizations do a lot of work with formal knowledge management systems, and try to capture things, and sometimes that's effective, and sometime that's not, but how do you spread what comes out of learning moments?

Garry Ridge:

Again, it kind of happens naturally now, because let's say we were in a marketing meeting, and there was a particular program that we ran in a particular place that was reasonably successful. That would be shared out in that meeting, or through some way, and then we all get together at regular times during the year, and we make sure that those things are captured and shared out. We have a global group on E-commerce, and we have a global group on marketing. We have supply chain summits. We have all of these things, where these things are captured.

Garry Ridge:

Now, if they're immediate, because we're so connected, and we all buy into the fact that we're here to protect and feed each other, it would not be unusual, and probably very usual that that person would pick up some sort of communication, and communicate with that group of people around the world on that learning. The other thing that we've written is, we have a document that goes right back to day one in the company, and we went through, and we identified all of the significant actions, all of the actions we took along the way.

Garry Ridge:

It was what did we do, what was the objective, what did we learn from it? This thing's now 50 or 60 pages long, and we update it every year with the key decisions we've made, and whether it was a positive or a negative outcome. That's available to everyone.

Michelle Ockers:

Beautiful. There's a little bit of the corporate history of why did we make a decision at that point in time. What was our goal?

Garry Ridge:



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Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

That's something I encourage teams to do, is to keep some sort of key decision log, because sometimes something changes, and you think, well why did we decide to do that? How did we end up here with that decision? I think we all do the best we can at the time, and having that record allows us to learn from the decisions we've made as well, right?

Garry Ridge:

Right. We're a 66-year-old company, so some of those decisions that were made, the people aren't around here anymore.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. Absolutely. It sounds like you've been very deliberate over the years in how you've built these practices. What's the balance between being deliberate, and some of the practices emerging, do you think?

Garry Ridge:

It was deliberate in the beginning, because I was consciously incompetent. I learnt the three most powerful words I've ever learnt in my life, and they are I don't know. I got really, really comfortable with those, and I knew that if we were going to be successful, I had to create an environment where the learning was rich, and it came to the table and resulted in outcomes. Our learning is due to my incompetency.

Michelle Ockers:

Lovely. That's a nice reframe, and it gives other people the permission to say, "I don't know" as well, right?

Garry Ridge:

Three most powerful words I've ever ... I often state this, too. In most situations, I'm probably wrong, and roughly right. I'm okay with that. As a leader, you have to be okay with being vulnerable. You have to be okay with not knowing. I don't know if I sent you some of the stuff I wrote about AI, the soul-sucking CEO, but I invented this person called AI, the soul-sucking CEO. AI has attributes opposite to learning. He knows everything, he has all the answers. He's not a good listener. His ego eats his empathy, instead of his empathy eating his ego.

Garry Ridge:

He hates feedback, and those behaviours are present in a lot of leaders. Those are the behaviours that actually squashed learning completely, because people don't want to be part of it.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. It's sometimes interesting if you caricature things, and take them to your extreme, you can look at them and say, "Well, that's ridiculous," but then maybe you can do some self-reflection and recognize a little bit of your own behaviours in some of that as well at times.

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Garry Ridge:

Marshall Goldsmith wrote the great book called What Got You Here Won't Get You There. It's the 20 bad habits, and two of them that really are really focused on the fact that they kill learning is we as leaders want to add too much value. Someone will come to us with a great idea. It's 95 percent as you want it to be. Their enthusiasm behind it is roaring with emotion and motivation, and we as leaders go, well, you know, that's great, but, and we add two percent value to the idea, and we kill the enthusiasm and the motivation by 80 percent.

Garry Ridge:

The other thing is, we want to win. Leaders want to win, so we try to win too much, and we've got to trust it. An organization needs to have these things to be successful. Number one, you have to have a dedication to it's all about the people. Number two, you have to have a clear purpose. What's your just cause? Number three. You have to have a clear set of values that are going to guide your decisions, so that you don't get churn, because what happens if you don't have values, you get churn. Hierarchical values take churn out.

Garry Ridge:

Then, of course, you've got to have a clear strategy. You've got to have bold execution, and over the top of that, you have to have a complete umbrella of learning. If you have those things, and you do it consistently, we could say, through our success, that it works. It builds a highly engaged workforce, which is what you need, and imagine a place where you go to work every day, you make a contribution to something bigger than yourself. You learn something new. You feel safe and are set free by a compelling set of values, and you go home happy. Happy people create happy families. Happy families create a happy world. That's what we need now.

Garry Ridge:

We as leaders have the opportunity to do that.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. Yes. Yes. You have a learning and development team, I assume? You've got specific, formal learning programs as well as learning being built into the way the organization works. What do you, as the leader, expect of your learning and development team?

Garry Ridge:

To be focused, to make sure that the learning that we're bringing to the table is relevant, and to us it's very relevant. The majority of our learning is around leadership skills, because most organizations don't teach leadership. They teach people to manage, but not to lead. We do a lot around that. Then, it breaks off. We have a scientific team who, we've got how many scientists - 14 or 15 scientists in the company, so that's the science lab, that side of it. We've got the leadership lab, and then we have a competencies lab, so what competencies do we need to focus on? It's different by department or whatever, and our team put that learning together. A lot of it now we're doing virtual, which is really good. Some of it's formal, i.e. university type courses that we help people through.

Michelle Ockers:

How do you think amidst, because we're having this conversation where we really in the full grip globally of the coronavirus right now? How do you think your learning-obsessed culture is shaping the way you're responding across the organization at the moment?

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Garry Ridge:

I think we're loving it. We're being forced to go that extra step to learn the things that we weren't that good at. I'll be the first one to admit it. We have a wonderful global virtual learning platform, and I must admit, I wasn't that good at it. We invested quite substantially in this thing. I tell you what, I'm an expert. I love this thing now. We use Webex, or Zoom sometimes. I've been on five and a half hours of Webex meetings this morning, from when I got up to an hour ago before I took a break.

Garry Ridge:

We're all learning to be that. The other thing that I'm treasuring about this time is people are a little more compassionate, they're a little more forgiving. They're actually collaborating at a higher level. They're learning to do it at a distance, so this too will pass. We will get through this, and there will be some learning from it, and we'll put that learning to work, and hopefully we'll build a better place because of it. We've had some fun this week, too. We've had virtual happy hours, and out of crisis like this comes opportunity.

Garry Ridge:

Last Saturday, I had a Zoom virtual happy hour with 10 of my friends in Australia that I don't see that often, only when I visit. There we were, with our favourite beverage, and we're all laughing and joking. It's like, wow, why did it take a crisis for us to reconnect like this?

Michelle Ockers:

It's interesting, isn't it? I've organized, my family. I have a large extended family. We normally do an Easter Sunday picnic where we all gather in Wollongong, which you'll be familiar with, the beautiful spot by the seaside there, and of course we can't do that this year, so I've organized a family picnic on Zoom, so I'm currently coaching some of my older family members through how to use the technology, and it's just a delight to see their joy in being able to use this technology to connect with each other. I'm like, well we're all a bit distributed. We should be doing this all the time, right, and stay better connected.

Garry Ridge:

I know, I know.

Michelle Ockers:

I, like you, very hopeful that some very good things will come out of this. Garry, as we near the end of the discussion, there's a question that I'm going to ask on behalf of every learning professional around the world who does not have a leader who has the vision you have around learning, who is working in an organization where perhaps they feel there's level of cultural resistance, that their culture inhibits, rather than promotes, the kind of approaches to learning, and learning just happening as work flows. A lot of learning professionals aspire to build cultures of learning to help their organization to really strive or be able to adapt to change through learning.

Michelle Ockers:

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What advice would you give to a learning leader in an organization, a learning professional, who is endeavouring to engage the executive team business leaders with building a learning organization, and sharing responsibility for learning? Where do they start?

Garry Ridge:

Number one, don't give up, because you're doing meaningful and worthwhile work. By building these platforms, and increasing the competency of the people, and actually the culture of the people around you, you will make a difference. There's no doubt about that. I get challenged with a question similar to that often, when they talk about, well why aren't there more servant leaders out there? Why is employee engagement low where it is? I think it goes back to that statement around ego, and the people thinking there's no value.

Garry Ridge:

The other side is, most executives, or most leaders are very short-term leaders as far as results are concerned. Building a learning culture, you can't get fairy dust and sprinkle it all over the organization. It takes time. It takes time, consistency. I think those sort of conversations with the leaders is, hey, if we're going to build a learning culture, don't expect this to be the immediate impact. You're going to have to give us time to do this. We've proved that. We've taken our employee engagement from those low numbers to 94 percent, or whatever it is. We've 10 times-ed the value of our company, from where it was to now 2.6 billion dollars.

Garry Ridge:

But it took us 23 years to do it, and we're still learning. Don't give up. Have the conversation around the fact that this is not Alka-Seltzer. You don't take it and you get your tummy upset fixed. This takes a journey to get there, and it's worthwhile work.

Michelle Ockers:

Certainly does. I think part of the challenge is, even before that, before you've got leaders engaged in the idea, before they're on board with building a learning culture, for some of them they just don't understand what's possible. There's not an awareness there. I think the social proof, stories such as your own, and being able to bring to our leaders, look at what WD-40 have done, and this is how they've created those amazing results, or the impact of Satya Nadella at Microsoft is another great example I like to share with people.

Garry Ridge:

Again, we're not that sexy product like Google. We're WD-40. If we can do it, selling oil in a can? No, what do we do? We create positive, lasting memories and learning is part of that.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. Is there anything I haven't asked you about today that you'd like to share, Garry?

Garry Ridge:

Only that I think that business leaders today have the biggest opportunity ever to make a difference in the world. We touch so many people every day, and it's our responsibility to create a place where people do go to work and go home happy. I think if we can make sure

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that our empathy eats our ego, instead of our ego eating our empathy, we can get comfortable with saying, "I'm probably wrong, and roughly right, and I don't know." That'll blossom a lot of curiosity, a lot of learning, take away fear, happy people. The world will be better.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you very much. For guests who would like to learn more, I will curate a whole raft of the resources you've talked about, Garry, as well as a link to your LinkedIn profile, if people would like to reach out to you. Is that the best way if people would like to reach out to you, to use LinkedIn?

Garry Ridge:

Sure. Yes, of course.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. Thank you so much. Thank you so much for sharing your insights, Garry, and for the beautiful role modelling you bring for people around the world, and that you so generously share in ways such as this.

Garry Ridge:

I'm grateful to be able to do that.

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:

- *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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