

Learning Uncut Episode 86
L&D Evolves at Cotton On – Beth Hall
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

It's been two years since I last spoke with Beth Hall from Cotton On Group in Episode 33. In that episode we spoke about the deliberately different approach to learning at Cotton On. While the philosophy hasn't changed, the approach to continue building and sustaining a strong learning culture across a global team has evolved and what they're now working on. In our wide-ranging conversation Beth talks about some of the key shifts and initiatives they've undertaken in the past two years. No spoilers from me in the introduction. Just a flag for some really interesting things to listen out for, including the ongoing focus on solving for business need and performance, the role of leaders in this, the application of insights from behavioural science, extensive partnering with other parts of the organisation, how Beth evaluates the success of her team and the approach they are taking to figure out how to shape digital workplace culture.

As a Learning Uncut listener, you may be aware of my discussion with Nigel Paine about learning culture, which was published as Elevate episode 5 on 15 June 2021. The second edition of Nigel's book *Workplace Learning* will soon be released. It includes an interview with Beth. If building learning culture interests you, I invite you to find out about the Building Learning Culture program that Nigel and I co-facilitate. You can find information on the Learning Uncut website under the Services menu – or use the link in the show notes. Our next cohort, the final one for 2021, kicks off on 22 September – be sure to check it out if you are ready to take action on learning culture.

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome back to Learning Uncut, Beth.

Beth Hall:

Thank you. Thanks for having me, Michelle.

Michelle Ockers:

It's a delight. Can you believe it's been two years since your first episode?

Beth Hall:

I can't. It feels like yesterday we had that chat. Yeah, time flies, hey.

Michelle Ockers:

It sure does. It sure does. We had such a great conversation last time about the deliberately different approach you'd taken to learning at Cotton On around building learning culture based off the back of the company culture, about the way you approach performance and using performance data, and facilitating to solve problems. It was such a rich episode. If anyone hasn't listened to episode 33, don't stop listening to this conversation but go back and listen to that because you'll pick up the threads. Beth, has your approach changed much since that time? Are you still doing similar things or what shifted, what stayed the same and why?

Beth Hall:

I guess, philosophically my approach hasn't changed. What I said in that original conversation that I had with you still very much rings true. However, I would say it certainly has evolved. There's nothing like a pandemic to kind of change an approach in a way of

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working for a learning team. I think it's just been more built upon in terms of those foundations are still there but how we're going about doing that work has evolved and changed slightly due to the pandemic.

Michelle Ockers:

In what ways has it evolved?

Beth Hall:

For example we talk a lot about conversation over content. We talk a lot about solving real-world problems, as opposed to the tell and the content driven learning training methodology. Now we actually package that up and we put it on our learning management system. Anybody who's in the business has all of the tools they need to run the sessions that we used to run. Whereas we were the ones facilitating the conversation and asking the questions in order to get the business solve, now our leaders across the business are doing that with the framework that we've provided for them. It allows us to get more scale. It also means that we're not flying around on planes to run sessions anymore. And that's not to say that we don't want to facilitate the sessions, but we want those for more senior leaders within the business, leaving the tools to be used for the other areas.

Michelle Ockers:

What does that look like if your philosophy is around solving business needs, solving for business problems, and you're creating toolkits to allow managers to do that without a facilitator from your team being involved? Have you kind of curated here's a common list of needs that might arise, and here's the toolkit to help you facilitate for that? Give us an example of what that might look like.

Beth Hall:

Well, other than telling or listing any of the possibilities of what may or may not crop up for people we've just built really clear and great question sets that they use in order to navigate and apply to any given problem. Last time we spoke, we've talked about the 24 creds as an example that we have been in the business. They still exist. If they have a communication problem, they would go and get the communication cred tool and they would find all of the questions that they would need to navigate that session. They would have the PowerPoint with the questions underneath to go this is how you open up the session. This is how you talk through the framework of communication or change or whatever it is. These are the kind of questions that you're drawing out of the room.

Beth Hall:

And what we're really finding is whilst we don't have trained facilitators across the group, it's just so much more real and authentic when it's coming directly from your leader because you leader has got skin in the game with regards to the problem of what's happening. The conversations are richer. The conversations go to the level of detail, and they're followed through because when we facilitate a session as a learning professional or as a development team, we're kind of an external coming into that area of the business and then we leave. The follow-up is really reliant on those people in the room actually staying with that conversation. Whereas when it's actually run by the leader and led and facilitated by the leader, they've got skin in the game of the outcome. They've invested that time to get that conversation happening. We're starting to see a lot more traction post-session there.

Michelle Ockers:

Might a leader come back to the toolkit again, to that same cred, excuse me, to the same cred toolkit at a later point, if they say for instance, sticking with communication, a different

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communication problem arose could they use it again?

Beth Hall:

Well, definitely. Definitely. We spoke a lot last time about context over content. Context is so important so I don't know about you but I'm working on my communication daily. My kids are getting older so the context is different in the way I communicate with them. I'm learning new skills and new ways of parenting as they grow. It's the same in the workplace, depends on the situation that you're navigating, depends on the complexity of the problem, the players associated with the problem, the changes therefore dissolve and changes the nature of the conversation.

Beth Hall:

One of the key things we want with our tools is for them to be reused. We don't want anybody to ever go, okay, tick, I've done that I'm now moving on to the next piece of learning. And we have found that, that our content because we can obviously track it from a learning management system perspective, our content is being reused which is great.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep. Just remind me the size of your total workforce and of course we didn't recap you are in the retail industry and it's fast-moving fashion goods predominantly, isn't it Beth, the industry?

Beth Hall:

Yes, we are in the retail industry. We're in 20 countries now and we've got 8 brands. We've got 22,000 team members across the globe and they come from three different workforces. We have our distribution centre workforce that get all of our goods to stores or to our online customers. We have our support centre workforce that is building the product, making the product, marketing the product, supporting our countries across the globe. And then we have the largest part of our workforce, which is our retail team that are working there out in stores in those 20 countries.

Michelle Ockers:

And how many leaders would you have across the organization? Just roughly.

Beth Hall:

Right now a couple of thousand. If you think the 22,000 includes the peak workforce too, the work during those holiday times.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And the reason I asked this, you've got 2,000 leaders who you are now saying, here's your tools you self-facilitate using these tools. How have the leaders responded to that? And I guess in terms of kind of mindset and have they embraced it or have there been some issues you've needed to work through? And also their skillset to just pick up and run with the tools helped. Mindset and skillset in terms of the leader response and their ability to just pick it up and run with it.

Beth Hall:

Mindset has been "Thank you." Thank you so much for giving me the road map if you like to be able to generate and lead a great conversation with my team. They've loved it. We've had some really great uptake and really great responses from them. Some of them have been like, "Hey, can we do train the trainer?" We often get those kind of requests to go through

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some of the session with them and we do that. We went to train the trainer across the globe just to give them that additional context and support if they need it but we find that they don't. We find that they know their business, they know their team and it's actually just a confidence thing, really. The mindset's been really great and the shift has happened organically.

Beth Hall:

In terms of skillset, I mean they're leaders so they're used to inspiring a team, they're used to engaging a team, they're used to communicating with the team. It's not a far stretch from being a great leader to being a great facilitator. The biggest shift I guess is that as a manager, you often are in that position of telling and providing direction to a team whereas asking them to lean more towards their leadership skills where it's you're facilitating, empowering, you're enabling your team. You're asking them great questions as opposed to telling them. It's actually a shift that is supporting them with their journey from management to leadership too which is a real positive we've found by rolling out programs in this way.

Michelle Ockers:

It's quite a different model to the model that's still in place in the majority of organizations where facilitation is done by specialized facilitators often within the learning and development team, or you bring in an external facilitator. And I know from conversations with other learning leaders that there's sometimes this wistfulness around, I just wish I could make changes. There's a resistance. People expect to be trained. "I keep getting asked to train people." You don't have that issue and your leaders have actually said, "Thank you." Is there something special about your culture about Cotton On that made it easier where you didn't face resistance, where this shift was welcomed rather than resisted?

Beth Hall:

I guess our culture is very much focused on personal leadership. It's one of our values so actually taking ownership to solve problems yourself. I think our induction says a lot about our business in the sense that we don't spoon feed people information. Yes, there's a set of information that they need as part of their induction that they wouldn't be able to find out if we didn't share with them, but we don't kind of develop them in a vacuum whereby we plan their first month., we plan their first three months to know exactly what they're doing every single day because that's not life. And I think if you set people up in the induction to be curious, to have a growth mindset, to be open, to solve problems themselves, that is real life therefore post induction they don't feel like having grown up and developed in this vacuum and now real life has taken over.

Beth Hall:

I guess from the moment they join us, that's the expectation. The expectation is seek and you will find, ask great questions you'll get great answers. If you want a mentor go find one. If you don't know how to use a piece of equipment, go ask someone. Because of that we've kind of created that culture of curiosity anyway, which therefore has meant that our leaders just love developing their team. That's part of the culture too. So we talk about the performance metrics associated with them running their part of the business unit but we say, your number one job, your number one responsibility is to develop and engage your people.

Beth Hall:

Because of that, giving them the kind of rule book on, hey, here's how to do it. Here's some great questions and some great things that you can do. It's like, "Thank you. Thank you for helping me to do my job better ,"as opposed to, "Oh, you're now asking me to flex a different skill" because the reality is if they can't ask great questions and they can't develop their

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team, then they're probably in the wrong seat anyway as a leader.

Michelle Ockers:

It makes me think that recruitment, and thinking back to recruitment and the type of people you're recruiting is important too. Is that a link that's consciously made or do you think there's something different or special about the way Cotton On group recruits people so that they fit into that culture of autonomy, self-direction, resourcefulness.

Beth Hall:

We're definitely very clear when we recruit on our values and what is the COG way. We've actually captured the COG way really clearly and articulate it similar to what Netflix did a few years ago. It's really clear the expectation to keep things simple, to use that curiosity. We promote a lot from within. One of the metrics that we look at from a development team perspective is we go what's our internal fill rate, because if our internal fill rate is good that means that we're developing and retaining our people and giving them the skills to go to the next level. Because of that when you do become a leader at the group you've already been a recipient of that form of development. Again, it just feeds that culture of this is just normal around here.

Michelle Ockers:

That's a great metric and it's not one I often hear learning people talk about-

Beth Hall:

Oh, really?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, it doesn't come up often when I talk to people about how do you evaluate how well you're performing?

Beth Hall:

Oh, wow that's my number one. That's my number one metric. Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

I imagine lots of people are scribbling a note around that one right now, if they're not already looking at that to go and take a look at that. Really powerful, really powerful. This sort of evolution of facilitating to solve through to setting up leaders to be able to do their own facilitation to guide great conversations using a toolkit, what did it take to actually shape those toolkits? Was there a lot of experimentation? Was it really clear like from day one, this is what it looks like? How did you actually go about developing and putting out and testing those toolkits and the approach that you wanted to take with managers self-facilitating?

Beth Hall:

Well, in order to drive consistency across my department we already had PowerPoints with facilitation notes underneath, within the note section of the PowerPoint. Really it was as simple as making them available. Previously they were held in a file that my team had access to. We said one day we cannot handle the number of requests. The number of requests for development had gone up dramatically and we kind of said, "What's our approach here?" And my response was, "I don't want to add additional head count. I actually don't think we should be responsible for developing people at the group. I think leaders should be responsible for developing their own teams because if every leader in the

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business developed their own teams, we all win."

Beth Hall:

Coming back to that philosophy of we're here to enable people or we're here to enable and empower people, to be able to think critically and do things differently, it was a no brainer for me of, well, let's just give them the recipe and they can go cook for themselves. Here's the recipe it's on our learning management system, go get it. You don't need to ask permission. You don't need to speak to a person and they can also play with that content however they like. If they're leading through a change moment and they have a challenge with influence, they can take the influencing pack, they can take the change pack and they can go, "Okay, how does this play together? How do I use these two things together?" Again, we're not sheep dipping people through the same way of thinking or the same way of working. They can have a play with those tools and find what's right for their people.

Michelle Ockers:

And so how do you make sure that the leaders know what's available, where to find it, how to find it?

Beth Hall:

It depends what the subject matter is as to how we would drive them to it. Probably a good example at the moment is wellbeing. Wellbeing is a massive focus I imagine for most learning departments across the globe. It was a huge part of our offering pre-pandemic but then when the pandemic hit, the acceleration of that need for our people meant that we actually said, "Okay, how do we support them more? How do we enable them more with the tools that we have?" As a learning department, we went and grabbed the rem & ben department. We went and grabbed the comms department. We went and grabbed the safety and risk department and we said, "We have all of this amazing stuff around wellbeing and how do we actually bring that all together for our people in order for them to be able to access what they need at the time that they need it?"

Beth Hall:

We launched on our internal internet that's accessible to everybody around the globe, a page it was called HealthiestYou and it had everything they possibly needed in there. They could go and access their benefits. They could go and access our EAP provider. They could go and access all of their development content. We still house all development content within our LMS but we create different, I guess, entries to the elements. Everything within that HealthiestYou page has an example pointing back. And then there was a social media campaign that also pointed back to the LMS. What we're finding is language is so key with these kind of things. When we launched our mental health program we actually didn't call it mental health. We called it Healthy Minds and the reason why we called it Healthy Minds is that everybody has varying degrees of health when it comes to their mental condition.

Beth Hall:

And we didn't want to make it about a certain stigma or a certain conversation around mental health. We called it Healthy Mind and then we attached the concept of a battery because no one at Cotton On Group would ever let their battery on their phone run out. We attached it to the concept of a battery and we basically created this language is where's your battery at? And within learning program, there were four different levels of the battery from feeling off all the way through to not in a great place. And it helped. This is what I do as an individual when I'm feeling like this, this is what I do as a teammate to support my teammate if they're at this stage of the battery, and this is what I do as a leader. They had all of the guidelines

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and the support and the questions that they needed to be able to navigate healthy minds.

Beth Hall:

But then what happened is we started to create this language across the business of where's your battery at. And it really took the the fear and the stigma around having that conversation. People will start their meetings with where's your battery at? Okay, I'm feeling off. You said that last week, that's two weeks now that you've been feeling off. What, do you need to have a conversation? I think placement of your points I mentioned last time we spoke, so that we listened to this morning about nudging and I was playing with nudging off the back of our and talking to nudging and learning and that's examples of how we've nudged. We've nudged by social media. We've nudged by the intranet, we've nudged by the leader asking where's your battery at because we've created a language and a trigger that's become part of the culture but all of those conversations point back to the LMS to be able to get the source.

Michelle Ockers:

Lots of cueing and nudging. I like that. And there's a lot more interest now. I think you're a bit ahead of the curve around looking at behavioural science and nudge theory, and how do we apply that? There's a lot more interest now in that whole area across learning. That's a really nice example. Have you found during COVID that your content has had to change much? Or is it more because, you talked about context and people's context . Well, the context has been different during COVID. Have you had to adjust content or has it been more about that like the example you just gave us around mental wellbeing? What was the phrase you just used? It was a lovely phrase and it's gone out of my head straight away.

Beth Hall:

About Healthy Minds?

Michelle Ockers:

Healthy Minds. Thank you. That's around not necessarily having to change a lot of content but how it's presented and how it's supported and made accessible. Have you found that in order to respond to the different context it's been more of that kind of thing or have you had to also look at content, have there been gaps in your content? Have you had to refresh content to make it fit for use to meet the demands of the different context during the pandemic?

Beth Hall:

There is some basic things that we've had to do with content. For example, how to respond to COVID from a physical perspective in stores, or working closely with the risk team to make sure that our people are safe. Definitely there is COVID related development content without a doubt. In terms of the rest of our content, it's not really the content that's changed. It's more the methodology that's changed. For example when we go into lockdown all of our teams were closing our stores.

Beth Hall:

They're at home and it's a great time for them to develop and it's a great time for them to be able to focus on themselves and set some goals and what it is they're going after. We already had a development plan. We already had the ability for them to use the tools on the learning management system but we said, wouldn't it be awesome if we were to run global development planning sessions whereby the person in Johannesburg is having a chat with the person in Sydney and they're sharing what's happening within their lives. They're feeling like they're part of something bigger than themselves. They're connecting across the globe

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from a wellbeing perspective but also we're guiding them through the completion of their development plan.

Beth Hall:

And they're all working across the globe on a separate document that is unique to them but they've got a facilitator that's helping to guide and support them through it. Different things like that. Bringing our EAP provider in for an interview so they get to watch a kind of a fishbowl conversation happening between the development department and the EAP to try and understand what they do and how they do it. We've done things like that to help people feel connected. For many people I imagine listening to this, they've had to induct people during lockdown. We needed to flip our induction. Induction had a key component that was an exploration of our global support centre and walking around and meeting people and going to stores and having conversations about our products.

Beth Hall:

It was very tactile. It was very using all of the five senses was our day one at Cotton On Group. We call it the best first day ever. And it's a big part of our culture in really understanding our culture and who we are so straight away, we had to flip that to be a digital induction. Therefore we had to think differently about how we would do that. We're really focused on belonging at the moment, we're building out a belonging program and really working on how do we help our team members globally feel part of something where they feel seen, they feel heard, they feel included.

Beth Hall:

Induction experience is a big part of that too. Now, most people are working in a digital workplace so we talked about culture a lot last time but what is the culture of a digital workplace? That's very different and how do we help inform that and how do we help? Everybody is a cultural contributor, how do they contribute to our culture when they're working remotely and not having those ad hoc conversations? Again, we've had to think differently as to how do we facilitate and enable that too, which is we've still not got a head around yet. It's still a work in progress as to what that digital culture is.

Michelle Ockers:

What are your insights at this stage? I know it's still a work in progress but what are your insights or hypotheses around what does contribution look like in a digital environment? How can people be part of the culture in a digital environment? Because it's something everyone's grappling with right now, right?

Beth Hall:

Yeah, it is, and I was fortunate enough to have a really good conversation with Owen Eastwood who's written a book called Belonging and I asked him that question. I said, "In this hybrid world, how do you go about creating belonging when you often don't physically meet someone. For some of our global team, it will be years before they actually get to physically meet someone." And he had some really great tips around value alignment and the different exercises that we could do in order to be able to understand what is driving them versus what is driving us. I think that providing those tools to our leaders is one way of creating belonging and creating that culture and subcultures within the business because I don't know the learning and development that's going on across the group.

Beth Hall:

I know they're using our packs. Those packs are aligned to the COG way, they are aligned to our values. They are aligned to our culture. I guess in that sense as a development team,

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we have a huge responsibility when we're putting words in those leader's mouths to make sure that they are aligned with who we are as a business and the kind of questions and the kind of approaches that we would want to create and maintain a great culture. And so I take that responsibility seriously. We do agonize over every word that goes out into those learning bites and into those training packs. I think things like that will hopefully make sure that the culture and the cultural contributors are still alive and well.

Michelle Ockers:

We'll put a link to the book by Owen Eastwood in the show notes for people who'd like to take a look at that, Beth. You said something really interesting there that I want to pick up on. You said you don't have visibility of the learning. You can see that maybe people are downloading a pack to have a conversation but you've no idea what they're doing with it, really what problems they're addressing with it, what impact it's having. How do you know if your team is meeting its goals? What are your team's goals? How do you know if you're hitting those? How do you measure your performance?

Beth Hall:

Yeah, great question. We measure our performance on internal fill rate that I just mentioned earlier. We measure on retention. If our people are staying development and wellbeing is a huge part of that and we play as a development department role in making sure that that happens. We look at our engagement survey. Our engagement survey has a questionnaire that asks them whether they are being developed in their role. Straight away we get a quantitative response to that every six months but we also get qualitative comments in there that help really guide our thinking and approaches to what is it that they're not getting that they possibly could.

Beth Hall:

We do have the kind of moments like everybody's saying, where's your battery at that make us go, "Yes, we're onto something here. This is working." When we start to kind of hear and see across the business that we can attribute back to a piece of work that we did that gives us a kind of nod in the right direction. An example is some leaders send some care packs out to a team in Sydney that have been locked down for a while and we had nothing to do with these care packs. This was leaders just working together to be able to support their team and the wording on it was directly from our wellbeing learning bite. They'd lifted the language and put it directly into the message for their team. It's things like that, that kind of give us the nod to say, we're going okay.

Beth Hall:

Now I know we've probably got lots of learning people listening and they will look at the learning management system metrics. Yes, we do look at them. We don't ignore them. We have about 1,000 learning bites on our system and we have about 28,000 learning bites viewed every month. We watch that. We watch that as it goes up and down because that tells us what are they looking at? What are they interested in and particularly if we launch a new program.

Beth Hall:

During lockdown we launched our emotional intelligence program. A couple of reasons, one we wanted to really focus on how do we elevate that leadership skill and EQ is a huge part of that. And secondly, there's a big component about yourself perception and your self-regard and how you feel about yourself and as part of that wellbeing piece we felt that emotional intelligence could really support our people. That's not something that was necessarily COVID driven but I was in lockdown and I was like, what's next? Okay, EQ I'm interested in this let's jump into it. Let's figure out what it's all about,

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how it works.

Therefore it was a program born out of lockdown but not necessarily because of lockdown. And we'll watch that really closely on the LMS. Who's picking it up, who's looking at it and how often are they going back to it? Yes, they're going back multiple times. Why? Is it because it's too difficult? Is it because it's just really interesting? We will look at those kinds of metrics as well just to inform those tactical operational decisions that we make.

Michelle Ockers:

At an individual level, what does learning look like for your... Do you call your staff associates? Do you have language around your staff?

Beth Hall:

We call them team rather than staff and it's interesting it's like I had a physical reaction when you said staff.

Michelle Ockers:

I know. It's so hard to find the right language. I hate using the word learners because it's like, they're people who are part of your organization. I find it really hard Beth to find elegant language to differentiate between when you've got people who are in leadership roles and then you've got other people who work in your organization who aren't in leadership roles. Help me, what language do you like?

Beth Hall:

Yeah, so team. The reason why we like the word team is because that creates belonging. It removes all hierarchy and the reason why personal leadership is one of our values because we believe everybody is a leader. Now, yes, there'll be a leader structurally that is accountable for a certain amount of people but equally you're a leader and a decision maker every day but it's interesting, like I had someone ring me the other day and just ask me questions around some challenges they were having with their people and throughout their entire conversation, they kept on referring to them as them. They do this, they do that, the staff do that and it's like there's your problem.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, I don't like the word either. I'm 100% with you. For a team member at an individual level, you talked before about people having development plans, obviously there's opportunities where leaders will pick up on your toolkits and facilitate but if I were one of your team what would learning look like for me and how would I recognize it? Because it's an issue I often hear from learning and development leaders, if people aren't going on training courses, they don't recognize that they're learning because that's their view of learning. How, what would my experience of learning be like as a team member at Cotton On Group and how would I know that I was learning?

Beth Hall:

You can access the same things that your leader can access. We truly believe in equity when it comes to development. Everybody has access to everything so that everyone has the opportunity to become a leader and progress throughout the business should they want to which is also supporting our internal fill rate because people can actually access the content and level up their thinking before an opportunity is available and therefore they're ready to take that role. They'd be able to access all of those packs and they were creating their own little session for themselves where they answer some of those questions. There's three kind of buckets or areas that they would be able to access in terms of content. They can access development content that helps them to perform in their world. Whether that be

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how to use a system any kind of compliance programs, induction that kind of stuff, the technical knowhow that they would need in order to be able to perform in their role at the group.

Beth Hall:

They then have access to a whole load of content of how they perform in their life. That's the wellbeing, the emotional intelligence stuff, the personal leadership stuff around time management and effectiveness and things like that. And then they have a whole suite of programs around progressing their career. If they're performing in their life and they're performing in their world, what's next for them, what are they going after? And that's where they'll find all their management programs and leadership programs. We've got a brand new partnership program because we really believe that a big component of being a great leader is being a great partner, particularly within a matrix organization. They would be able to access all of that. When I say content it's very question driven. Our entire emotional intelligence program is questions. The whole thing is questions.

Beth Hall:

And what they do is they almost self-diagnose as to based on the answers to those questions. This is where I know my gap is. And then they get suggestions on how would you close that gap? And the suggestions are very much about habit changing as opposed to, okay, you have a gap here, go and do these five things and you've now closed that gap. Those habit changing nudges that we give them to be able to retrain that neurological pathway to think differently and operate differently in order to be able to make that shift based on what they've diagnosed, their shifts should be. That's the kind of content we're talking about as opposed to instructions.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Interesting. Again, leaning more into behavioural science. I've been reading Katy Milkman's book, How To Change. I don't know if you've come across that. It's fascinating. She just studies, researches, habit formation and it's really interesting to see what the research actually says and how much is folklore or maybe it's intuitively appealing but there's been no research into it. It's great to hear that that's being drawn into your work. I've got another question I want to ask but before I ask it, I'm going to preface it with the fact that I'm a big fan of the longitudinal benchmarking work that was started by Towards Maturity and is now conducted by Mind Tools for Business into high performing learning teams and what are the practices that are high-performing learning team uses.

Michelle Ockers:

And one of the things that they have consistently found, I think the research has been going for about 20 years right now, is that there's actually no linkage between the technology you use and the impact you have. That it's not about tech, but I'm curious all the same, Beth in terms of your use of technology to support and enable performance has that shifted in the last two years? How do you think about technology? What sorts of technology do you use beside the LMS or is it pretty much the LMS and your social intranet you've talked about?

Beth Hall:

Yeah. We are not techies at all, so I'm glad that's the research. I used to have a few techies that worked with me that loved the concept of chat bots and how do we use augmented reality and how do we stimulate, this is what the store is like they do with the how to fly a plane and things that they do at Qantas. We've not even really dabbled with it to be totally honest with you, Michelle. We're so focused on real life and not trying to stimulate anything or not trying to make something separate from where the work is. We really truly believe that learning and work are one. Because of that, we've not wanted

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technology to override or interrupt people just go in about what they do on a day-to-day basis. And we're just the nudges or the interrupters within their day to get them to think differently or shift the behaviour. That's probably why we've steered away from it.

Michelle Ockers:

I mean there are some interesting platforms available now that feed nudges out to people which I did an episode a little while ago with Michael Blaxell from Humm Group and Michael Tan from, no Graham Blaxell and Michael Tan from Elenta where they use nudging through either email or text messages and so on. And I think some of that is less obtrusive than having to go away to use a piece of tech but nonetheless, I completely respect your position and the impact that you're having without getting too fancy around different technologies. What about time? That's often cited as a big barrier for learning. I don't have time to learn. Is that something you hear people talk about at Cotton On Group or have you addressed that issue in some particular way? Do you have a strategy you've used around making sure people have time to learn?

Beth Hall:

My immediate response to that would be, it's not a time issue it's a prioritization issue. Because we empower our team to make their own judgment calls as to how they spend their time. If we think about right now we've just been informed across our entire state that there's no daycare open as well as no school open. If those people told me they had no time, I'd say, "Hey, you're working full time. You've got children at home. How are you juggling?"

Beth Hall:

I'm not suggesting for a moment that the time factor doesn't exist but equally I find that people that prioritize development and are focused on development will find the time, same as fitness. People will find time to go to the gym and same as people make time to spend time with their friends. I think my response would be, is it important to you because if you're not finding the time I would suggest that you're not seeing, you're not being driven by a specific goal. I'd be asking you, where's your development plan because if you don't have a specific outcome that you're going for a specific goal that you're coming from it can just, oh, that I'll wait till tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow never comes.

Beth Hall:

And so I think development plans are a really great vehicle for that because they help bring to people's attention and front of mind how they're going. Whilst we don't have the technological nudges we do have a lot of nudges whether it be on the point of sale in retail or on our socials or via email, where we're nudging people to have a development conversation with their manager. That also makes it a priority because that shared accountability once you tell someone you're going to do something and you're going to develop you kind of it's a lot easier to let things fall off your day when you've already told yourself and you only let yourself down whereas sometimes actually sharing your development goals or your wellness goals actually makes you feel more accountable for it. Anybody listening to this that is like, yeah, I don't find the time to go tell a bunch of people what you're going to do, and you will find the time.

Michelle Ockers:

And there's plenty of evidence around creating that external accountability about that really working. It's one of the reasons I blog too, Beth. If I say on my blog, I'm going to try something then I'm on the hook to try it. The same kind of principle. When you look back over the two years, is there anything else that you think has shifted, evolved substantially

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that we haven't talked about yet?

Beth Hall:

I think one of the things that has come about, I don't know whether it's due because of the pandemic or because of the types of needs that are coming up for our people more and more but I'm really finding that in the development field, we actually have a real opportunity to be social innovators and to use the skills that we have in being able to make the complex simple and being able to help give them support and guidance, to be able to shape behaviour and shape attitudes or approaches to things that we can actually make some real positive change for people and be those social innovators.

Beth Hall:

We definitely did it with Healthy Minds. We're hoping to do it with Belonging and it just excites me to see what we can do with these instructional design and facilitation skills that we've got over the years as an industry to start shaping and also having a conversation with a fellow development leader. And they were asking me about the Healthy Mind program and I was talking to exactly how we did it and how it played out. And they said, "I just think that's HR's job." And I was like, "I don't want to disagree with you more." We need to get some skin in the game as development people. This is our time there. That's what people are looking for when they're looking for a workplace, they're looking for will they develop me? Will I leave that workplace better than when I arrived? And that's the challenge that I have every day is as people come and go throughout the business, do they leave having a better skillset, a better set of behaviours or leadership competency or whatever you want to call it than when they arrived? Because if they have, I've done a great job. To your point of what do I look at I also look at ex interviews. I want to understand what their sense and feeling of the business is. If they do leave us and why are they leaving us? Because if that's ever because they're not being developed, I take that as my personal performance appraisal that I need to step up and do something differently. I'm excited about what our industry can do and the social innovators that we can be.

Michelle Ockers:

I really like that question around well, what is our job? And I think the way we think about our role, the way we think about the people that we serve in our organization, the way we think about how we work with others and our interdependence are all critically important to open up our sense of possibilities and how we might be able to have an impact. I think you've touched on something there. And you've talked a lot about partnerships. You've just mentioned consistently throughout this conversation working with Safety, working with Risk, working with Comms, working with HR. Yeah, it just feels like partnerships are just part of the way you work, Beth. Who do you work with most often?

Beth Hall:

Yeah, I should add IT to that mix, really. With all of the focus on systems, IT is definitely a key partner. I actually don't think that's isolated to the learning department. I think partnership has become a huge part of leadership across all organizations, particularly ours with it being a matrix structure. But I think partnership ultimately that alignment upfront and that bringing together our various different skillsets in order to have a bigger impact is so important.

Beth Hall:

Learning is the vehicle in my mind as to how do you... It's the kind of end point of how do you affect change and how do you but the comms team are the ones that are going to drive that team to the learning and the development if they buy into it. You don't have to go through the pain of the brief sheet and everything else. We tend to

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brief our comms team on concepts of this is what we're trying to achieve. This is what we're going after. This is what we believe and we get them excited. We get them interested in what we're doing. It's then really easy when we say, "Hey, it's ready." Because they're wanting to go and they feel like it's their program too. It's really just about getting that buy in I think upfront.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. It's not just skillsets you're tapping into either is that it's diverse perspectives and different domain expertise that brings something to the table that just because of our own expertise and our own entrained thinking, we can't see potentially as well.

Beth Hall:

Yes, definitely. That diversity of thought is really key to make sure the product hits in the right way and helps not hinders people because I think it's like creating content and sending out that to the masses. You either drive belonging or you drive separation and people feeling like I can't access this, I don't understand this. There's a really fine line between stretching people and breaking people. I'm actually getting that lot of diverse thought and opinions into the mix prior to launching the program, I think is really important.

Michelle Ockers:

You've spoken a bit about the Belonging as something you're exploring at the moment. I guess that's on your list of goals or aspirations and plans for the rest of this year. Are there any other significant goals that you have in the coming six months?

Beth Hall:

Wellbeing and belonging are definitely the top two because they're the top two that are really relevant to our people. I mentioned about this digital workplace culture and what does this look like? That's also really high on our radar. It's a moving target as you're feeling and experiencing yourself. We don't know where we're going to land post-pandemic and what that will look like in terms of our workplace. We're just keenly watching that, keeping an eye on it, making some early decisions but not necessarily locking it in for the next year.

Beth Hall:

I imagine it's going to be a huge focus for the department and then we're going through a bit of a refresh. Content relevancy is really key. Some of the content, some of those thousand learning bites that are sat there have been sat there for up to three years. We do have a kind of cyclical check on certain content where we look at it quarterly but some of that older, regional content needs a little bit of a refresh. We're going to give that a bit of a make-over the next year.

Michelle Ockers:

Great. And at a personal level Beth, looking back over the last two years how would you say if at all your perspective has changed or shifted or how have you developed?

Beth Hall:

Well, I'm studying to be an org psych, so I've developed in lots of different ways through that. I'm about to submit my master's thesis so I've learned a lot throughout that process. I've definitely developed in that way. In terms of the world of work I think I've been developed in being more open and receptive to different ways of working. I think even the first conversation we had Michelle, it was called deliberately differently work - deliberately differently because that's the way I was deliberately different. Whereas now I think I'm focused on how do we shift our industry thinking and not just how do we be deliberately

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different but dance in the same space. I'm going, how do we widen our dance space? How do we work across the business more? How do we as an industry start to evolve and shape who we are and what we do for organizations. In that I'm learning so much around the opportunity and the impact that we can have. Should we think differently about who we are and what is our role within organizations?

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. I'm going to add a link in the show notes to an eBook that I worked on with Laura Overton and Shannon Tipton. We've got a partnership - we call it Emerging Stronger. One of the pieces of research that we turned into an eBook was around five thinking habits for L&D to emerge stronger and it touches on a lot of what you've spoken to. And you're familiar I think with the YouTube video, I think it's called the second dancer so where there's one lone crazy dancer at first out there doing his thing and then other people kind of start picking up and joining the dance.

Michelle Ockers:

It's like you're waiting for the second dancer Beth, or maybe there's more than one of us out there and you're thinking about the movement and the wider impact you can have. I think you're doing a fabulous job and I think lots of our listeners are going to get again, an incredible wealth of insight out of what you've shared today. Thank you so much for your generosity in coming back and speaking about your work and your thoughts and that org psych study, it shows in a lot of the approaches you talked about. Thank you so much.

Beth Hall:

Thanks for having me, Michelle. I really appreciate it.

Michelle Ockers:

Pleasure. And for anyone who would like to connect with Beth we'll put a link to her LinkedIn profile in the show notes. Thanks again, Beth.

Beth Hall:

Thanks.



Learning Uncut are learning and development consultants that work with learning teams and/or business leaders to accelerate learning transformation. We specialise in supporting organisations to create or update their learning strategy, enhance their learning team's capabilities, align learning to business value, and implement modern learning approaches.

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About your host, Michelle Ockers



Michelle is the founder of Learning Uncut. She is an experienced, pragmatic organisational learning strategist, L&D capability builder and modern workplace learning practitioner. She also delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events.

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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