

**Learning Uncut Episode 78:  
Leadership Development in Antarctica – Nigel Paine  
Hosted by Michelle Ockers**



**Michelle Ockers:**

One of my goals for the podcast in 2021 is to bring you a story from every continent. I had a listener ask me 'even Antarctica?' It turns out I knew a person who had done some interesting leadership development work in Antarctica.

In 2016 Nigel Paine was invited to join an expedition to Antarctica with 40 people from around the world. The purpose of the expedition was to sensitize them to issues of environment and climate change. Nigel's role was to provide leadership development for the group. The environment provided dislocation, disconnection and discomfort – a context in which Nigel had to rethink his approach to leadership development. While it's clearly impractical for most organisations to take people to Antarctica you can apply the elements of what Nigel learned to make leadership development more effective.

In 2019 I collaborated with Nigel on a Building Learning Culture program. I saw first-hand how much he emphasised the facilitation process and drawing upon the experience and insight of the participants over content delivery. After this Learning Uncut conversation with Nigel I can see how his experience in Antarctica has shaped his approach. I trust that if you also facilitate any type of learning program you will look at your approach a little differently after listening to this episode.

**Michelle Ockers:**

Welcome back to Learning Uncut, Nigel.

**Nigel Paine:**

Thank you, Michelle. Thank you very much.

**Michelle Ockers:**

Now today, we are talking about leadership development. This is a topic I get lots of requests from listeners for more episodes on leadership development. And I've not done a lot around here. We haven't featured a lot of stories. And I know that you have a very interesting example to talk to us today. So can you start by giving us some context in terms of the—I don't know if you call it a program, an experience, you know, the body of work you want to share with us today around leadership development.

**Nigel Paine:**

I want to talk about the work I did in the Antarctic. I was invited by the expedition leader. He's a pretty famous explorer called Robert Swan, and he was taking a group of people to Antarctica, which he's done on quite a number of occasions. And the aim of the experience for people is to sensitize them to issues of environment and climate change. And what he's trying to build really are global ambassadors to protect Antarctica in perpetuity.

So he's got a very strong mission and it's very hard to go to Antarctica and see what is going on there and not feel committed to his cause. But over time, he's just decided to use that opportunity to focus on the leadership capabilities of the group. And the group ranges from—I think 74 years old was the oldest, and 11 was the youngest.

Now, there wasn't a lot of leadership development going on for 11-year-old, but for pretty much everyone else. That's about 100 people from 40 different nationalities. Biggest group, American, second biggest group, Indian. So it's very, very diverse group of people, male and

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female. And Rob's idea was to turn the experience into life-changing leadership development, and he asked me to lead the leadership. So I went out to Antarctica not as a scientist or as an expedition leader or anyone who knew the first thing about Antarctica, but I did know about leadership.

### **Nigel Paine:**

The big thing that was fascinating and what I want to capture if I possibly can today is that leadership development in that kind of environment was not just any old leadership development. There was something spectacularly powerful about the environment which really helped change people forever. And I think quite a number of those who went on that ship down to Antarctica came back a different people with a different focus on life and a different bunch of skills in terms of their leadership. But much more than that, a different commitment to the power and need for leadership.

So it was an extraordinary experience for me, but it was also an extraordinary experience for not absolutely everybody, but for a large proportion of those going down there. And that's what I want to try to capture for you.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

Great. And this was 2016?

### **Nigel Paine:**

It was in 2016. It was at the end of the summer season. So when we were—we were the last ship to go down to Antarctica that year. And when we were there, the sea ice was beginning to bubble up. So we would go to bed at night in a pretty much clear sea. We wake up surrounded by ice, and we pushed through the ice. And every day, the ice got more and more dense, so that if we'd have stayed another week, we probably couldn't have for six months because we would have got iced in.

So it is an amazing time of year, that transition between winter—sorry—between summer and the emerging winter is extraordinary. It's when all the animals down there are feeding like crazy to try and get enough nutrients on board before the ice sets in. And it's a time when it's like the sea is alive. It's bubbling. The sea ice comes from below, and it bubbles up in little pinhead size bits of ice, and they float to the surface and float to the surface. And the first millions all immediately melt. But gradually, one or two don't melt, and then gradually they stick together, and then they bind. And then by the time high winter occurs, there's three or four feet, and sea ice has appeared plus snow on top. So snow, there's lands on sea ice that freezes. The sea ice appears more and more vigorously from below in the sea. So the seas about -2 at that time of year, which is pretty cold, but it can't get any colder because it's salt water, and that's when saltwater freezes.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

It's like an environment of awe and wonder, right? It's like nothing you could experience anywhere else in the world.

### **Nigel Paine:**

I think that's true, but there are three things that I think are really pertinent when we talk about leadership development. The first is this sense of dislocation. You take people out of their comfort zones. This is not a familiar place. In fact, it's quite a hostile place. One of the talks we got by the Antarctic experts before we left from Ushuaia in Chile was Antarctica is trying to kill you. It may look benign, but it's actually trying to kill you. So you have to do what

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you're told, listen to what you're told, and obey the rules, which we all did unquestioningly because it's a dangerous place. So there's that sense of dislocation, and with it, discomfort.

When you're in a place where you need three layers of gloves and four layers everywhere else, and where the weather just changes at the fingers, it goes from calm benign to a roaring gale, and the sea goes from crystal clear and calm to six-foot waves, two-meter waves in seconds because you've got these katabatic winds which fall down off the mountains and just accelerate and whip the sea up. So you can be peacefully in your little zodiac, which is a rubber boat, a rubber dinghy exploring, following a whale. And then, all of a sudden, you've got six-foot waves coming at you. It can be quite scary. So there's that sense of dislocation, that sense of disconnection.

### **Nigel Paine:**

So there's dislocation, discomfort, disconnection. And it's that combination. It is magical really because the last of my Ds is discovery. At that point where all of your assumptions, your connections, your sense of your place in the world evaporates. You're left with a real focus on yourself, your mission, other people around you because there's no—you can't phone a friend or contact anybody. You're isolated. Therefore, there's an intense relationship with the people around.

And when we got onto the ice, there were ten people in the zodiac, and we were told ten people would leave, and ten people return. So if you're faster and stronger, you have to wait and look after those that are slower and weaker than you. And one of the great moments was to see this woman, who was 74, stumbling along the ice with two strapping males in their 20s propping her up and dragging her around the course because they knew that they couldn't—no one can be left behind. You have to work within the interests of the group and at the pace of the slowest person in the group, and you have to celebrate that, not get annoyed about it.

So we went up ice cliffs. We went across crevices which were 300 meters deep. If you fell in one of those, you would be instantly disappeared forever. And all of that creates a heightened sense of your place in the world, and you experience intense emotions. And from that, if you know what you're doing, and I hope I knew what I was doing, you can turn all of that different sense of place and different sense of self into an intense leadership development experience.

And one of the things that we insisted on was journaling. We got people to journal. And at the beginning, it was really difficult. We make people sit down and write for ten minutes. By the end, we had to drag people away because they would just write and write and write. And out of that writing came insights. And what I had to do was turn those insights into actions—rethinking the position, rethinking your role in the world, and rethinking how you want to show up when you got back into the northern hemisphere. So it was a really big learning experience for me because I realized that experience is way more powerful than courses and programs.

And interestingly, when—I did a leadership a bit of research with 14 companies across Europe, large companies. One of the new rules of leadership that were emerging from the work with those companies was that experiences are more powerful than programs. And that there are many companies creating intense experiences for their leadership to in some ways shape them into seeing the world in a different way. Now, that didn't involve going to Antarctica. You can send people to Antarctica, but it's quite expensive and probably not

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good for your bank balance. But there are plenty of ways you can take people out of that—the comfort of their surroundings.

When you're in a company, you've got your senior, you've got people looking after you, you know the world, the world knows you. It's comfortable, it's incredibly connected, and you are in a location you know, and therefore discovery becomes much more difficult. So this was all about creating moments when people were shaken out of all the things they believed and all the things that we assured them.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

So Nigel, can I get a little more context before we unpack a little bit more about how you facilitated this experience? You talked about Robert Swan being an expedition leader. What organization was Robert with, and what was the purpose of the expedition?

### **Nigel Paine:**

He set up the 2041 foundation, which is still going strong. It's called 2041 because, in 2041, the Antarctic treaties, which large numbers of countries have signed, and the Antarctic treaties protect Antarctica until 2041. So until that moment, there is no—nothing apart from scientific exploration in Antarctica; no fishing, no wild scale exploration or digging for oil. So Antarctica is the last untouched, pristine part of the planet. And Robert's mission in life as someone—he's the only man to have ever walked solo to the north pole and the south pole. So he's walked the ice for hundreds of days. And his committed belief is that if he can persuade people younger than him—Rob's in his 60s now—if he can persuade people younger than him in their 20s or 30s, that Antarctica is worth—in fact, it's vital that it's preserved.

As they move through their careers and take positions of leadership, he wants that commitment to Antarctica to come through so that by 2041 when Rob is in his 80s, they're in their peak power—in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, these people will stand up to be counted and say, we need to re-sign these treaties in perpetuity. We will not allow Antarctica to be exploited in any way. So that is his mission. His mission is to populate the world, and that's why it's such a diverse group. He doesn't want just Americans there or just Europeans or Australians. He wants Indians, and Chinese, and people from all over the world to be in those positions of power. So that is his mission.

And he wanted to use that opportunity to expand and deepen the leadership insights. And so I was brought in really as a facilitator. I wasn't teaching people anything. I was trying to work with them in big groups and small groups and one-to-one on their leadership insights and how they turn those into leadership actions. So one of the outcomes was not just your journal, but also, for me, an action plan; things you're going to do differently, things you will start doing that you weren't doing before, and things you will stop doing; very simple action plan. But for some people, very, very powerful and life-changing.

So that was the context. That was the essence of it, so we were all on this ship. And it wasn't a kind of tourist thing. We were out and active. We were on the ice every single day. And because of the limited numbers who are allowed onto the land, we had to have—half of us were in the zodiacs going around, looking at whales and seals, and exploring the wildlife and getting right up close to icebergs, while the other group was doing exercises on the land. And then we'd come back in and reverse that, and the ones on the land went on the sea.

So every day, we got a chance to be on the sea for hours in two, three hours. And on the land for two or three hours, and we had exercises to do. We had to navigate, you know, we had to climb in difficult terrain. We had to observe what was happening. We had to look at the way that the ice formed, the landscape, and understand what was going on in the

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landscape. And we had little circular walks. We had little mini expeditions on land, but we always had that preceptor. We had to be back at the boarding point to get back on our zodiacs at a certain time. And only a full boat of ten went out as a group of ten, came back as a group of ten were allowed back onto their zodiac. So if nine arrived and they abandoned one person, they had to stand there in the freezing cold and wait until that other person came back. And they were given a big talking to as a result of that.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

So the—in terms of your own objectives for the group, and obviously, part of what Robert is interested in with the 2041 project is creating ambassadors, so people who could exert leadership directly in relation to protecting Antarctica over time. And when you looked at—when you were invited to be part of this process, what were your aspirations like? How did you frame up what you felt you could leave this group of people with going through this experience? And I'm not sure we talked about how long the experience was that you had to work—

### **Nigel Paine:**

Two weeks. It was two weeks.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

Yep. So what were your aspirations for where you wanted to leave these people at the end of two weeks, what you wanted to ha—the legacy you wanted them to take away?

### **Nigel Paine:**

If I'm completely honest with you, what I started out with and what I ended up with were completely different. I actually started the process with a view, but my job was to deliver content. And I've taught thousands of people a program called personal leadership insight which is to kind of beef up people's awareness of their own leadership and improve it. And it's largely based in the classroom and content-driven. I've done it all over the world. I thought, all right, okay, I'll just do that in Antarctica. And we had a part of the ship, which was the classroom, the projector and the screen, and all of that stuff.

So I had the idea that I went there and every day because we use the early evening before dinner as lesson time if you like so people would come in, and I'd have two hours or more with the group. My job was to deliver my content. And I realized very, very quickly that that wasn't my job. My job was to facilitate the experience that people had already had. People were coming back from the day in some sense traumatized, but certainly, they came back with lots of things going through their head. My job was to turn and focus what was going through their head into an insight that would last. It wouldn't just be a momentary view of their perspective on the world. It would be an insight that would last.

So I turned very rapidly from—my job is to explain about this, and my job is to facilitate, engage, and pull out the learning. So I wasn't putting learning in. I was extracting learning from experience, and that changed me. I'll never see the world again in the same way because I realized I got it 100% wrong.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

And that's not just because of the environment you were in, but because of how you saw that the process unfold and the shift in your perception around what your role was in that situation, right?

### **Nigel Paine:**

It was because the environment was so powerful, and things were happening to individuals that were so momentous. My job was to—I realized my job was not to put stuff in their heads

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but to take stuff out of their heads and get them to articulate it and try and create a frame that would allow it to mean more. So I spent a lot of time on frames and models and no time on pushing content. So that was the insight. I still do that. I still use that process.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

Well, from working with you on that building learning culture program, I see that very much in action, that a lot of—the way you approach the work there is around extracting experience and facilitating bringing experience to the table rather than lots of content. What were some of the most useful frames or models or processes that you ended up using to work with the group, maybe those that have influenced your practice the most moving forward?

### **Nigel Paine:**

That's a very good question. I think there were lots of different frames. There wasn't one that was particularly important, but the very simple—one of the very simple frames was the power of reflection. Just getting people to unpack what was in their head and get it down because it fades. So to use reflection and turn reflection into insight, and from that, we used very simple things like what did you learn about yourself? What are you going to do differently when you get back on dry land or get back to more familiar surroundings? How does that—what did that teach you about other people, and how will that alter the way in which you interact with other people?

So we asked a whole bunch of questions in that way. And we spent time on what will you read when you get back? What will you need to read? Who will you need to talk to? How can you ensure these changes stick? What help and support will get you through this? And some people were going through pretty big life-changing events. There was a lot of emotion and a lot of patent tension, so that I followed up with one-on-one mentoring. I probably did one-on-one sessions with 20 people, maybe more than 20 people, just trying to hone in on all the work that had happened outside on the ice and on the water and all the work that has happened inside in the classes. How do we bring this together and turn it into meaning?

So it was very interesting, and I had a very—I had Robert as my mentor on the trip. Now, I would sit down with Robert for an hour, and he'd just talk about me and my—what was happening in my head and why it was happening in my head, and what I was going to do with that when I got back. So I had that experience myself. So I—you know, I was in the process. I wasn't standing outside as some sort of seer who knew everything. I was in the process at the same time also learning, also changing my practice as a result of what I was learning. So the whole thing was quite extraordinary, I think. I think that's the best words I could use; quite extraordinary.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

Look, it sounds extraordinary. And kind of the sense I'm getting there is that as the facilitator of this, your role was to help people to turn experience into meaning and action, but it's really risky, right, because it's like where are people going to go with this? It's not like you're

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getting up there with a learning outcome and a set of content, and you know what the end destination is. So this is so different—

**Nigel Paine:**  
You're quite right

**Michelle Ockers:**  
—from the way we approach it.

**Nigel Paine:**  
You are not in control.

**Michelle Ockers:**  
Yes.

**Nigel Paine:**  
Yeah, the issue is about control. You're not in control of the outcomes. You're only in control of the processes. So you can make things happen, but you can't determine what happens at the end. It's kind of risky, but it's also possibly the most and safest way of dealing with this myriad experience. So I didn't do the—I didn't get out there and have all those thoughts and ideas churning through my head. That's what was a—that was a result of the environment. That's what—that was the position people were in. And in some ways, taking that and turning it into something concrete and learning and action was actually a service and a help, not a risky endeavour, and it would be better to bottle it all up.

Some things had to come out, and I tried to bring them out, or I tried to help people bring them out themselves so that I also wanted to create in people's heads automatic processes that would allow them to continue that learning and understanding without needing someone doing it for them. So there was an enduring message as well that we are working on this process, and disconnection, dislocation, discomfort does lead to discovery, but it's not an automatic process. You have to engage with that. And I hope that's one of the things that people were left with; that sense of being able to engage and do it themselves, carrying forward.

**Michelle Ockers:**  
So when you think about—this is obviously a really extreme environment, a really unusual set of circumstances. And where the environment provided the dislocation and discomfort, and you were there to help facilitate discovery. When you think about the corporate landscape and leadership development, which, you know, I don't know how many hours and

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how many millions is invested in leadership development around the world every year, but it's astronomical, right?

### **Nigel Paine:**

\$45 billion approximately.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

Right. Thank you for that. Where does that come from? Do you know where that comes from?

### **Nigel Paine:**

Yes, it comes from some research that was done by FASFA in Stanford University.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

So we put a massive amount of effort into leadership development. And mostly, it looks nothing like what you've described. What can we take from this really extreme example and use it in a way that's relevant and appropriate to strengthen the way we approach leadership development for this \$45 billion worth of effort every year that we put into it in the corporate environment?

### **Nigel Paine:**

Well, I was writing my leadership book when I went to Antarctica, and there's a chapter on Antarctica in my leadership book. What it convinced me was that we have—I think I have, but I think we all have a mission to turn that \$45 billion of investment into way more enduring outcomes than it generally happens. That leadership development fails for the most part, and it fails because you tell people things and they listen, but it doesn't end up in changed experience. And often, the culture of the organization mitigates against what they've been told on their very expensive leadership development programs. So everyone enjoys the experience, but nothing much happens as a result. So I think that we have a duty to create leadership development that changes people's behaviour, not just for two weeks or a day, but forever permanently. So that was the first lesson.

You focus on changing behaviour forever, not just giving people kind of intellectual frames that they can embrace in some abstract way. You've got to make it concrete, concrete. The other thing I learned is that leadership happens in context. That you—people have to operate in a particular place and a particular time. It's not vanilla, and therefore you need to contextualize, and you need to build in experiences. And you can do that very easily. You don't—as I said, you don't have to take people to Antarctica.

And I work with someone who took senior leaders into galleries and made them sit in front of a painting for half an hour, which was really painful for some people, and then start talking about that painting. And then he brought in a curator who then gave a 15-minute lecture on the same painting. And then, he asked the people to talk about the gap between what they saw and what they learned after the curator. And that was all about being discomforted, seeing the world differently, and realizing the paucity of your knowledge and how little you take in, and then translating that back into the organization; what is it you don't see, how many situations do you look at but don't really understand them because you've got preconceptions. And in the art gallery, that's rubbish, or that's meaningless, or they're just dabs of paint, whatever it might be. Now, and it's—exactly the same thing happens.

So there are ways of building in experiences and facilitating people's exploration that is relatively simple but massively effective if you do it right. But it's also dangerous, which I think that point you make. When you start unlocking things, you've got to know what you're doing. You don't just get people to talk about stuff that is very difficult, and then just abandon

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them at that point and say, well, that was great, wasn't it? You've got to know how to focus it and turn it into insight learning behaviour change and things that have to be done. And that sometimes means having difficult conversations, for example, with bosses or with subordinates, you know, whatever it might be. You have to get people to follow through. And if they don't, it becomes a very unsatisfactory half-finished experience. And the idea is to create completion. You know, part of my job, I guess I had to sum it up, was to complete the experience in Antarctica, to earn it from just experiences into insight, knowledge, behaviour change, and action. And that was an incredibly rewarding task but very difficult to say because I was learning as I was going.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

Yeah. So how do you think or what would some of your tips be for people working in corporates and leadership development to create that sense of completion? What's missing at the moment from a lot of leadership development programs that could be—well, I guess there's a few things here. What could be taken out as well as what could be added in? But if we stick with this idea of completion, so you take people to a certain point of insight, and, you know, then it's like, well, how do we support them to actually create real meaning out of an insight and to apply it and take action. Like how long do you have to help hold the space for people and help facilitate them through a process, and what might that look like?

### **Nigel Paine:**

Well, the first thing is I wish that more leadership development started with a very simple point, what is the problem we're trying to solve here? And many go into leadership development on the assumption that we have a curriculum if you like. This is what we're going to do, and it's all very valuable. I think you should start with a completely different process. What other leadership deficit is in the organization? What is the problem that we're trying to solve? And if you start with there is a problem, and we are going to fix it, you're already putting the emphasis away from absorbing content into doing things differently and agreeing and buying into doing things differently.

So sometimes, you have to expose people to the real issues going on. And that can be just some research, some anonymous quotations. I remember in the BBC, we got—and they insist on being pixelated, which is another comment on the culture. We got six people to talk about the awful consequences of poor leadership in the BBC. And they said it like it was, and it was harrowing and shocking. And if you start from that point and say what, are you happy with this? The answer is, obviously, we have to do something about this. So you already got people on board. So you—we understood viscerally the problem that had to be solved, but that is not the case. That is not common in many leadership programs. No one has any idea the problem is trying to solve.

You focus on different processes and different models and tools, most of which will be interesting but not necessarily useful and will be forgotten about very quickly as the prevailing culture comes washing back in within days of finishing those kinds of programs. And I suppose that the other insight is that leadership development isn't a course. It's a process. It doesn't stop. And the key to all of it should be you want self-generating leadership development. You want leaders who see their role as they get better and better at what they do over time.

They need to engage in that completion process even if it never ends. So to understand that this is an engaging and important role in—as part of your position and you should understand yourself and be able to control and manage yourself before you try and control and manage others and focus on bringing the best out of people, not focus on control. So there's some pretty fundamental things that should be going on in organizations when they engage with their leadership. And many are getting it. I think, and particularly on the

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pandemic, leadership development has become starkly evident where it's lacking and where it's working. And therefore—but there's a journey and a commitment, and most organizations have to completely rethink what they're doing. And some are doing that. Many are not.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

So I've got one observation there to wrap up that question around what do you need to do to create completion. And I think the answer is that it's never complete, and that part of your role, if you're working on leadership development, is to create generative learning so that the people that you've supported through whatever activities and experiences you've run for leadership development can continue to sustain their own development. Would that be right in terms of this idea of completion?

### **Nigel Paine:**

I'd say it's partly right. What you need to do is complete the process that you started in order to begin another process and to complete that before you begin another process. So there are steps forward, and those steps are completed. So you've drawn a conclusion, you've made a commitment, you've agreed to do things differently, so that is one step, but it's not the end that is the beginning of a new set of experiences, areas that you need to change that you also need to move forward to completion. So if you could see it as a series of steps—small steps on an endless journey. But each step has to be taken before you can take the next one as indeed on any kind of journey.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

And the other observation I have when you are talking about the research was done at BBC and people talking about, well, here's the problems I see in leadership here at the moment, and needing to be pixelated to feel safe to do that, it gets to organizational culture, right. And whether the organization is ready to go there and to face whatever the real problems are and to get beyond the superficial and look really hard, and for it to be safe enough to look really hard at what's really getting in the way in terms of leadership of us reaching our aspirations as an organization and being the kind of place we want to be. So there's an element of organizational culture that plays into this, right?

### **Nigel Paine:**

Absolutely right. Yeah, and I think that any attempt at leadership development, you need to bring in relief, the nature of the culture that you're putting people through, the experiences that you are creating for other people. And if those are unsatisfactory or destructive, you have to make that commitment to change that culture so that if you like, it is about yourself, and that's very important. It's about what you do, and that's very important. But it's also what everybody does. That is the most important.

So consistency. Most people in organizations want consistency. They don't want to have A treat them one way and B treat them a completely different way. And they want an organization that is clear about what you can do and what you can't do, where the boundaries are. And often, that the output from what we've been discussing is leaders to get together and say, right, we will solve these problems ourselves, we will work on this organization together, and we will agree what we all agree, and we will do what we all agree to do. That's the ultimate aim.

You change organizations from within, and you change them through individuals, but unless you're collective, unless you try to change the whole culture of the organization—And, you know, my latest work about organizational learning, really, I think—I believe—whether I'm crazy or not—but learning happens between in the spaces between people, and leadership should happen in the spaces between leaders. That's how you create something that is

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indelible and powerful, and three-dimensional in an organization. And therefore you change it' the individuals and the culture forever.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

Let's talk about COVID-19 and what's happening with leadership as a consequence of the shifts in the world over the past. What must be going on? What? Is it close to 18 months now, 16, 17, 18 months? And what do you think this period has either highlighted or shifted in regard to leadership? And then what challenges and opportunities does that present for leadership development?

### **Nigel Paine:**

My perception. I've worked with—through webinars and conferences, hundreds of organizations in the last year or so, and a few things are really stark. The first point is that leadership is unbelievably necessary. Good leadership is necessary, much more so to help steer organizations and help staff cope with what has been going on in their lives and their companies. But there's also an equally powerful insight, and that is that micromanagement, bullying, top-down leadership has failed spectacularly. You cannot micromanage a remote workforce who are in the middle of all sorts of issues and traumas. What you can do is help them do their best work, help them communicate and work as a team and empower them to manage that process, and take the decisions that they need to do to get stuff done.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

If some habits are deeply ingrained—but let's lean into optimism on this. If micromanaging clearly doesn't work, if indeed it ever did, which I doubt it ever really did, but it's really brought that into stark contrast, what is working in terms of leadership? Where do you see leadership at its best over the past 12 to 18 months?

### **Nigel Paine:**

Those who saw their role as rebuilding community, community has been really important, and it was smashed up and smashed up very quickly, almost overnight. And to rebuild that sense of community and belonging has been really, really important. And that isn't about getting stuff done, it's about making people feel okay and able to cope and to rebuild the connections with their colleagues, but then you can get stuff done. So first of all, community, second communication, setting up pathways of communication so people can work together effectively. And third, to give a little bit of autonomy and define the limits under which people can make their own decisions. And then, just let them get on with it and not blame them if there are mistakes and things go wrong.

And in many instances, unbelievable stuff has happened. People have rebuilt networks, have transformed logistics simply by getting together with colleagues and making decisions quickly in order to get stuff to the customer and build new relationships with customers, etc. And those organizations that didn't do that were paralyzed. They couldn't do anything, and therefore they did nothing. And that was sad to see and awful for staff to experience. And just sitting there thinking, I don't know what to do. I don't feel I can do anything without permission. I don't know who to ask permission or—so that really—it really made a massive difference and organizations that did things without even thinking about them.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

If we have learning and development people listening to this episode of Learning Uncut and they've kind of heard what you've said about working through experience rather than through content. I guess, specifically, you've been talking about it in leadership development, but you could potentially apply that to many other areas of work that learning and development get involved with. So for someone wanting to work more with experience rather than with

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content in their body of work as learning and development professionals, what would be your key takeaway tips?

### **Nigel Paine:**

Do it. I think my takeaway tip, for example, if you take compliance, you can give people utterly tedious, boring e-learning where they click through screens and they memorize stuff temporarily in order to get through some, you know, really low-level test of retention, or you can create a visceral experience when they see the consequences of non-compliance.

I remember a long time ago when I was working with a company where they wanted to get them well aware of the dangers of fire, and they shot this movie, and it—in a store shut with a clock on saying this small little teeny electrical fault. And within something like three minutes, the store was ablaze, and within five minutes, people were dying. And therefore, they showed that—what happened when you didn't know what you're doing, people running around like, you know, headless chickens, and the difference between people who understood what they had to do in case of fire, and knew that immediately and instinctively. And people came out of that learning absolutely transformed and committed. They will never forget. It was years ago. I remember it really well what happened. And it made me super, super conscious of the need to be prepared to act and act very, very fast.

So there's no need for you to bore the hell out of people. Just create a sense of the danger lurking around. And if you do that, you will get people to comply willingly and automatically. But so few organizations do that. But even in something like compliance, you can turn it into a really fascinating deep and moving, and enduring learning experience, or you can bore them with click-throughs.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

No more boring learning, hey Nigel.

### **Nigel Paine:**

No more boring learning.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

Thank you.

### **Nigel Paine:**

Life is too short.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

It is short, yes, and what we do matters too much for it to be boring. So thank you so much, Nigel, for sharing your work and insights with us today. It was all absolutely fascinating. And I'm delighted we could bring a story to our listeners from Antarctica in particular, so thank you for that. We'll include a link to your LinkedIn profile and, of course, to your website and the book that you mentioned. If anyone would like to get in touch with Nigel, there are many ways to do that and, you know, to explore any of the topics discussed in today's episode in more detail. Thanks so much, Nigel. It's always a pleasure to speak with you.

### **Nigel Paine:**

Good to speak with you too, Michelle. Thank you.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

For anyone who is interested in building learning culture, Nigel and I will be running the Building Learning Culture program again in the second half of 2021. This time we'll facilitate

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it online with a combination of live virtual sessions and an online community. It will be run twice with sessions timed to suit people from different parts of the globe. Follow Michelle Ockers and/or Nigel Paine for information about the program, which will be available from late May.

### **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*

*Michelle can be contacted at [michelle@michelleockers.com](mailto:michelle@michelleockers.com).*