

Learning Uncut Episode 63
Sunder Ramachandran – Game Mechanics for Learning in Lockdown
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Sunder Ramachandran is the Head of Selling Excellence for India at GSK, a global healthcare company. His team supports the development of sales and marketing capability in India. We discuss how his team sustained employee engagement during lockdown, as well as building sales capability and enabling leaders to adapt to the online environment.

Sunder describes the people who work in sales at GSK as thriving on the energy of being in front of their customers and closing deals. The pandemic lockdown took that away from them. At the same time the business needed to completely recalibrate how they went to market and approached sales. In this episode Sunder describes how his team addressed the priorities of employee wellbeing and business continuity in this environment.

They had invested in their learning technology architecture so were well-positioned to support learning in the digital environment. Even so, they needed to make a shift from digital as a bolt-on to digital first. Their approach evolved as the business environment shifted and lockdown extended to ensure that they kept employees engaged with learning and supported rapid reskilling, as well as being ready for the eventual easing of restrictions. While not the only design approach used, this is an excellent example of how game mechanics can effectively engage people and build collaboration and teamwork - so long as it is linked to meaningful activities.

We also discuss how the learning team supported and collaborated with managers and leaders to figure out how to effectively lead and communicate online - from motivational sales meetings to one-one-one coaching.

This is a success story from COVID era that illustrates the value of investing in the mindset, skill set and toolset of your Learning and Development team.

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to Learning Uncut Sunder.

Sunder Ramachandran:

Thank you, Michelle. Thanks for having me.

Michelle Ockers:

I was really thrilled when you responded to my call on LinkedIn for good stories. We have known each other for about five years, and I've followed some of your work at conferences and on webinars and so on, so it's great to be able to bring a story to the listeners. So Sunder, can you introduce us to the organization you work for, GSK, and tell us a little bit about what the organization does, and who for?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Absolutely. I work for GSK, which is a large global healthcare company, Michelle, and with a very unique purpose of helping people do more, feel better, and live longer. I'm based in India. India is one of the key markets for GSK globally, and in my role I head up what we call sales and marketing excellence. It is essentially the commercial capability function, and we've got close to 4,000 employees in India, so that's really my role at GSK.

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And tell us a little about your team, Sunder.

Sunder Ramachandran:

So you know, I have a team of 20 colleagues who I work with. These are people who bring in a lot of experience and expertise in sales and marketing roles, and then obviously at some point in their career they decided to make the transition into a learning role. So a lot of business and commercial experience within the team, and then of course we do have people with very specific learning expertise. It's really a good blend of commercial acumen and people who are deep experts in various aspects of learning.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, those mixed teams seem to work quite well where you've got people who have a deep understanding of the business, as well as those who have the Learning and Development expertise as a background in bringing those two skill sets and levels of understanding together. It does seem to work well.

Sunder Ramachandran:

Absolutely. I think in all we sort of feed off each other, right? I mean, you fill the gaps for each other but also overall as a team, you show up as a significantly better business partner, so that's important.

Michelle Ockers:

It is. And today we're going to be talking about a challenge that you've faced during the COVID period in 2020, so I think it's relevant to set some context in terms of just understand what life in India has looked like this year. So can you paint us a picture of life in India in 2020?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Of course. I mean, not very different from what other parts of the world have gone through, but we went into a nationwide lockdown sometime in the middle of March. We stayed with that for close to a three-month period, and then over the last couple of months things have started to open up. It's the classic balance that every government across the world is trying to manage between health and economics, and really that's the conundrum we are at as well. So large parts of the economy are starting to open up, but I think the initial period was uncertain, was stressful, was tough, just like for most other people across the world.

Sunder Ramachandran:

Because it was so difficult to do any sort of short-term, mid-term planning. I mean, we're not even talking long-term, but it was really taking it on a day-to-day basis, acting based on the information that's available on a particular day. So I think that is quite stressful, both from an employee experience point of view but also from a business point of view. So, but again I'm hoping that things are getting better, at least in terms of the economy is opening up slowly. Until we have a more sustainable solution, we've got all the guardrails in place to sort of live with COVID if you will, right?

Michelle Ockers:

What has working life looked like for your sales and marketing team, and how different has that been to their normal day-to-day experience?

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Well, I think it's fair to say that it's transformed 360 degrees, significantly, right? I mean, these are colleagues who thrive on being out there in the market. I mean, each of them is like a mini-entrepreneur if you will, because they are the CEO of the territory in which they operate, right? They don't work from offices. It's a customer-facing role, and then when we went into lockdown, I mean all of that changed. Now you had 3,000-plus employees working out of home, not something that they signed up for. If you really think about the value proposition, I mean most people that come into sales, because they just thrive on the energy they get being in front of people, persuading them, closing the deals. And then suddenly the environment took that away from them, right?

Sunder Ramachandran:

So it's quite difficult. That's on the employee experience and the value proposition side of things, but also as a business it had a significant impact. Because we are meeting customers face to face, and therefore we had to particularly change the channels, right? I mean, how do you engage customers? How do you influence customers? And all of that required a complete recalibration, not just from a capability point of view but also in terms of how we can go to market. So yeah, quite a dramatic change, actually.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So as the learning and development team, when the lockdown started and there was this big shift for your sales team, what needs or challenges did that present that you felt you were in a position to help them with?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, I think as a business, I mean just like most large businesses, we had set out some very clear operating principles, Michelle. Those are clearly around employee safety and well-being, the number one priority, having business continuity being the second priority. And of course, all of this in the context of being socially responsible both at an organizational level as well as at an individual level. And then specific to the work that my team and I do, we really sort of doubled down on two of those buckets, which is employee safety and well-being, and how do you drive well-being and safety from the point of view of enablement, engagement, motivation and education, right?

Sunder Ramachandran:

And then from a business continuity point of view, how do you really step up your colleagues to embrace the new channels of engagement with customers? Because at the end of the day, you can't not engage with customers even if it's a lockdown. So, how do you step up customer engagement? What new capabilities? What new platforms do you need to think of? So, those are the areas really in terms of education, engagement and motivation being one, and how do you step up capabilities for newer channels of customer engagement? Those are the areas that we really doubled down on as a team.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, and did you find a way to tackle both challenges at once, or did you tackle them as separate challenges? What did that look like?

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Well, I think we looked at it as an integrated. I mean, it's not one after the other. The way we sort of really looked at solutions and design over the lockdown period were things that sort of, one leads to the other sort of a philosophy. So really, anything that we were doing from an education engagement standpoint had a proxy of customer engagement skills built into it. Anything that we were doing on the enablement standpoint had a proxy of what the new normal is going to look like three months down the line. So clearly, I think that we were thoughtful about, what is work going to look like as things start to open up? And how can we, in a very subtle way, start building those capabilities up when we have the time? Which we did during the lockdown, so ...

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So talk to us about what you did. How did you shape the solution? What did that solution look like, and why did you decide on this specific design and the choices that you made?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Yeah. I think we started where most other companies did, right? Which is when the lockdown hit us, and this was literally, we had like a couple of days' notice in India, we went to, what was the easiest thing to do? Which is up the ante on self-learning, right? So for about a week, literally all employees were, as I like to call it, drinking from a hosepipe, right?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Sunder Ramachandran:

It was sort of a productivity contest, and it was really about who can do the most number of courses on LinkedIn learning or Coursera, or any of our other internal content repositories. But I think just a few days into that we recognized that, "Hey, this is okay, but if you're going to be in this for the next few weeks," which is what all indications were telling us the case was going to be, "You've got to move beyond it." And I think that's the point where we came together as a team and really thought about, what are our immediate priorities and what are our short-term priorities? So literally, those are the two buckets we've been going after.

Sunder Ramachandran:

And the immediate priority was, how do you replicate the employee experience and the value proposition that a colleague in sales is used to, right? Which is, having a comparative mindset, working with people, getting the sense of victory on a quarterly, on a monthly basis. How do you replicate that? So that's the first challenge. And then in the short term, how do you enable them with new skills that are going to help them leverage the new channels of engagement that were already starting to emerge, right?

Sunder Ramachandran:

So these are the two things that we looked at, and then within the first bucket, which is around enablement and education, we moved away from just consuming content without much thought, to really more gamified virtual tournaments with pit stops built into it. Each pit stop is delivering a very specific business objective. So as an example, we actually took stock of our entire learning ecosystem. And at GSK, I have to say it's a fairly mature and sophisticated ecosystem of learning experience platforms, best-in-class content, in-house as well as what's available in the market, but also mobile applications that give us access and reach.

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And then we were able to actually marry all of that with our communication platforms, like our internal social network, and run virtual tournaments. So we had business units competing with each other, and really scoring points by performing tasks and activities that were meaningful not just in the immediate term of staying engaged and staying competitive, but in the short term of building up new capabilities, and that's really the approach. I think what's interesting is, we had to keep revisiting this every two weeks. Because every two weeks, we were getting new information and nobody really knew that we were in this for the long haul, right?

Sunder Ramachandran:

So we were literally planning for a week and saying, "Hey, what's next?" So something that started as a gamified virtual tournament, very quickly moved into creating a virtual coaching clinic because we realized in the short term, people have to get used to being coached virtually, and delivering coaching virtually as well if you're a manager. So, and then that transitioned into, how are you going to ... What is going to be the new normal in terms of how we operate? So that moved into a lot of enablement and capability-building on new channels of engagement. So digital presentations, digital calling; how do you discover? How do you scope a client online? How do you present online? How do you close the deal? How do you move on? All of that, right? So that's how we get shifting.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, so you kept adjusting and evolving. Talk to us about how you design a gamified virtual tournament. First of all, in this context, what do you mean by gamification? And, how did you go about designing this tournament?

Sunder Ramachandran:

No, that's a good question and I think obviously we do confuse game mechanics and gamification quite a lot. So what I wanted specifically was to leverage game mechanics, not so much a gamified learning experience, but essentially stitching together learning experience with robust game mechanics to bring in the element of competitiveness. How did we do that? We essentially used our enterprise social network to anchor this entire event. Because if you really look at game mechanics, I think the key aspect of game mechanics is visibility and competitiveness. It's important for you to know that you're doing well, but it's important for you to know that others know that you're doing well as well.

Sunder Ramachandran:

And in an organizational context, the enterprise social provides you very good scaffolding to facilitate that, right? And that's really what we did. We said, "We're going to anchor around the enterprise social, double down, use that as a big tool of learning," right? And then, use all of the other integrated systems that we have and create interesting pit stops. Just to give you a very specific example, what did a week look like for an average sales colleague? So, you were expected to do about five or six different activities through the course of the week, right? Apart from all the other business demands that were there. I mean of course, it wasn't that people were only doing learning during this time.

Sunder Ramachandran:

So these activities were literally of the form of going and consuming a piece of content which is relevant to let's say something we're driving in that particular week, and you gain a few points for that. It could be if you're a manager, leading a group coaching session online and then that gets recorded on the system because it's integrated. If you're a sales rep, making a

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presentation or doing a teach-back to your peer group about what you've sort of picked up. It could be doing a video simulation. We've got mobile applications where people could do elevator pitches and video simulations and get some both AI-based level one feedback from the system, but also get some feedback from the managers.

Sunder Ramachandran:

So literally, a range of activities, a range of learning and performance activities, each tied in into a point table. And then obviously we're dashboarding it on literally a daily basis, so there's momentum and drive not just for completion, but also to do well. And all of this being made visible using the enterprise social, sort of the organization's really sort of rallying around this initiative and everyone's cheering everyone along. Again, you're trying to replicate the experience that a sales job would provide by default. But then, and then in the environment we were in we felt this was a great proxy for what an employee is used to.

Michelle Ockers:

I have seen you talk about other things you've done in a sales environment in the past, and it strikes me that the nature of salespeople and the way they're incentivized really lends itself well to things like gamification, and when they are on the road, use of mobile delivery and so on. So I can see how the solution really fits extremely well with your understanding of who these people are and what drives them. When you're talking about these game mechanics, you did talk a little bit about team as well as individual. How do you get that balance right, and what does that give you from a learning perspective where you're looking at the team as well as at the individual?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Yeah, I think depending on the industry you're in, I mean in the business we are in and just the way we operate, I mean sales you would think is very individual. But in our context, it's actually a team sport, right?

Michelle Ockers:

Right.

Sunder Ramachandran:

So you feel best when you win, but your business unit also wins, right? So, and we essentially leveraged that, right? So we said, "There is an inherent desire in people not just to sort of do well themselves, but also to make sure that you're actually part of a winning team." And therefore what that meant was, we had actually events built in where if you had a head start and you had sort of completed all your activities early, you could actually go chip in and help a colleague, right? Because as a team, then you end up scoring better.

Sunder Ramachandran:

Because while you want to be on the top of the league table as an individual sales colleague, you also want to make sure that your business unit, because it's competing with various other ... We've got eight business units. They're all going against each other in this virtual tournament, if you will. You want to make sure that your business unit is emerging as a winner as well. And again, if you sort of really peel it down to what we were trying to do, the underlying behaviours you're trying to drive, it is that spirit of competitiveness. It is that spirit of collaboration and doing what you can, all hands on the table, to make your team win, which is what you would expect even in the commercial environment.

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So, how do you replicate that? And again, it's a great opportunity to surface some of these behaviours, and at the same time surface the challenges which may actually create handicaps in these behaviours getting embedded. And I think it also gave us a lot of reflection and learning on, what does it look like when it's not done well? And I think we now know a lot more about, how do we handle these cultural and behavioural levers, courtesy of COVID, if you will?

Michelle Ockers:

So what data were you able to look at, and how did you use that? What sort of decisions did you make using the data that was being generated through the gamified tournament? Because I imagine there would have been potentially quite a lot of data you could have worked with here.

Sunder Ramachandran:

Oh you know, we were truly looking at it on a day-to-day basis, and then of course we were reporting on a biweekly basis, reporting both using organizational platforms, like I said the social network, but also the leadership. Number one, we were looking at the fairly standard engagement data. Because again like I said, one of the clear or immediate objectives were, how do you create meaningful enablement and engagement in the immediate and the here and now? So we were looking at, are people really engaged? Are people doing what we're asking them to do?

Sunder Ramachandran:

We were also looking at though, the willingness and the velocity with which people were sharing, because that's a good marker of engagement. It's not just about consumption. It's about you being willing to tell your story, right? And you being willing to nudge others along. And we were looking specifically for that, and encouraging that behaviour. The other data that we were looking at was, what sort of activities are sort of getting more traction versus the others? So as an example, it became very clear to us in just a couple of weeks that digital activities that actually involved people coming together using tools like the ones that we are using today, actually drive a lot more enablement and engagement, versus digital activities that you can do using your own personal device or by yourself.

Sunder Ramachandran:

And therefore, we obviously shifted our efforts and attention towards creating more collaborative digital activities. In the latter part of our journey, when obviously even the gamified journey had a certain shelf life, you couldn't just keep joining a virtual tournament forever. And then when we had to make a transition, we made a transition into things like virtual board games, right? Virtual board games, just like the way we play online games, built around specific capabilities like collaboration, teamwork, influence, persuasion. And these are bringing people together, people who are playing off against each other in a virtual environment, but at the same time obviously building skill sets, mindsets, capability. I think that's the direction, that's how the data informed us and that led to us moving into newer forms of enablement as the lockdown kept sort of getting extended.

Michelle Ockers:

One of the big things that's coming up at the moment for me in conversations, and looking at some of the research that's been published, is the idea that people need contact over content, that there's plenty of content out there right now, but what people are really craving is contact with others as part of the whole learning experience. What you described there just really makes that neat, or slots into that very nicely, I think.

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Sunder Ramachandran:

I think content has room, of course. But like you said, I mean it's all in the mix. Just like in marketing, you learn the marketing mix, content is one ingredient in the overall learning mix, right? There could be times, and this is how we thought about it, Michelle. There are times when content clearly was the anchor piece, right? I mean, you had this excellent piece of content and you've got to anchor everything around that. And then there were times where an event is an anchor piece, and the content is just on the urgency, right? So it really depends on what you're trying to drive, kind of who your target audience is, and what's the business problem you're trying to solve?

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And where the specific business skills that you built or aimed to build during the tournament? Or was the tournament more about engagement and keeping people ... Looking after their well-being and their sense of connection?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, both. To begin with, like I said, we had two objectives. We had an immediate bucket which was, "What do I need to do today?" And then we had a in terms of, "How is all this activity that I'm generating sort of really helping me for the unlock?" Which we knew would happen sometime, in a few weeks or a couple of months, right? So we were doing both. Specifically on the business side of things, we were looking at three broad buckets of skill sets. Number one, we were looking at really helping people understand what multichannel engagement looks like. That's number one, which is how do you really scope out a customer journey across multiple channels? Which companies in the FMCG business are very good at, right? How do you look at the digital footprints for your customers, discover information, bring that and tie that into your conversation, into your sales conversation, when you actually get to meet them digitally or face-to-face, as an example?

Sunder Ramachandran:

So that's a skill set. We call it the ability to leverage multichannel engagement. That's one piece. The other piece is just digital body language, and easier to understand, difficult to teach. But we really sort of doubled down on, what are the principles of presenting digitally, right? And this isn't just ad hoc about you just putting a headset and speaking to a customer. I mean, there's so much of the significant amount of pre-work that needs to go in. There's a significant amount of thoughtfulness that you need to put in in terms of how you construct the conversation, and then what do you choose to do after the conversation? So I mean, it's a process and if people haven't done this before, it's quite naive to expect that. This is not intuitive, so we actually put a lot of effort in helping people understand and get their heads around this.

Sunder Ramachandran:

And the third piece is really scenario planning, right? What COVID has taught us is, no matter what function you're in, no matter what business you're in, do you have your plan A, plan B and plan C, right? So for example, as I'm now building my 2021 learning strategy, already we're thinking about plan B and plan C, right? What happens if we go into another lockdown? What happens if something else comes through, right? So you've got to be prepared. You don't want to be ... I mean, as much as possible you don't want to be taken by surprise. Although it's tough to say in the times we're living, but even if you are, at least you feel confident that you thought through this and you know you're ready.

Michelle Ockers:

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So what shifts, if any, did you need to make to your learning strategy in order to be able to respond effectively when COVID hit?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, I think the biggest shift was in thinking, right? Moving away from digital as a bolt-on, to digital first. If you think about it, I mean even progressive companies like us, in the past we've always thought of digital as something that you build on top of a face-to-face experience, to call it blended, or just to say that you've augmented the experience. And then you build a journey where your core competence are some form of face-to-face or instructor-led, and then there's some digital sort of peppered around the whole journey, right?

Sunder Ramachandran:

How do you change that to actually designing and delivering experiences completely online? So you're creating an experience for the medium where it's going to get consumed. So it's a completely different skill set, both from a sensibility and a design standpoint, but also in terms of how you need to deliver. What does governance look like? How do you track? All of that. So I think today when you're creating a learning strategy or any sort of ... When you're responding to a business problem, we're now thinking, "Hey. This has got to be digital first," right? So we're not even thinking about face-to-face or those sort of interactions, and I think that's been a big, big change.

Michelle Ockers:

And did your team's skill sets need to shift or develop at all to accommodate the digital-first approach?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, I think we were lucky, or we were thoughtful about this, and obviously nobody saw COVID coming.

Michelle Ockers:

That's not luck, Sunder. That's good planning and foresight, right?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Yeah. I think we've made investments in this area over the last several years. So one of the things I've been working on with my team is to just make sure that they get the best exposure possible. So we've done work with Jane Hart, globally known for her work in modern workplace learning. We've done work with Jo Cook in the past, globally known for work on virtual training, as an example. And I think all of those investments we made in just building capabilities, it all came together. And of course, we made very specific investments in our learning ecosystem and learning technology architecture.

Sunder Ramachandran:

I think just 2020, when I look back, is really a year when everything came together. I say it a lot, because obviously we planned and we were thoughtful, but it really sort of galvanized. It just sort of made us look good, right? Because you suddenly had the skill sets. You had the mindset. Because I'm just trying to think now, if we had not made the investment just to get the team to think through what a digital enablement plan for a three-month period looks like, it would have been such a difficult conversation.

Michelle Ockers:

That's right.

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Sunder Ramachandran:

But because we had the mindset, skills and tools, it was a lot more seamless, I would say.

Michelle Ockers:

And in terms of your technology stack, were there any gaps in it? Was there anything you needed to fill, or was there any element of it that you hadn't used much before, that you really accelerated the use of?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, I think one of the things that we accelerated is really, what is the enterprise social, right? I mean, you wouldn't think of the enterprise social technically within the learning stack, as reported. But I mean, there's such a strong use case, right? And I think the other piece that we used quite a lot is the way we used our CRM system. And again, not something that you would think of within a conventional learning stack. What became very clear in this time was, while you need your conventional learning stacks, you need your bread-and-butter systems, you need your learning experience platform, your mobile applications, your content repositories, but you also need an architecture that allows integration with other parts of the organizational system.

Sunder Ramachandran:

So I think when you take an overall inventory, what became clear was you've got to look at the overall enterprise technology ecosystem, and not limit your view just to the learning ecosystem, because that can then sometimes make you feel like you don't have what you need. But when you step back and look at the overall organizational ecosystem, you're able to make more thoughtful decisions. Because you don't tend to then go and spend and get newer systems, because there could be some other system within your organizational set of things, which may not be classified as a learning system but does the job really well.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. You know, there's a really good report that RedThread research, who you may be familiar with, did, I think it was last year or maybe the year before. I'll include it in the show notes. When they did research around technology ecosystems for learning they found the average number of technologies in a learning ecosystem was 11 for the use cases, the case studies that they did. They also derived some really useful decision-making criteria and things you need to think through in order to get your technology stack right, so you guys have clearly done that.

Michelle Ockers:

I wouldn't ever think of not including the enterprise social in the technology stack, and then increasingly the operating systems are now starting to be thought of as a platform for enabling learning. Which makes sense when one of the things that we're pushing for is to integrate learning more into the flow of work.

Sunder Ramachandran:

Oh, absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

And if the workplace is these online platforms, then that's where we need to look for the opportunity to provide support to people, to help them to work better.

Sunder Ramachandran:

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Well, absolutely. I mean if you think of the narrative around learning in the flow of work and performance support, I mean people are not performing in the learning system. People are performing in the customer relationship management system as an example, right? So if you're not able to integrate that with the way you design and deliver learning, I think you're going to miss a big part of the commercial problems you may be solving for. So I think it's an important consideration, and I think with cloud, where we are today is these integrations are possible. And I think it really allows large organizations to have multiple systems, but still deliver a very integrated experience to the end user because they're agnostic of whatever is happening in the back end, right? As long as they get a unified, interesting experience. I think that's what companies are focused on right now.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. Now, I know at some point you moved out of the tournament into other approaches. When did you decide it was time to leave the tournament space and move on to something else, and what did you move onto?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Yeah, so we knew right at the beginning that the whole self-learning productivity race is not going to last us more than a week. Fatigue is going to set in. The gamified tournament, our assessment was, would sort of give us maybe two to three weeks at best, so we actually stuck it on for three weeks because we saw good engagement. So we did that, and then we moved on to something different. Now, as you keep innovating, as you keep changing, the standards you expect from yourself and also what people expect from you keep rising.

Sunder Ramachandran:

So after having done what we now as we look back, a fairly engaging, successful, gamified virtual tournament, we knew we can't just go back to people and say, "Hey, now you can do some more LinkedIn Learning," or, "Come and do some more webinars." I mean, that's not going to cut the ice at all. And this is the time when we said, "Well, what did we learn in the six weeks that we've already spent in the lockdown?" And it became very clear, digital, but it's got to be collaborative. It's got to be activities that people are doing together, and not just sort of activities that people are doing by themselves.

Sunder Ramachandran:

And that's when we made the transition into virtual board games. Essentially what we did was we worked with a partner and very quickly designed virtual board games that can be played in cohorts of 10 to 15, over a couple of hours, completely immersive and online. We focused it on specific capabilities we were building, so that became the anchor event in a week. So if you look at, we were literally plotting, what does a week in the life of a sales rep look like in a complete lockdown? We said, "You've got to have one or two big anchor events," and the virtual board game became the anchor event.

Sunder Ramachandran:

Why do you need anchor events? Because that's the event that's going to generate the noise, the traffic, the excitement, and then you build around the urgency. So the virtual board game, a couple of hours a week, became the anchor event. Building a critical capability like understanding channels as an example, right? And then you build pit stops around it. So there's obviously, there's content. So we looked at, "Hey, what ...?" You know what I mean? We didn't build any content in this phase because like you said, right at the beginning there was so much available in the consumer space already.

Sunder Ramachandran:

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Sunder Ramachandran – Game Mechanics for Learning in Lockdown

So LinkedIn has got some great content. We leveraged it. We leveraged content from other providers that we use, and those became part of the pit stop. Group coaching became part of the pit stop. Presenting back to the team became part of the pit stop, right? Doing a live video case simulation became part of the pit stop. So if you look at how the week was sort of plotted, you had six or seven interesting events with one or two big anchor events, and it also gave ... The other lesson that we've learned is, people actually wanted guidance on, "What does the week look like?" Because if you're sitting at home and there's nothing to do, we all like a little bit of structure in terms of, "How should I pace my day and week?" I think that also, and now we know, provided a sense of calm and certainty to the employee, so being part of a bigger employee experience narrative.

Michelle Ockers:

Some of the activities that you talked about being run during that period when you were running the virtual board games sound similar to the activities you were running in the gamified tournament. Was it more around how people were invited to join the activities? I mean, what was different between the two?

Sunder Ramachandran:

I think one of the big differences was no longer being sort of competing. In the previous event, we had teams competing against each other. Now you had sort of a solo virtual board game, so you were sort of literally playing against a small cohort of 15 people. So what the big difference here was, here you were demonstrated your individual skill sets and your ability to win, and then we were bringing all the winners together from different cohorts for a final competition, if you will, right?

Michelle Ockers:

Right.

Sunder Ramachandran:

So that is a big difference. In the earlier part, we were focusing on collaboration and team performance, and in the latter part we were doubling down on individual execution excellence, right?

Michelle Ockers:

Right.

Sunder Ramachandran:

So that, from a design point of view, was a big difference. The other difference was just the sensibility. I mean, this was new. The whole board game experience was a new experience for people. The ability to join the dots back, which is also a capability we want to build, which is sort of come and immerse yourself in an experience and then be able to draw some dots back to say, "Well, what does it mean for the commercial reality in which I live in?" So those are the type of things that we were trying to do.

Michelle Ockers:

How have you been able to determine the extent to which these skills have actually been applied?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, I think early days, but the markers ... Like I said, our objectives were immediate and short-term. In the immediate, I think we were looking at strong employee experience,

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advocacy, engagement, very high sense of morale. And as was the case coincidentally, in the month of August is when we rolled out at GSK our annual employee survey, right? And I think we had fantastic results. On all these indicators, in the end we'll survey around, "How engaged did you feel in this part of the year? Did you receive meaningful coaching? Were there learning opportunities?"

Sunder Ramachandran:

I think we were really at our best that we've been at over the last five to six years, right? Just in terms of the employee ratings. Not as great qualitative feedback in terms of how employees felt. On the business side of things, I think we were looking at the principles of faster, smarter, stronger. So as the economy was starting to open up, we were thinking, "Well, there will be companies that will be off to a great start, and there will be companies that'll still be struggling to figure out. And we want to be among those set of companies that have sort of done the sweating in peace time, so we're not waiting in the war time, right, to use a military analogy.

Sunder Ramachandran:

And literally, as the economy started opening up, because we had made very specific instructional investments in people, we were able to sort of make early wins. We were able to move to our customers faster, reach our customers using a range of different channels. I would argue, communicate and engage with our customers better. And obviously, what we've seen now over just the last quarter in terms of where the business is now compared to where the market is, I think we feel quite confident and we're in a good place right now.

Michelle Ockers:

You were able to get these solutions into play very quickly, and I know you said with the board games, you worked with an external partner. It sounds like the internal, the initial phase, that game mechanics phase, you did internally. What does it take to be able to be so responsive and get things in place so quickly?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, I think it takes a lot of organizational stakeholder management. Business right from the basics of bringing a new partner on board, which in normal times in a large company could take anywhere, as you would know, anywhere from several weeks to a few months just to sort of get the RFP going, the procurement, the legal, I think it was really an all-hands-on-deck approach. But also giving a heads-up, so that you're not taking the other functions by surprise. So very early in the process, we realized that at some point we will have to be creative. We will have to engage with other partners who can come and sort of make the journey more meaningful.

Sunder Ramachandran:

So we'd given a heads-up to our procurement teams, to our legal teams, so they could set themselves up to really help us secure the contracts and partnerships in place in a few days versus in a few weeks. And then, we were willing to do all the background work that may be required. So really, I think I feel you can't do this alone in a large organization. You can't just bring in a new partner and start tomorrow. So one was to align all the functions.

Sunder Ramachandran:

The second was obviously, constantly be on the lookout for interesting solutions. So while we were going through this, one of the things I was doing was, doing panels with other colleagues from the industry, bringing them together, brainstorming. Because there's a classic example of, it was the same storm but we were all in different boats. So we were

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eager to learn from other companies, what were they up to? What were they doing? And we were openly sharing what we were doing, right? So that also meant that the ideation was not just limited to the 20 people, because when you're working in the same organizational context, there can be a lot of group think and echo chambers. So we wanted to sort of break out of that, look at, what are the financial services companies doing? What are companies that are sort of having more office staff, what's their approach to enablement and employee experience? I mean, picking inputs from all of them and then obviously quickly contextualizing then for our reality.

Michelle Ockers:

I love that you reached out to your networks in that way. And again, that's not luck, right? You'd invested in building a network to the extent that you are able to reach out quickly in this situation to create real value from your interaction with others in your network, right?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Oh, absolutely. I mean, and I'm not an expert on this topic but I just think of it just as my personal board of advisors. I mean, you've got to be realistic. At the end of the day, there's only so much that you can do by yourself. It's amazing how there's so many smart people doing such interesting things in different industries, and also sometimes in companies within the same industry. I think all it takes is just the ability to connect. My general experience has been that most practitioners are very happy to share, it's just that no one's ever reached out to them.

Michelle Ockers:

Certainly in Learning and Development, I think that's the case. So Sunder, what tips do you have for others around using game mechanics effectively?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, one of the things I would say specifically around game mechanics is, look at internal systems to begin with. If you want to start, start with game mechanics. I mean, gamification is the more sort of more blown out, more fully-developed version of all of this. But basic game mechanics; I mean, what systems could give you simple things like leader boards? How can you run some sort of enticements where you can get metrics on a day-to-day basis, and they don't have to be conventional learning systems, right?

Sunder Ramachandran:

A lot of the enterprise social networks these days, I mean we use Workplace by Facebook, have game mechanics built into them, right? Whether it's social elements like likes, comments, nudging, appreciation, or even leader boards in the back end. A lot of the CRM systems have this built into it, right? So a good place to start is to use what you already have. And then even if you have to sort of produce a common dashboard at the back end, I mean just get someone from your business intelligence or data team, and it's not so difficult to do on an Excel sheet as well, right?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Sunder Ramachandran:

So, start where you can, right? And then don't worry about onboarding vendors. So that would be my first advice. The second piece is, be thoughtful about, don't do game mechanics for the sake of it. If you're going to put a leader board, if you're going to run some

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sort of an internal competition, you better ensure that the activities that are actually producing those metrics are meaningful activities. Because the whole idea of game mechanics is creating an inherent desire within people to be engaging in those activities, and then obviously securing a win. So you've got to be very thoughtful about, what are you asking your people to do?

Sunder Ramachandran:

I find a lot of people think just because they've put the bells and whistles in a leader board people are just going to participate, and then they're surprised a few weeks later about the low engagement numbers. You've got to do it the other way around, so I think those would be my recommendations based on what we've learned.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, great tips. And is there any person or any resource that you would recommend for people who want to learn more about game mechanics?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, there's obviously so much that's been written about gamification and game mechanics. I think the work of Karl Kapp is quite useful. I personally refer to him a lot. I've also, I mean I've written a couple of blogs about how you can be sort of thoughtful about differentiating game mechanics and gamification, and happy to share that with you, for you to further share with the readers. So again, there's quite a lot out there. But you've got to obviously think about, what is your commercial context and then sort of go from there.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So Sunder, before we move to wrap-up, we do have a little bit more time. I know that you had another challenge that you were very active in addressing, that I think we've got some time to touch on, which was around supporting the shifts that your leaders and managers needed to take. Would you like to talk to us a little about that? Do we have time for that conversation, do you think?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Oh, absolutely. I think again, I mean if you look at it from leaders' and managers' point of view, I mean the challenge was just the way your engagement models with customers were evolving and changing, the engagement models with your own team is going to evolve and change, right? So the whole element of getting comfortable, leading a very meaningful team meeting online. So I think big questions; can you lead a really immersive, motivational sales meeting online? The answer to that, we now know, is yes. Can you run a super-inspirational sales kick-off event online, completely online? The answer to that, we now know, is yes. Can you coach people one-on-one online, in a very meaningful way, providing the same level of personal connect, empathy, acknowledgement, appreciation that you would face-to-face? The answer to that is yes.

Sunder Ramachandran:

Can you lead a very meaningful group coaching event online, which most team leaders do when they're leading larger teams? And the answer to that is also yes. But you know these things don't happen on their own, right? You've got to make specific investments. You've got to obviously ... There's a little bit of shifting mindsets, and that is something that we did in the lockdown as well. So thinking of managers and leaders, how can we get them to be very comfortable delivering, having conversations online, connecting with people online, coaching online? How do you marry your personal insights in coaching with AI, as an example?

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Sunder Ramachandran:

So one of the things that sort of I mentioned earlier was, we have mobile applications where sales reps can get ... And it's a very narrow artificial intelligence system, but they can get some immediate feedback on things like their tone, their facial expressions, their pitch, the pace, the choice of words. And you know these are important, right? So if the system has solved for the level one problems, when you come in as a manager, what are you going to focus on? You better then use your time to tackle more contextual issues that the machine's not going to pick up. That's a different capability.

Sunder Ramachandran:

If you have this going for you as a manager, how are you going to prioritize who you're going to spend time with as a team leader? Not just who you're going to spend time with, how much time are you going to spend with each individual? That's going to change. So all of this orientation happened, and while the sales reps were sort of doing what they need to do in the context of their reality, the managers were doing stuff like this in the context of what they do, which is becoming managers who can lead, coach, manage, performance manage, appraise virtually. I think that's obviously a journey, but I think we started really, really well in that front because that's an element that we want to rethink, right?

Michelle Ockers:

So, what was the most effective thing you did during that period? I think there may only be time to talk about one thing, but what was the highest impact, most effective thing you did to support your managers and leaders, to make that shift?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, I think the most effective was the fact that telling the managers they're not in this alone, right? So one of the things we did was, we brought the leadership teams together to connect with the managers, to share their own vulnerabilities. Talk to them about how this was new, how this was not the most comfortable thing, and then they were learning themselves. And I think that sort of really moved the needle, because we didn't approach it with any level of certainty to say, "Hey, we've figured all this out and now you need to learn."

Sunder Ramachandran:

We really embraced it with the point of view that, "We're in this together. I mean, all of us are leaders and managers. It's uncomfortable. It's new, but we're going to make this happen, and we're going to do this together." So we went with that approach of less prescription but more collaboration. "Let's make mistakes together. Let's learn. But three months down the line, just as a team of managers and leaders, we're going to be in a better place." And I think that honest narrative worked out really well.

Michelle Ockers:

So it sounds like it was about creating some connection in a space where the group could collaborate to figure out how to do all these things you talked about really well in a virtual environment. What was the role of your team through this two- or three-month period where they all made adjustments to the virtual space?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Yeah, so I think the role that we played was one, just showing the mirror, providing an objective feedback. Because very few people who had the experience of having someone reflect on them, when they are coaching virtually or presenting virtually, or doing a team briefing virtually. And what a lot of managers found significant value in was just having somebody from the capability function joining the meeting, and have an effective

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conversation with a manager to say, "Hey. Do you think you could have sort of expressed yourself differently here?" Or, "Do you think you sort of came across as too assertive? That could have passed on in a face-to-face meeting, because you can sort of see other elements of how you're expressing yourself, but it sounded very aggressive in a virtual meeting," as an example. That level of feedback, managers have never received. So my team's role was to really provide the scaffolding, a safe space where managers can have a conversation and say, "What can I do better," right? That was my role. That was my team's role; reflecting, coaching, just providing some feedback.

Michelle Ockers:

So you and your team must have gained tremendous insight into what was actually happening in these sessions. What did you then do with those insights? How did you pull that together and create insight learning from that, and then share that back across the group?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, I think we've obviously ... One of the things we've done is we've now invested significantly in this as a capability that all managers should have. So we now have, within our learning experience platform, a specific pathway. We call it leading, coaching and managing online. Essentially, it's sort of a combination of an articulation of all the tools and resources that we now have, for anyone who wants to sort of get started on, how do you lead a sales kick-off? How do you lead a group coaching online? How do you deliver a one-on-one coaching? What are the fundamentals of that, right? And then obviously, we've bound it up with role-playing videos, with video nuggets on what good and great looks like in these areas. So I think we wouldn't have made such a structured investment in a capability like this, if we didn't have all the insights that we gained during this period.

Michelle Ockers:

Wonderful. That's a really nice example of learning from the work, and then creating an asset around that and a way of working, based on the observations and your engagement with the team, rather than right up front saying, "Here's the answer." I really like that approach. So what's been the biggest challenge that you've had this year with supporting your leaders and managers, in terms of your teams having to do all of this coaching for the first time? Did that stretch them? Was that something they were able to do naturally, or did you need to support and enable your team to work in this way? Was it very different for them?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, it was very different because the teams are actually used to coaching managers. That's what they do. But of course, they're used to coaching them in the context of their daily operations, which is usually face-to-face, going out with the into the markets, meeting them in their reality and then working with them in that context. When that shifted to online, I think even for the teams this was a new capability, right? Which is, just how do you coach people online? How do you observe online, look for those behavioural indicators? Because not just is the person who you're coaching online, the people who have been coached are online as well, right? So you've got to be sort of really looking at and picking out those indicators, and that was new for the team.

Sunder Ramachandran:

In terms of the challenge for our own leaders, and that continues to be the case, is how do you keep building this capability, right? And this isn't just about virtual or online. Again, I think there's an entire mindset around this, right? Which is just being comfortable with

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creating those connections. From my own personal experience, I know that while we all think about face-to-face or physical as the most optimum way to do it, there are several people who I connect with globally who I've never met with online, or I've actually never met with in person. But we share the same sense of purpose and connection, and are often there for each other to support, right? So you can do this online. It's just that you've got to be thoughtful about it, and just like anything else in networking and building relationships, you've got to make consistent investments over a period of time. It's not a one-and-done, right? I think that's the piece that we're trying to build.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. So as we move into the wrap-up then, and I think we've talked about a lot of the, what went well? What did you learn? But let's summarize some of that. When you look back over the year, what do you think has really gone extremely well in learning in your area, and why?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, I think the one thing that I thought went very well, Michelle, was we got the narrative right around the whole spectrum of empathy, engagement and education, right? And I think that resonated, because if you had just gone education first or learning first, I think it would have failed. So just getting that whole value chain right, being empathetic, creating a great employee experience and engagement, and then educating employees as well. That spectrum I think came out really well, resonated with employees, created a good employee experience, and created a space for us as an organization to pivot into what we're now calling the new normal.

Michelle Ockers:

And when you look back, is there anything you wish you'd done differently, or if you had the chance to do over, you would do differently?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, I think one of the things we would do differently is to get sort of leaders involved earlier in the game. I think we did a lot of the heavy lifting ourselves, at least in the earlier phase of this entire enablement plan. So if I were to sort of do it all over again, I would have gotten leaders involved right from day one, in the ideation stage itself, rather than sort of having to do all the heavy lifting ourselves and just sort of go to them then for some final feedback. So, that's something we would do differently.

Michelle Ockers:

Right, and on a personal level, what's the most important thing you think you've learned this year?

Sunder Ramachandran:

Well, I've just been amazed at what the possibilities are. The possibilities really end where your imagination does, so when you make investments you've got to have the belief that it's going to pay off. Sometimes it takes 12 months. Sometimes it takes 24 months, so this has reinforced the need to make consistent investments in your own team, so L&D for L&D, if you will. You've got to eat your own dog food, and I think that's something that I've learned, right? No matter whether it's a good time or a bad time from a commercial point of view, you've always got to make room and time for your teams to reflect, retrain, refresh, because you know that's going to hold you well in scenarios like this. So that's been a big lesson for me through 2020.

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Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely, and there were a whole stack of people and resources that were mentioned during the episode. We'll put those into the show notes. For anyone who's interested in connecting with you, Sunder, we will include your LinkedIn profile in the show notes, and of course we put all of our episodes up on LinkedIn and invite people to interact, to engage, to ask questions. So please, to our listeners, if you would like to elaborate on the conversation, extend the conversation with Sunder, you'll know where to find him on LinkedIn. Thank you so much, Sunder, for sharing your experiences during this period, and some of the really valuable work that you've been doing at GSK.

Sunder Ramachandran:

Thank you, Michelle. I've enjoyed the conversation.

Michelle Ockers:

As have I, and as I'm sure our listeners will. And I just wanted to say, there's been a really big increase in downloads of the podcast recently, particularly with surge in our listenership in the United States. So, thank you to everyone who's listening and sharing episodes with colleagues and on social media. I'm really grateful that our guests like yourself, Sunder, come onto the podcast to share your experience. It's wonderful that people are sharing it with others, so that we can get the most learning and the most growth across the whole profession from the stories being shared. So if you are listening, please share with a colleague and take a moment to write the podcast and leave a review comment, so it becomes visible to more of our peers in the learning and development profession.



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.

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

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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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