

Learning Uncut Episode 61
Damien Woods – Leading Learning Transformation
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Damien Woods, the GM of Learning at National Australia Bank, returns to Learning Uncut. My previous conversation with Damien, episode 38, was called 'Business Impact through Design Thinking.' It has the distinction of being the most downloaded Learning Uncut episode to date. That episode focussed on a specific initiative in the Direct Bank Call Centre.

One year on we look at the bigger picture of learning transformation at NAB over the past two and a half years. Damien discusses the importance of having a vision for learning in your organisation and, as a leader, gaining buy-in and building the capability of your L&D team. We discuss other key pillars of the NAB learning strategy including putting the learner in charge of their own learning, right content at the right time, technology enablement and the foundation of getting compliance right. The shifts that had been made since 2018 equipped the team to help the organisation quickly pivot and upskill people to move into areas of high demand at the start of the pandemic, as well as redesign learning for the online environment.

This is a very real conversation about the rewards, challenges and lessons learned from leading learning transformation in a large, complex organisation.

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome Damien. It's lovely to have you back on Learning Uncut.

Damien Woods:

Thanks for having me back Michelle. It's a pleasure to have another conversation with you.

Michelle Ockers:

It's always good to hear what you've been up to, and I know it's a busy, busy time of year with COVID and probably still working on some of the agenda around the royal commission from last year in the banking sector. So thanks for taking the time. I think we spoke about a year ago and you'd been in the role as GM of Learning at National Australia Bank for 18 months then I think. So coming up to two and a half years now, would that be right?

Damien Woods:

Yeah, that's almost to the day I think.

Michelle Ockers:

Well, happy anniversary.

Damien Woods:

Thank you. I had another anniversary on the weekend. I turned 50 on Saturday, which was an interesting thing to be doing in isolation, but it actually turned out to be a really fun weekend fortunately.

Michelle Ockers:

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Nice. When we last spoke back in episode 38, we focused on a very specific case study, a piece of work you'd done with your team in the direct call centre where you'd been out to the workplace, made some observations, noted that your starters were in the classroom for 17 days before starting to take customer calls. And you had a conversation with the business leader there and said, "Look, I think if you let us take a look at this, we can do something better and get a better result for the business." And of course you used the design thinking approach. And when we spoke, you'd put the first couple of 100 people through the new program. Attrition had dropped, I think to nil after several months at that point and time to competence had decreased.

So I'd like to touch on that story in a minute and just see what else has happened there. But I think the important point here is kind of it was ... It illustrated number of shifts you were going through with learning at the bank and with your team and so on. So it'd be great to explore some of those broader shifts that this was part of as well.

Damien Woods:

Yeah, absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

So we're six months into COVID. What is working life looked like for you Damien in the past six months with your team at NAB?

Damien Woods:

Looks like everyone, it has been remarkably different. It's been very challenging and I think for everyone in the team, their story is a little bit different. There are some consistent themes in there in that we are all working, doing things like we're doing right now, Michelle using technology to connect. But it's been impossible to completely decouple work and home for everyone in the team and work has changed remarkably, but [switched] to home and everyone's home environment is somewhat different. For me in particular, I have a wife who works full time as well. We have an eight and a five-year-old, and the first couple of weeks for me was at home with the two boys and my wife was still in at work with her business. And it was a real challenge. I tell a story, which I can chuckle a bit about now, but one of the things we did at NAB was to institute a weekly call for people leaders, which I co-hosted with our CHRO. And the first week of that, I had both boys at home, they were getting a bit ratty. It was the end of the day. So I put them on their iPads and locked myself in the bathroom, and we had two and a half thousand people leaders on a call. And the one key question I got at the end of that one was why was my camera off? So, I didn't want to explain-

Michelle Ockers:

Why is it echoey where you're at Damien?

Damien Woods:

I was locked in the bathroom, hoping the two boys wouldn't kill each other. And it was, at the time I found it was quite stressful because you just sort of thrust into this new world and you didn't have time to plan or prepare or to think about how am I going to do it. You just had to do. So, that was one really key thing. And look, the other thing which all L&D people will have had to confront in the last six months is one of our more significant tools or channels or delivery methods has been turned off. We cannot do classroom-based or bring people together face to face anymore, And so we've had to rapidly pivot and do things differently. And a lot of that has been keep the lights on type stuff. We have to get our people, our new starters versed in the technology, the products, the tools, and the systems and processes and do that really quickly, but do it in a virtual and digital environment. And it meant having

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to rapidly redesign a lot of things that were still classroom based. So the thing we talked about last time, Michelle, with the contact centre and taking a 17-day learning experience into a four day face-to-face one, but supported by many digital channels.

In a sense that was a prototype which we had to rapidly iterate on it and do with a lot of other things in a very quick-fire way. The other thing that's been interesting, we're a very large organization as you'd appreciate. We have about an [FTE] size of 34,000, so probably closer to 40,000 actual people. And what you've seen in a big company like ours is some workers literally dried up overnight. So a large recruitment function at one point had nothing to do because we just stopped recruiting. But our help centre, NAB Assist, experienced one year's worth of volume in one week. So we were just inundated with customers in all sorts of duress.

Michelle Ockers:

Let's lean into that example a little bit in terms of what did that mean for the L&D team and what was your role in supporting such a massive spike in one area of the business?

Damien Woods:

Yeah, well, it's interesting. It meant the acceleration of things that we've talked about for some time, but sort of only dipped our toes in. And that is we've been thinking for a while that one of our key success drivers in the L&D function is to upskill and reskill people where we can see work is going to be disappearing in the not too distant future, that we think people have got transferable skills.

So how do we prepare them to move from part A in the business to part B. What the pandemic has done is accelerate that significantly and basically say, well, you don't have three or five years to do that. You've got three or five days. And so our job was to try and move people with transferable skills in parts of the business where their work had significantly decreased and move them into parts of the business where the workload had significantly increased. And so we started, and it was a multidisciplinary approach. There are many different teams involved in doing this. Our part was when we're bringing people in, how do we rapidly upskill them and do that in a virtual environment. So get them to the point of proficiency so they can be helping our customers and helping them quickly and helping them well, not making mistakes. And we had to do that extremely quickly in a virtual environment. And if I think about one of the things I'm most proud of with our team is how well they were able to do that. They knew what to do. They did it really quickly, and they did it really well.

So the investment we've made in being more digitally savvy and being better at using technology and redesigning learning experiences where it made sense to be a digital first, whether that were a virtual classroom or building digital learning assets or using virtual communities of practice, I feel like we were sort of ready to be able to do this really quickly. But it's been a real challenge to help move people from one part of the business to the other, and to be dealing with customers.

Michelle Ockers:

Just walk me through what that looked like. So you had people coming in from all different parts of the business. In terms of understanding what the business need was and knowing you're getting people in, what's the stop point? What have you got to build from? So you

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would have done some sort of analysis, some sort of rapid design. What did that upfront piece look like, the analysis and design phase?

Damien Woods:

So there are a number of different elements there. Number one is we had learning designed for new starters in those parts in the business, regardless. So we weren't starting from a clean slate. We had content, it was largely classroom-based content. And so we had to think of, well, how do we take this and build it into a virtual experience. And of course, when you build classroom-based, you usually build it for a day or two days or three days, whatever the requirement might be. You can't deliver virtual classrooms and keep people there for a whole day. So we had to think of breaking it down into consumable virtual experiences, and usually about an hour and a half is we think enough for people before they need a break. And so I think you can do a couple of those sessions during a day, but you've got to give people time to practice and to get away from the screen for big parts of the day as well. And so the team started with the curriculum as it was designed and said, how might we redesign this into a virtual experience, knowing that we can't keep people for more than 90 minutes at a time?

We want to make it engaging and interactive. We know what tools we want to use, and so we were fortunate at NAB in that Zoom is something that we've had access to for a while. And we actually had spent quite a bit of time with our designers, as well as our, we call them learning delivery specialists. We used to call them facilitators and we stopped using that term for ... The purpose is broadening the thinking and saying, well, you're not just in a class to many more. We need you to be equally adept at doing this virtually, whether it's moderating or actually delivering, and we also want you to be good at other parts of the delivery continuum. So it was designing something that was interactive and engaging using Zoom, using breakout rooms, using the white board, and different functionality to make it an engaging experience and to rapidly design and deploy that. And the other thing we also have to do with the curriculum is get legal sign off because you can't make mistakes with a lot of what you're delivering, if particularly if you're dealing with customers in a banking environment. So it was redesigned, get the sign off and get moving really quickly, which we were able to do. And that was the story for many different learning journeys that we have, which had been previously face to face.

Michelle Ockers:

So one [fact] that you mentioned practice there, what does practice look like in this environment? Because of course, coaching in some sort of supervision early on as people are practicing or starting in a role is probably the norm in any of these roles. What does that look like in a virtual environment?

Damien Woods:

Sometimes we've built in peer to peer practice, and so you'll do a virtual session of about 90 minutes. And then you build activities where the learners actually partner up and they go and do some practice, peer to peer activity. And then at the end of the day, bring the learners back together. So, that's a tactic that we've employed.

The other thing is the coaching element, which has previously been face to face now has to be virtual, but we found that it's not an insurmountable challenge given that we're all working virtually now anyway. But the other thing is, from a practice point of view, building in little breakout rooms, using Zoom allows smaller groups to get together and have practical activities in that virtual classroom-based environment.

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So there's been a lot of that deliberate design into the virtual experiences now. And look, I think what it's shown us is as a delivery method, it works and it can work really well if you understand the tools that you have at your disposal, what functionality that the tools allow you, how you design for interactivity and for practical application in that environment. And you've got people who are adept at delivering that way. And for the whole team, some of them took to it really quickly because they were used to doing it. For others, it was a real stretch. We've talked ... One of the first conversations I had at NAB with the people who deliver our classroom base was I want you to broaden your skill set. And I want you to understand that in the next three to five years, you'll do less of your time in a classroom, and you'll do more of your time virtually. And I need you to get comfortable with that. And some people sort of took to it like a duck to water and others were a little bit more change resistant, but it was the perfect storm come March this year. You literally had no choice anymore. It was sink or swim. But I think that fortunately for most of our people, they were able to cope. And for many of them, they actually really thrive because they were ready for it.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So you've been working on developing your facilitation skills in the team for the online environment for some time. How long have you been working it and how were those skills developed?

Damien Woods:

We've been working on it since I started. In fact, one of the things that we did, which Michelle, you were part of this journey was we used the LPI capability assessment model across the function. And in the domain for delivery, there is face to face delivery and virtual delivery. And so we started by identifying where we thought our gaps were so that we could invest in building that capability.

So I think first and foremost, it was being honest with that population around. There's a change journey ahead of us, and we want to take you with us because we believe in building capability, that's what we do as a function. But making that message really clear from the start, backing that up with a framework like the LPI that assesses where we are today and identifies where our gaps are and then deliberately building capability. So putting people into formal learning journeys around how do you deliver virtual classrooms effectively? We built out the capability in the teams, particularly in the design space. So I deliberately brought people into the team who were good at building virtual classroom experiences who could also work on building the capability of the delivery specialists to deliver those classrooms. And we gave people chances to roll their sleeves up and do, whether that was in a support role as a producer or a moderator while someone else facilitated. Or hands on delivering, we've given people practical experience of that. Another really great example, I remember talking to the team afterwards, but we were doing a launch event earlier this year of a number of the digital content platforms we were launching. And it was planned as a face to face session in Sydney where we thought we would get a couple of hundred people from the business attending to learn about the platforms. And we got closer and closer to the event, the vendors started getting nervous about travel and the pandemic was starting to get speed. And we made the call to move from a face-to-face to a virtual session fairly close to the event. And we ended up getting instead of about 100, we got 500 people. So we maxed out how many we could deliver that experience to virtually. And we had the team in the background running that session. And one of the tools that we were going to use, Zooms chat functionality has been turned off and on several times in the last six months because of some security issues with it. And so at the very last minute, we had to use both Zoom and Microsoft Teams to run that event. So that we had the chat functionality on teams and we had the Zoom, the breakout rooms in Zoom, and I was watching sort of the team deliver

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that. And afterwards, I was sort of chatting with them and said, guys, you did a great job there. And they were absolutely exhausted because they had to do so much on the fly and they were just so nervous about, can we execute this and can we make it work? And they did, and they did a really brilliant job of it. They said, I never want to have to do that again afterwards. But I think given a couple of days breathing space, they realized actually they'd done a remarkably good job of it. And what I really loved was the problem-solving mindset. The session had been built, they required the chat functionality and it disappeared on them the night before they were running it. And so they really quickly pivoted, they realized they could use another piece of technology which we use at NAB and they made it work.

And that to me, if you look at it and you think about, well, we are fortunate we've got access to some technology that maybe other businesses don't have. But the problem-solving mindset of the team to say, we can still make this work, I was really proud of how they did that.

And we've done increasing delivery, supporting all sorts of other stuff for the business running these sort of sessions for them using the tools, because the team are actually really good at it now

Michelle Ockers:

It's almost like a rite of passage experience, right? And I think most of us at some point in the last six months, have had to do something that we didn't feel prepared for, that we felt was maybe a bit rushed, that we've just had to ride our sleeves up and figure out. And it's been this rapid shift in skills, in understanding of tools and exploration of possibilities, I think.

Damien Woods:

Yeah, I agree. Look, I think that's a really good point you make Michelle. We've all had to do things we're not comfortable with. We've had no choice, and I think that in the pre-pandemic world, it was easier to avoid things that made us uncomfortable. In that if you wanted to, you could be in your comfort zone and stay there. But I don't know that there's a person in the last six months who couldn't say I've been taken out of my comfort zone by something with work. And there are some people who have gone significantly outside their comfort zone to the point of thinking this is going to be a monumental disaster. But it's a reality that we've talked about for some time, but it's been a slow burn.

The last six months, it's been a fast burn that ... And that growth mindset and the ability to test and the confidence that even if it doesn't work perfectly, it's going to be okay because we'll get better at it next time. And I've seen a lot of that in how we've gone about what we've done in our function. We just haven't had the luxury of perfection. It's been about execution. It's been 80% [rights] enough for the first time and how do we get better next time.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, and that was something you spoke about when we last talked a year ago around the idea that it's not okay not to try. It's okay to not get something right, but it's not okay not to try something new and to try to get better at what you're doing, and giving people permission to experiment and how important that is.

Damien Woods:

Yeah. I think the other thing ... I mean, thinking about how we've supported the business as well, one of the first things, the other first things we did was we realized that whilst we're

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quite ... Well, we're getting very comfortable using some of these platforms that the business has rolled out.

For many of our colleagues they've never had to. And there was a great discomfort with, well, I have to now. And so we rapidly built sessions on how do you use Zoom, Teams, and OneDrive to work virtually. And we promoted those quite aggressively and we put thousands and thousands of NAB colleagues through sessions about how do you use these tools to work virtually? And I think in terms of delivering value for the business, I think that's been enormously valuable because for a lot of people, they literally haven't had to. Their job is to be to turn up in a branch or to turn up in a contact centre or turn up in a corporate office or a business bank, which is you haven't been able to do. And so you've had to use these tools and we've talked about disruption and the way technology is changing how we work. Because that so rapidly changed in the last six months, it's another way in which our people in the learning function have been able to support the business. How do you use the tools to work virtually? And they were really useful sessions. And one of our guys built those over the course of a day or a day and a half, and were delivering them the next day, and they got better and better and slicker and slicker in how they did it. But they literally supported thousands of people in the business who hadn't used the tools before to just to get ... Picked them up and be able to use them in a basic way and continue working. So that's been another really part of how we've created value for the business.

Michelle Ockers:

Yap, and of course, nobody was asking you to justify why should my people take the time out to do this? There was a clear and present need, right?

Damien Woods:

Yeah, absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

So Damien, your team was well positioned to make these kinds of changes and to help the organization adapt, partly because of work you'd been doing over a longer period of time around learning strategy and shifts that you were seeking to make in the team, in learning, in the business generally. What shifts have you been trying to make? What are those kind of at a high level, those key shifts that we talk about from and to, what was old world NAB from a learning perspective and new world NAB that you've been trying to progressively shift to, what was the contrast key differences between the way things used to be and the vision you've had and where you've been working with the team to move to?

Damien Woods:

Yeah. Look, we've talked a little bit about the capability that [inaudible] been fundamental. You want to be creating value in different ways, and therefore you need the team to work on different things and be good at different things. And so that's still a journey. I think there's still a way to go there, but with my big steps forward there.

Secondly in terms of what our world has been like previously and what we want it to be like going forward, a key tenet of our learning strategy is to put the individual or the learner in charge of their own learning. And that's quite a shift because we've done a lot of things historically where we've sort of continued the message that will tell you what to learn and when to learn and how to learn. And we'll do it, we'll take the driver's seat. And one of the

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things I've been very passionate about is saying, well I prefer us to be in the background, playing an enabling role and to put the learner and their leader in the driver's seat, but primarily to learn and say, well, you're on your own learning, don't wait for someone else to take the lead or to do it for you.

You need to do it yourself. And we've made inroads there, but I think there's still a journey for us to continue with. One of the things we've wanted to do is to move wherever possible from building and delivering our own and therefore having to maintain our own curriculum to licensing curriculum or licensing learning content, and primarily digital content from the markets. And again, we've looked at introducing a number of the bigger providers into NAB and we've been tracking adoption. So in our first year, we rolled out one of the bigger ones and it had 15,000 or so hours of learning completed using that platform. We're now tracking it at about eight to 9,000 hours a month across NAB. And what that shows you, I think, is if you provide high quality digital content, you continue to market and promote that via the business as well that there is a desire for people to learn that way. And we're seeing it continually trend upwards across the business, but there are still big parts of the business who aren't used to learning that way. And there's more support that we need to provide people to say, well, you don't need to be in a classroom to learn this. You can actually do a really good job of it yourself and let's provide you with something that you could consume on your phone or your desktop. You could do in transit or you could do little bits during the course of the day. And we're seeing that continue.

The earliest and biggest adopters are our tech and ops people. So people who have learnt that way and worked that way for a long time, when you put these things in front of them, they grab them and they run with them. And we can see the stuff that they're doing, and it's really aligned to that, the strategy in that part of the business.

We're building the right sort of capabilities, whether it be architecture or cloud on AWS or Google or Azure, then the data and analytics parts of the business. The tools that are more prevalent for those types of people today, we're getting really great uptake from all those parts of the business. And I was actually reading a really nice post on LinkedIn about a week ago of one of our technologists saying how he'd transformed his skillset in the last 12 months using the tools that we'd rolled out for that.

Michelle Ockers:

So Damien, in terms of content strategy then first, the first pillar was to make sure you're accessing high quality content licensing, high quality content. But even where you've got a part of the business like the tech and ops part of the business who are more naturally inclined, because you're just more familiar and used to learning in that way and comfortable in the digital space. There would have been additional work you had to do. Did you do a lot of curation? Or how did you set things up so that we've got a need to build capability and data analytics, or a need to build capability around the cloud? What did you do in addition to just having the content available?

Damien Woods:

Yeah, we were targeted so we did a number of things. One, taking ops actually got on the front foot themselves, and the head of that part of the business wanted to be the leading business when it comes to AWS certified engineers. And so they'd invested quite a bit themselves and they'd build out what they called a guild and one of the objectives of the guild to get AWS certified.

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And so it was a community of practice if you like. They met face to face or virtually. They had a virtual community of practice. What we did was that they invested entirely in classroom based. And we started with partnering with that, the group running the guild and saying let us help your people post the classroom, getting ready for their exam with this AWS exam prep stuff that is built by one of our, or two of our content providers, which is available to everyone and started to introduce that to them. And actually made a big difference, because there were struggling with the gap between the classroom-based learning and sitting the exam. And these courses were built specifically for exam refresher. So we put this in front of people when they had a specific need and it really helped it. Helped people pass that exam.

Secondly, one of the content providers, was quite a clever move, they sent me an email saying, did you know we have registered over two and a half thousand NAB email addresses of people purchasing single courses at X price. And let's talk to you about how you could leverage your scale and get a much better price with us, which we did. But then we also had a target audience immediately of people who liked that content and were using that content already, and we were able to go out to them and say, look, you now have access to the whole business catalogue free of charge. You don't need to buy unit by unit anymore. So we're able ... And that actually proved to be a very successful strategy.

Michelle Ockers:

That's seems to be great value add and a really good initiative from your content partner, right? To come to you with that kind of intelligence around what was happening in the business.

Damien Woods:

It was interesting insight and they sent it not just to me, but to the head of tech and ops as well and a couple of other leaders in the business. So it was self-serving to a degree because they wanted to get an enterprise agreement with us, but good on them because it actually, there was benefit for us as well. And it's proved to be highly successful.

The other really, and this is probably more indicative of a large company, the other thing that the role that we played was we took on the pain of onboarding and enterprise digital platform. And in a big company like ours, it's a bit of hard work to do that. There's all sorts of rigor around managing our data effectively and architecture questions and security questions, and all of that sort of the procurement onboarding negotiating the best deal.

And so we provided a service to the business who otherwise would have had to suffer that pain themselves. We did it for them, and we just said ... We just went back to them and said, well, you've got access to it now. And I think that actually was really helpful to the business so that we ... I mean, we're getting quite good at doing that because we've done it with a number.

Now we know how to do it most efficiently and that worked really well also. I think the other thing was to listen to the business because we've onboarded a couple specifically because the business wants to use them and they are comfortable with them, and they believe that the quality is high. And I think that's also a really important thing.

You really need the voice of the business because quite often they know what they like. And I think as a starting point, if it's a provider that they would to work with, you're going to get better adoption.

Michelle Ockers:



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What are your strategies been for adoption for areas that aren't naturally inclined to pick it up where you're not getting the uptake? What are you doing there?

Damien Woods:

I think curation and partnering with the business. So I think one function where we've done a good job of that is the finance function. They had a capability initiative that they started themselves. And in the background we worked with the capability model that they had built to curate against the capability model from the providers that we have on board. And again, that was really successful because it was a business led initiative, the business with a face of that. But we were able to help in the background with their capability model and say, here are all the things that you can utilize to help build these specific capabilities, and you see really great adoption there when you take that approach.

We've just done something similar for the people and culture function. My team built out a capability model. We did a lot of testing of that within the function and also within the business, the people that we are here to serve. Once we had the model signed off by our people leadership team, we then curated against a range of different content providers that we have.

Some of them more generic, some of them very specific for HR professionals. And again, we've seen adoption be really quite strong in that we've asked team leaders to build out their learning as team-based learning. And so they choose as a team, a particular capability that they would like to build, and they build that together. And so that's happening from the people leadership team down all throughout the people and culture function. At the people leadership team, they look ... They focused on agile ways of working and so we've curated some great assets around how you build that capability, if within our team in particular it's around strategic partnership. And again, we've got some great stuff there and each team has a slightly different focus, but they've then got a catalogue of what they've got available to help build those capabilities.

Michelle Ockers:

So that was in the P and C area, the people in culture area where you're getting the team leaders to build out capability. Have you faced resistance from any parts of the business around your role and the sense of the shared responsibility or the business taking the initiative, and L&D kind of being more in a background role? Has that been a challenge anywhere in the business? And if so, have you addressed that?

Damien Woods:

Yeah, it's a great question Michelle. It is a challenge and it's one of those ones that will never really disappear. I think trying to be really clear about what you can do and what your resource to do, and then what you hope the business can do for themselves, is always a juggle.

One of the most common challenging conversations as an L&D professional you have with business leaders is there is so much, how do we focus on the really important stuff. And in a bank in particular there is a lot that is compliance in nature, and there's a lot more that continues to come in that's compliance in nature. And if you're juggling, if you're a business

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leader and you're juggling what do I want to invest our time in, you're really looking at stuff that's going to help your people do a better job for your customer. And so, one of the most challenging things is how to create space for learning that's really going to have an impact on how we deliver to customer. And it's, you're almost stuck between a rock and a hard place, because it's, in fact, not the learning function who decide what needs to be done from a compliance perspective. There are all types of other SME's across the business who are across the regulations that we're required to respond to where learning is required, and we help enable that. But it's certainly a shared responsibility between ourselves and the business. It's not something that we can pick up and deliver entirely on behalf of the business. And that's a tension that you always have. You've got to try and do this collaboratively with the business and what I think a lot of the time they would like to do is say, here's a problem we've got, can we give this to you and can you solve it for us? And that requires people within our function who are good at managing those tricky conversations and taking our business leaders on a journey around what's feasible and what's reasonable to expect from your learning function. And if you're a big business, you've probably got people in the centre like we [do], and people embedded in the business. And that sort of demarcation about who's going to do what, and that's a constant evolution as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep. So how do you measure the performance of your team? How do you know if your team's doing its job?

Damien Woods:

That's another great question. I think you've got to have the voice of the business in there. And how you gather that, there are a number of different ways. I mean, we have ... We do regular engagement surveys now. We used to do an annual one. Now we do them regularly, so we've moved from that once a point in time to at least probably about once a month in various iterations. So we get the voice of the business through there. So questions like, I feel like my learning and development is supported by NAB and you get very clear feedback in there and in fact, we get some input into the way we can structure those questions. So I think the voice of the business comes through there.

I think the other thing which is a little less tangible is how frequently the business come to you to ask for help with business problems that they think learning can help address. And if you're not getting those requests, then you're not creating value.

So that partnership with the business, and then also in how we're organized, how we partner with the HR business partnering world, whose job it is to support the business with the whole end to end HR continuum of which learning is but one of them, but we should be getting significant interaction with that group of people to help come in and solve business problems as well. And then I think you can take an initiative-based view on how well you're doing whether it's the call centre program that we talked about at the start of the call and in the last podcast. And you can measure very specifically what you're trying to shift there or what business impact you're trying to deliver and get business metrics to look at those. I think that means they differ initiative by initiative. And I think if you're fortunate enough to have very specific things you're trying to solve for and you've got business metrics that help demonstrate that, then I think you can show what value you're creating much more specifically.

Michelle Ockers:

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And that might be a good time to circle back to the direct bank call centre and the program for the new starters. What happens specifically with that program in terms of impact and any sort of how did it evolve at the time both pre-COVID and during COVID I guess?

Damien Woods:

Yeah, well look, I think number one was we sold that initial project with, I think we can do this better and I think we can get your people proficient faster if we do this differently. And we had a business leader who said, great straightaway, I'm up for it. I think the business metrics that we were tracking there such as average call handling times and handoffs, and escalations all demonstrated that the new approach actually had a direct impact on improving those business metrics. The interesting thing with that part of the business, that project took us months, by the way, to go from the design thinking to the complete rebuild to the piloting, and the rollout of [BIU] new model, because it's a high volume program. That was step one in the five-step program for that part of the business. And so when those contact centre bankers start, they learn the basic products and customer interactions first, then they progressively get more complicated products and customer issues to deal with. And there are five tiers that they move through, they call it their five-star model. And so we dealt with step one in that first project, and there are four other steps that need ... That sort of TLC around redesign. And fortunately, we are progressing our way through all of those because we've demonstrated that it actually works and it can help the business.

The flip side of that also is the capacity it frees up within our own team, because if you've got people facilitating for seven days who then only have to do it for four days, you've got capacity there for other stuff. And so there's a benefit there which we can redirect to other work. But there are ... That's one of our contact centres we've got, that's for our consumer or retail part of the bank.

We have contact centre for business and small business as well. And so the opportunities to modernize our approaches are somewhat endless because there's a lot to do and finite capacity, but we're working our way through all of that.

Michelle Ockers:

Yap. So when you look back at the sweep of the last two and a half years, what things do you think have worked particularly well on this kind of ongoing process of transformation?

Damien Woods:

Yeah. Look, I think one of the things that was fundamental was to articulate a strategy, who do you want to be as a function? And how do you want to support the business? And how do you want to create value? And to have a collective sense of ownership of that within the learning function.

So starting with that really clearly articulated message here's who we are, here's how we help the business solve their problems, here's how we're going to create value. And therefore here's what we've got to get good at, that was really critical. I think if you don't have that vision for people that they can subscribe to and say, I get why I'm here and I get what I've got to be good at, and I can see that there are things that I'm interested in here that I might actually want to move to as well.

That there's a career for me as a learning professional and I'm actually excited by that. I think that's a really important first step, when the hearts and minds of your own people are about the change journey, make sure they're very clear about how they support the

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business. And I think the other thing I've spent a lot of time on as we've done things differently and we've tried new things is to repeat the messages back to the team about, we said we'd be different.

We said we would work on different things and have different capabilities. Let's just remind ourselves when we've done good work that we set about deliberately to do this. And I think just continually reminding people of those successes. I think the other thing I've spent time to do is not just to remind the team of that, but also to show that to the business and the people in culture function as well. And where there have been opportunities to say, we set about doing something a bit differently and here's what we saw, whether it worked perfectly or we know we had to learn and iterate a little bit, but you've got to shine a light on that sort of stuff. And I think that's also been very, very important. And people when they try something different and it succeeds, they've got a real sense of pride. And if you can help raise that up to the higher levels within the business and you've seen your people saying that and commenting on that, and I actually got to the point of asking very senior people and sometimes the CHRO, could you send this person an email and say, well done? That matters to people. It really matters to people. And I think as a leader it's an important thing to do, make sure your people see that you're noticing what a good job they're doing, but get other people involved in that as well, because it really makes a difference. And, and also the business leaders, you're here to serve, you're here to help the business deliver on their strategy and deliver to customers.

If you do something that works, get the business leaders to come back to the team and thank them for it as well. We are lucky most of our business leaders will do that regardless, but occasionally it might just mean a quick nudge and say, look, could you send an email to these people? And I think that positive reaffirmation of doing things differently and creating value and getting ... Doing a job really well, I think that really matters to people.

Michelle Ockers:

I think it can work really well in the opposite direction as well if you're learning team notices people stepping up to the plate, like leaders doing a great job developing their people, creating opportunities or individuals who've taken on accountability for their own learning to point that out to their leaders so that they can pay attention to that and let people know that they've noticed. That's something I've done a lot in the past to help with that shift.

Damien Woods:

Yeah, I agree completely Michelle. I love that idea. I just think people love a pat on the back and it doesn't cost you anything to do it, and it can have a really profound impact.

Michelle Ockers:

And if you're trying to do something different, if you're asking people to learn in a different way to be more self-directed, to be more resourceful, there can be a little bit of concern around, is it okay for me to be spending time on doing this? Like the guild's, right? Is it okay for me to spend time in a community practice to helping other people out when I've got work to do? If a manager taps you on the shoulder and says, I noticed you helping someone else and sharing your knowledge, that's fantastic, well done. It tells them it's okay.

Damien Woods:

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Oh, absolutely. And that is a big challenge when it comes to putting people in charge of their learning. Learning is a legitimate activity at work. Learning is work, learning should be work. And in fact one of our most senior people, one of our executive general managers made that point in a steering committee that I was in recently, that we've got to make sure that people understand learning and work are the same thing. And that it's okay to be spending time learning at work, which was a really encouraging thing to hear a senior leader say. And so I think that's part of the challenge as well, legitimizing spending time on your own development is a legitimate activity at work.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. What's the most significant challenge you've had to grapple with or maybe still grappling with in making the changes you've talked about?

Damien Woods:

Look, I still think there's a lot of work to do in shifting that culture that from learning is something that someone else will drive to learning is something that I'm in charge of, so that putting the learner at the centre. And I still think we've got a lot of work to do around our leaders. It's not that they don't want to invest in their people, it's they probably need more help in how do they do that. And I think our job is to provide them more help, whether it's tool kits or whether it's shifts, how we manage the development planning cycle, we need to support our leaders better to be better developers of their people. So I think those are two frontiers. And if I think about what we've been trying to do and the journey we've been on, it's absolutely a change journey. We're looking for change of behaviour in our people. We're looking for change of behaviour in our leaders, and that doesn't happen fast. You've got to set the course and stay the journey on that sort of stuff, and know that you're not going to get it right straightaway or overnight. And I think that those two areas where we need to spend more time in the years ahead.

Michelle Ockers:

And when you reflect on how you yourself have grown in the past couple of years and the things that you can do you feel you're better at getting done or can do now compared to two years ago, say, which is what learning, real learning is all about at the end of the day, right? What do you think are the key things that, key areas you've grown in, the key things you can now do better or more confident in doing as a result of this body of work that you've been leading?

Damien Woods:

Yeah. Look, I think in a role like mine, you've got to be able to influence across the senior echelons in the enterprise to really see change. And for me, that's been probably the greatest stretch in my journey, but also an area where I feel like I've really grown. I feel that what I've noticed is the enterprise is dying for your help, and you've got to lean into that. And if you have ways, logical ways of helping the business, you're going to find senior leaders who are very welcoming. And I think that that's been a journey for me, but I feel like in the last two and a half years I've made real inroads into how a senior learning leader can influence senior business leaders. But it's certainly an area which I want to spend more time on personally because I feel as much as you've got a lot to do to impact the function that you're managing, you've got a bigger job to influence the business that you're there to support. And that means working with very senior leaders in the enterprise to help the change agenda that you're trying to drive.

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Michelle Ockers:

So any final words of advice for learning leaders in other organizations of any size who are just maybe in the early stages of engaging with modernizing or transforming their approach to learning their organization, what would you say to say them?

Damien Woods:

I'd say go about it with a passion, be prepared to put yourself out there, be prepared to be an influencer in your organization no matter how large it is and think about the ways that you can do that. Be known as that person who is driving, who is passionate about L&D. If you're the leader of learning in your business and people don't see that you're really passionate about it, I think there's a real problem there. So be a shining light for who the function wants to be and how they want to go about supporting the business and be known as that, and spend time to make sure that your name is a name that people think of when they think I need some help with learning. And that's going to be uncomfortable for some people, but I think you've got to put yourself out there.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, great. Anything we haven't talked about that you would really like to leave us with Damien?

Damien Woods:

No, I don't think so Michelle, but let's let's keep some of that powder dry for the next conversation down the track.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, all right. Well, we'll see you back here in a year's time Damien.

Damien Woods:

I hope so.

Michelle Ockers:

And I do hope for the listeners, and I watch ... We post everything on LinkedIn. We use the hashtag Learning Uncut. I've watched the commentary. I feel sometimes that some of the listeners could be asking more. I know that you're very active on LinkedIn as are many of our guests, and we'd be very happy to have a conversation with people about their insights or if they've gotten their questions. So I just really encourage people who are listening to these episodes from all around the world to look out for those posts on LinkedIn with that hashtag Learning Uncut about the different episodes and to ask people like Damien. I don't have all the questions. We've only got an hour at maximum, really to talk. So if people have questions, comments please look out for those posts and ask your questions or reach out directly to Damien on LinkedIn

Damien Woods:

Yeah, great advice Michelle. Yeah, I love LinkedIn. I love connecting with like-minded people and I love having a conversation with people. That way I find it so fulfilling, so more than happy to do that.

Michelle Ockers:

And if there's ever a time to engage with our professional colleagues around the world, it's during a period such as now when we're all having to adapt quickly and figure out how to do our best work. So thank you so much for your generosity in sharing today Damien.

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Damien Woods:

Always a pleasure Michelle.

Michelle Ockers:

I really enjoyed this conversation with Damien Woods, and as he mentioned I did do some work early in his learning transformation program with capability assessment and capability building for his learning and development team. If you're curious about this work you can use the link in the show notes to head over to my website and take a look at the options on the Learning Team Capability page to look at how I use the contemporary capability framework from the Learning and Performance Institute to take a really strategic view of the skills that are needed in your learning and development team and work with you to look at what your current skill set is and where the most important shifts might be for you to really transform learning and have a higher impact in your business. So if that is something that you think would be useful for you, please go over and have a look. There's a number of options and ways that I can work with you on building the capability of your learning team as part of transforming learning in your organisation.



ReThink Learning – A Message from Michelle Ockers

I created Rethink Learning to help learning teams and learning professionals with this challenge. The barriers to learning innovation are lower than ever. Now is the time to engage business stakeholders, embed good design practices, work in agile ways and use technology more effectively.

ReThink Learning will accelerate the shift in mindset, skills, practices and tools you need to quickly design and develop effective learning solutions for the virtual environment. You can apply it to your work immediately to redesign of an existing solution or design a new solution as you learn.

For more information on ReThink Learning check out <https://bit.ly/ReThinkLearning>.

About Michelle Ockers



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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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