Michelle Ockers:

I'm welcoming back Damien Woods who has changed roles since the last time we spoke with him. About a year ago Damien commenced in a new role at 7-Eleven as a stream lead in an organisational transformation program. In Australia 7-Eleven has shifted to an Agile structure. We explore why this decision was made and what it means for learning in the organisation. This is the fourth Learning Uncut podcast episode that has been specifically about adopting agile practices. All these episodes are listed in the show notes for you to explore further. This one is the most extensive example.

Damien states that agile fosters growth and learning. We discuss the opportunities that this presents to develop continuous learning practices. Of course, you don't need to be in an agile organisation to enable continuous learning and build learning culture. We talk about takeaways for learning professionals working in more traditional structures.

Damien refers to the Building Learning Culture program that I co-host with Nigel Paine. Through the program we've been guiding several of the 7-Eleven Learning and Growth Chapter members to shape their learning culture vision and take action toward this. This is a public program. Anyone who is thinking about or ready to take action to start or reinvigorate building a learning culture is welcome to join an upcoming cohort. There's a link in the show notes for information.

Enjoy this conversation with Damien.

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome back to learning uncut, Damien. It's great to have you here again.

Damien Woods:

Hi, Michelle. Yeah, great to be back. Thanks for having me.

Michelle Ockers:

There've been some changes for you from a work perspective since we last spoke on the podcast. You were with National Australia Bank, you're now with 7-Eleven. I think most listeners ... 7-Eleven is a global company, right. Am I right?

Damien Woods:

It's global. Although in Australia, it's a domestic franchise in fact, it's a privately owned business in Australia.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. Let's just start with a conversation about who 7-Eleven is.

Damien Woods:

Yeah, sure. We are the second largest privately owned business in Australia. We're a convenience retailer. We have about 720 outlets across WA, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. Many of those sell petrol as well as products. And we've been in Australia for a bit over 40 years, so around for a long time. It was originally bought by a brother and sister and it's still owned in those families. And we would have, I think in terms of people for the

whole network, between 8 and 9,000 people but in corporate office, about 520 or so.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And so are all of the stores franchise?

Damien Woods:

No, there's a combination of company owned and franchised. A large number of franchisees but increasing number of corporate owned stores as well. It's a combination of both.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay because I think that can create some interesting context for the work that you do in learning and development.

Damien Woods:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Talk to us about your role and when you joined 7-Eleven, what was going on, why you joined?

Damien Woods:

I joined in October last year, October, 2020. I've almost been around for 12 months now. And I actually came in to do something a little different. It was still very much in the learning space but with a bent. 7-Eleven had spent time building their business strategy a little while ago. And there's a number of things that we want to do as a business over the next decade, which see an increasingly different business. And therefore, we had to look at what's the best operating model to achieve that business strategy? And looked at numerous different ways of organizing. We partnered with some consultants at McKinsey to help with that process and eventually landed on Agile as a way of organizing our business so that we could enable the business strategy. That decision was made before I started. A transformation team was pulled together. Someone I had worked with previously at NAB asked if I'd be interested in joining the transformation team. And it was such an interesting opportunity that I jumped at it. And so I came in as what we call the Ways of Working stream lead in the transformation team.

And my job really, was to support the al change by helping people build the right capabilities to adopt Agile and to successfully operate in an Agile enterprise. We had a focus on skills for the whole enterprise. We created a range of new roles. All of people in those roles needed to understand what it meant to be successful in those and learn how to operate in those roles. It was a heavy bent on building organisational capability so that the transformation would stick. And we flipped to Agile on the 15th of March this year. We've been operating in a fully Agile way since then.

And it's interesting, it's probably as tumultuous a change as you could put a business through. It was incredibly ... It's quite different than most changes that I've been involved in organisations where you might restructure a team, reorganise resources a little bit. Quite often, it's a cost out imperative and that stuff. This is really fundamentally about shifting how we do our work so that we can accelerate the pace of innovation, we can create products and experiences for customers faster and we can make it difficult for our competitors to keep up with how fast we're moving. It's a really, really fundamental shift in how people turn up

and experience work each day.

Michelle Ockers:

Is pace of innovation the key strategic reason that 7-Eleven decided to go Agile or were there other drivers which were behind that decision to adopt an Agile operating model?

Damien Woods:

Yeah, that's a big part of it. I think also, we're quite cognizant that change is inevitable. And in fact, the pace of change has accelerated significantly. You want to be able to innovate and move faster. That's a big part of it but I think the other thing is it sets your business up to be more resilient and that comes with ... We've got to change direction and we've got to change direction really quickly because this isn't working and we need to try something else that will work. We know, looking at what's made our business successful in the past, that looking ahead, that won't always be the case. And so we've got to set up an organisation that is able to adapt, to test new things out, work out what our customers really like and to move quickly on those things.

It is about innovation. It's about resilience as well. And I think, at the heart of it, it's how do we meet and exceed what our customers expect from us? Because our customers' expectations change a lot as well. Things like digital disruptions hit every business but in ours as well. We've been a bricks and mortar type customer experience for most of our life but increasingly now, where our customers are engaging via digital channels. And so we probably do about 6% digital interactions with our customers. Our aspiration is to be closer to 30% by the end of the decade. And so that means we've got to change how we think and work as well.

Michelle Ockers:

I was going to ask you a question about end state but as you're talking there, I realize that the end state is that there is no end state, and the end state is being able to continue to evolve, to transform, to adapt, that that's really what you're trying to build the capability to do in the organisation.

Damien Woods:

Yeah. Look, I think so. It is about setting yourself up with this innate ability to evolve and adapt quickly and relatively painlessly. And so Agile allows you to move people around the business to where the work is much more easily than you do in a traditional enterprise because that often requires a restructure to do. With Agile, you form a squad around a particular work need and you put the resources into that squad that you need to get the work done. It's a very different way of operating.

I found it quite fascinating because it is so different than how most of us have experienced work, our professional lives. I feel like we've made huge inroads in that it feels like our bread and butter already only a few months in and we've got a lot to do to really fully optimise the model but for me, it's been an interesting story that not only have we done it, we did it really quite quickly. And we did it in the middle of a pandemic. And so the risks with the change, the scale was enormous but so far, I think it's been very successful in how the dust has settled and how the new ways of working are being established and people are embracing going about their work in a different way.

Michelle Ockers:

What does it look like now? And I guess, it's interesting because you talk about ways of working and then you talk about being the Ways of Working stream lead and it sounded like a lot of your focus is on skills but of course, when we talk about capability, capability building is not just about building skills, right. The actual work method, work approaches are a big

part of it as well.

Damien Woods:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

What's different? What's the same and what's different versus how it was? If you can paint a bit of a picture of where 7-Eleven was maybe six months ago, if I walked into the business now, what I see in terms of how people are working and then I guess, we can talk about into the future.

Damien Woods:

Yeah, sure. I think there are a couple of bigger blocks of change. One is structurally, we're organised very differently. We were a typically siloed, functionally siloed organisation. You had HR and Finance and et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. We now have our bigger building blocks of tribes and they're built around important things. We've got a customer tribe, we've got a product tribe. We've got a channel tribe, which is our store network and we've got a tech tribe. We organise a lot of our people into those and then we've got some centres of excellence as well. The other building blocks in our structure are where people do their work and people do their work in squads now. Each tribe is made up of numerous different squads and the squads come together for a particular purpose.

One squad might be Food Innovation. We want to continually innovate and change our food offering for customers. A squad has got that as their task. And you build into that squad all the people with the skillset that you need. It might be food specialists, it might be brand and marketing specialists. It might be supply chain specialists as well. There might be some need for tech in terms of how you get that offering out via a digital channel. You put all the people with the right skillset into the squad and you give them a very clear direction you need to be delivering these key things. Work happens in squads and then how that work happens is quite different as well. We work in sprints now and a lot of people ...I've seen these terms used in other enterprises, some Agile, some not. And they're sometimes quite misused as well.

For us, what a sprint means, it's a two-week block of work and at the start of the sprint, your squad comes together and they agree on what's going to be delivered in that sprint. And everyone's clear on what they're contributing to that sprint. It's all captured on a digital workspace and work is all allocated out in that way. And there are regular, we call them ceremonies, that happen across the course of those two weeks. At the start of the two weeks, defining what work's going to be done, we call that setting the backlog. We meet on a regular ... We meet on a daily basis to talk about what we're doing each day. We have a daily stand-up. They tend to be quite short. We continually manage that backlog of work to make sure if it's on track, great. If it's not on track, how do we get it back on track? Or do we need to push it back?

And at the end, we do retrospective. We look back and say, "How did we go? Did we meet our objectives? What did we learn? What worked and how are we going to change that in the future?"

And we regularly showcase what we've been building and delivering with the people who are going to end up using it. For someone like myself, my end user is someone who works at 7-Eleven but for other squads, it's our customers. And so it's trying to get the voice of the customer and feedback on the work that we're doing, to make sure we're doing stuff that they actually want and put a value on. That Agile vernacular about sprints and showcases and retros and all that stuff, that's now bread and butter for us but 12 months ago it was a foreign language. And so people have got to change with all of that as well.

And then also the, the roles that exist within those ways of working like a Product Owner and

an Agile Coach and a Chapter Lead, all new roles within Agile and a lot of people doing them for the first time. A lot of people trying to build that capability but it's a very different experience of work for everyone at our business. And I often try and encourage people to reflect on the amount that they've learned in the last six months, simply by doing different things, by working differently, rather than by a formal learning channel. It's just by turning up and doing their job each day, they're learning such an incredible amount of new stuff. And also, you see people's eyes light up when they stop and think about that and say, "You're right. I know so much more about Agile and Agile ways of working and why you do it and the benefit of it than I did 12 months ago. And yes, there was formal training to help me with that but actually, rolling my sleeves up and doing it has made such an enormous difference."

Michelle Ockers:

Learning has been through the experience of working in this way.

Damien Woods:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

The work is done in squads, which are part of tribes. Are squads enduring or is it a bit like because it's a project environment, that you might have a squad that is set up for a certain period of time and then the need that the squad was set up to meet has been met and the squad is closed down, if you like?

Damien Woods:

Yeah, that's exactly what happens. And some of them are more enduring than others. Some squads might exist for a very long period of time because things that they're trying to deliver take a long time but others might be around for a short period of time, deliver exactly what they need and then the people in those squads end up moving into other parts of the business. And so one of the principles of Agile is that you move resources to where the work is and you put the right skills in cross-functional team, so that they've got everything they need to deliver and there's no handing off between this function and this function and this function to get stuff done. You can do it within your squad.

Yeah, they do change. And even in the first few months of being Agile we've had some squads pop up, new squads appear and some squads can deliver what they needed to and the people in those squads have moved elsewhere. And it's much easier to do that, than traditionally, if I needed to change a team in a traditional business, I might need to restructure to move people around like that. In Agile, we just move them.

Michelle Ockers:

How is resource allocation managed then? And how do you decide ... For all the capacity you've got, you've got a certain range of skills that come with people, how do you decide which squads people are allocated to?

Damien Woods:

Yeah, it's a great question. And in fact, I think this gets to the heart of why Agile is a great way of working. Every quarter, we run a process called a quarterly business review. And so it starts at the senior leadership team and the CEO level where Angus, our CEO, sets the objectives for the next quarter and says, "We need to deliver these things."

And there's quite a bit of to-ing and fro-ing to get those right. Once he sets those, they then cascade down. They go to his table, who are the tribe and COE leads. And then each of them bring them down into their part of the business. I sit in the People Centre of Excellence. And so Sharon brings down Angus's objectives for the quarter. And then we basically say, "Well, our contribution to that is going to be these things."

And it cascades all the way down into a squad. The squad actually have to say, "Okay. In the quarter, here's what we're going to deliver and it connects to our COE's objectives, which connect to Angus and the business's ones."

There's this really clear alignment between the work that you do in your squad and how it's meeting the business objectives. Everyone can see that and really, that transparency is fantastic because people have got a very clear line of sight between the work that they're doing in their squad and how they're helping the business achieve its objectives. And as part of that process, there are a couple of elements. One is called big room planning, where you do talk about resources, "What will it take us to deliver these objectives and key results over this next quarter? Have we got the capability that we need? Have we got the capacity that we need? Who are we going to rely on to help us deliver that?"

For me, one of the objectives in my squads, I will need support from procurement and from technology. And so I need to make sure that I'm going to get that. And if they don't have the capacity, maybe I need to push that work back into the next quarter. And then the final thing we do, we call speed dating, where you sit down and you work through those interdependencies and say, "Okay, here are the things I need from each of the different parts of the business. Here's roughly what I think it will take in terms of capacity and capability. Can you help me with that?"

And if the answer is no, we have to come up with a plan B. That big room ... Sorry, the quarterly business review process takes a few weeks each quarter but then at the end of it, you've got absolute clarity from top down as to what people need to deliver in that quarter. And we also deliberately leave a little bit of capacity because you know that there are things that will come into your backlog that you can't plan for but will need to be done. You got to leave a bit of space for that. And sometimes things will come in that have to be prioritized and you'll have to push an objective back into the next quarter but it's actually ... In terms of what am I working on, why am I working on it, when does it need to be done? It's quite fascinating about how it drives the organisation in a consistent direction.

Michelle Ockers:

It's interesting, the point you make there around things will come up. You can't plan for everything and you have to make sure you've got some capacity to flex. It was certainly one of the points last year when I spoke with Krystal Irving from ANZ about their experience of going to Agile, that she said that having some capacity to deal with near-term priorities was really important as well.

We've talked a bit about how work gets done. And I do my work in squads, I end up working on a squad because I've got a specific set of skills that's going to contribute to the outcome allocated for that squad. Where's my home? In terms of people, my own development, my people management, how is that set up?

Damien Woods:

Yeah. The home is actually the chapter at 7-Eleven and not all Agile businesses have a chapter structure. Many do but some don't. And so in terms of that traditional, "Who do I report to and who approves my leave and all of that stuff," that's your Chapter Lead.

My job is a Chapter Lead at 7-Eleven and I have learning people reporting in to me, so that's technically their home. And within the chapter, there are a couple of critical things that are really important for us. Number one, it's your development. My job as a Chapter Lead is to ensure that my learning people are growing and developing their skillset and using all the levers that I've got to do that, they need to be better learning people at the end of the year because of the environment within the chapter.

Our Chapter Leads are a very important population at 7-Eleven. We have I think, 38 chapter instances, so 38 crafts. Some of them are big chapters and so there are more than one Chapter Lead. We've got a big chapter of data and insights people. We've got three data Chapter Leads. Learning is myself and Leanne, who's my co-Chapter Lead in learning. And so that's your home and you have to also carve out time to come together as a chapter and focus on learning and growth as well. And so there's some tension between, "I do my work in my squad and I spend my day working in my squad but I have to keep some time also for coming together as a chapter and learning and growing together as a chapter as well."

And that's a little bit of a tension we're still trying to iron out and make sure it's working really, really well.

Michelle Ockers:

Is there specific time allocated? When I think about speaking with Simon Brown, the CLO at Novartis, they've got a goal. It's not cast in stone, it's not a set policy but the goal is that everybody spends 5% of their time on development and they do a lot to encourage that. Is there a specific allocation of time when the capacity planning is done, for instance? Is there, "Here's what we need to not allocate out to the squad for work because we need it for development and activities that are chapter level?"

Damien Woods:

Yeah. Look, it's an excellent question, Michelle. The honest answer at the moment is no. I'm working on a learning strategy where that's going to be one of the key principles to it because I think if you look at organisations who get learning and growth right and great organisations for building a culture of learning, they dedicate, they carve out and make some time sacrosanct for it. We have the infrastructure for that. And I think, the next little thing is that we need to be really deliberate about saying whether it's 5% or what it might be. That's dedicated time for every individual. Now, whether part of that's spent with their chapter part of it's self-directed, whatever it might be but you need space to be able to invest in your own development. I think the other thing I've increasingly felt when it comes to how you want to approach learning is to make sure that the individual owns it.

And if you're saying, "Your learning and your career is your responsibility and our job will be to help you with that. One of the things we do to help you is to create some time and space for you."

I would like to formalize that in the business. I floated the idea with our CEO and I think it'll be something that we'll probably move to and say, "Okay, there is dedicated time for your personal growth, learning and development."

I think if you look at a lot of businesses that do this well, I think that's a fairly consistent theme that you see because it's hard. We tend to over-commit, that's another early learning of Agile. We bite off more than we can chew. And so we want to make sure that we are ensuring that time for learning and growth is there for people. It's one of the main reasons we've moved to Agile because we believe that it's an ecosystem that fosters growth and learning and we believe there's a business benefit in that. One of the nice things is from the board down in fact, there is a real interest in how our people are learning and developing. And I have numerous really good and challenging conversations with our CEO about it, he's quite passionate about how we're doing it. And that's also a really lovely thing to have when you're trying to build learning into the ecosystem of a business. If you've got a CEO who's passionate about it as well, it makes it a lot easier.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, absolutely. Your point there about creating time and space so that individuals can take ownership for their own learning is a really important one. I interviewed a lady called Catherine Lombardozzi, who has done a lot of research, put out a really good paper around scaffolding, self-directed learning and the environmental pillars or scaffold you can create so that people are able to accept that responsibility because you can't just tell people like, "You're responsible for your own learning" and it magically happens. I'll put a link in the show notes to my discussion with Catherine, if people are interested in following that up. Tell us a little bit more about your chapter then.

Damien Woods:

Yeah. There are 20 ... I think 22 of us and we grew significantly through the change, which is another interesting thing. I think we doubled in size and learning doubled in size through the transformation. One of the things that we wanted to do was to invest in building capability in our store, our store network. We've got team leaders and we've got team members and got thousands of those across the country. We have squads that have designated regions for stores and they might have 60 stores that they look after in those squads. There's a learning person in every one of those squads. And so they're dedicated to focusing into that store network and thinking about how we build capability there. Then we have three squads within the people COE where the remainder of our learning people work. We've got X people experience squads we call them, where we look at the end-to-end experience of people in three different cohorts, our store leaders, our team members and our people in the support office. And so we have quite a range of people from very junior to reasonably senior.

One of the things every chapter tries ... Will be doing, is to build out a forward-thinking profile of what they think their chapter needs to look like in terms of capability, doing a baseline of where that capability is today and having to build out a game plan for getting it from point A to point B. That's something that we will start this quarter. And again, I think that you've got to have a clear strategy to help guide you around what capability profile you want to be building and therefore, where you need to invest in your people.

And so one thing that is important to Agile is that you have a culture of learning, a culture of continuous learning. It's a skillset that I think our chapter needs and so we're investing in that at the moment with a couple of our people, as the program that yourself and Nigel are running, which has been just fantastic in the way it's broadening the thinking and not just for

the guys doing the program but they bring that back to our chapter on a monthly basis.

And it's helping grow the skillset of the entire chapter. For me, that's what gets me out of bed. I love that ability to help people carve out a career as a learning person and build their skillset. And I think increasingly, it's a very different skillset than a traditional learning and development team or function in that the work that we need to do today to be really supportive of the business, actually looks different than it used to look. It's a primary focus for me. And in fact, it's the job of a Chapter Lead, right. It's to be clear about what does great look like for my people and how do I get help them get there?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, it's interesting because your role has a couple of layers then, in terms of capability build because it's about building the capability in your team but it's also enabling the other Chapter Leads to build capability in their teams, right. You've got this couple of levels you're thinking at and operating at.

Damien Woods:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

And you talked about Agile being something that intentionally fosters growth and learning and you've mentioned learning culture, continuous learning. What's your vision for learning? Where do you want learning to be across the organisation in let's say, 18 months to two years?

Damien Woods:

Look, one of the most important things I think ... Or opportunities for us to build little eco systems in every chapter, which are self-sustaining. And so you're absolutely right when you talk about there, I'm focused on my chapter of learning people but also all the Chapter Leads as well because I see them as first cousins of learning. And in fact, really, if they're doing their job really well, they're doing the work of a learning function because they're helping build capability in their chapters. One of the most important things to me and actually, I think it may well be the most important thing, is that we set chapters and Chapter Leads up to be really good at how they foster that culture of learning. Simple things as a starting point, "Are you guys sharing frequently with each other? And if you're not, what are one or two simple things we can get you doing right now to start fostering that culture of sharing within your chapter? How are you collaborating? How frequently are you doing that?"

And this is what I'm really enjoying about the role at the moment, I get a chance to do stuff that you just can't do in a normal business. I'm finding the Chapter Leads actually really proactive and saying, "Can you come and do some work with us?" ... because they're experts in their craft, they're not experts in learning. When they've got someone who wants to help them do their job, they're very embracing of that.

And so next week, I'm running a session with one of our chapters on your professional network and why it's so important to learning. And I want to do an exercise of network analysis across that chapter and say, "Well, who are we connected to? Who are we following? Who are we reading? What are we watching?" And then I'm going to get them to say, "Okay, I'd like you to find two more people to add to your network over the next month. And when we come back together, everyone's going to talk about the two people they brought into their network and why."

Now for me, the value of that from a learning perspective is enormous. And I get to work with the Chapter Leads who are actually starting to say, "Oh, I see what you're saying there. I think that would really help that culture of learning within our chapter."

And so they're quite receptive to doing things differently. Now for me, that's not the traditional activity of a learning and development person but in an Agile structure, we talk about test and learn, try new things. And from a learning perspective, it's a little bit fresh and different for our people. And I talked about that with one chapter earlier in the week and then had numerous of them connect with me on LinkedIn straight after that, which I thought was fantastic. Those are the sorts of things that make me excited about where we're going. I think it's the chapters, they're our key. If we could have really high-performing chapters where they're great at sharing, they're great at collaborating, there's high sense of trust in all the stuff that you and Nigel talk about with learning culture, if we could establish those ecosystems across the business, it'd be a very, very different business in 12, 18 months' time. And I think I am absolutely convinced we can do it as well, so that's quite exciting.

Michelle Ockers:

It's a really high leverage model right, setting your Chapter Leads up to run development, which is their responsibility. You're enabling, they're not outsourcing the development to you.

Damien Woods:

No, that's right.

Michelle Ockers:

You're enabling them and positioning them to be able to develop their people on a continuous basis themselves and to grow the collective knowledge across the group in spaces between people in the group. What I find fascinating, you've got this point in time where your Chapter Leads are probably open to that because they're in these new roles, a lot has shifted, so there's an environment where change is in the air, as opposed to an environment we're trying to introduce it to, say people who have responsibility for development of their teams in a non-agile environment but maybe don't see it as their responsibility, even though they have just as much power to develop their people as a Chapter Lead would have.

Let's just talk a little bit more about the Chapter Leads. Are these people who are ... They've been with 7-Eleven for a while and because of their expertise, they've been given a role as a Chapter Lead. Has there been a lot of recruitment into the Chapter Lead role? What is it about the role at this point in time, that's giving you the opportunity to shape things afresh in terms of how learning happens and their high leverage role in it?

Damien Woods:

Most of them have been with the business for a while and they're experts in their domain or their craft but we have also bought in numerous new Chapter Leads as well. And it's around the things that are really strategically important for our business. Experience design, we've got a new Chapter Lead starting shortly in that space who's really well-regarded in the human centred design space. We've brought in people in the food innovation space who are exceptionally well credentialed in that space as well. We've bought in some real expertise that aligned to the business strategy through the process. We weren't able to fill all the gaps through transformation.

And I think the interesting point with a traditional managers job, because you're right, that is the job of a traditional manager but you've got to think about the system in which they operate. They tend not to be rewarded for how well they do it. Whereas a Chapter Lead is, we're going to sit down with our Chapter Leads and say, "Demonstrate how you've grown the craft in your chapter, it's 50% of your job."

And when I say that as a Chapter Lead, I sit in a squad and spend 50% of my time actually doing work in the squad as well. All of our Chapter Leads are doers as well, they're not just leaders. They're doers too but they're going to have to talk about, "Here's what I've done to develop the people in my chapter."

Now, those conversations tend not to happen with traditional people leaders, although our expectation is that they're doing it. I think that's the system stuff that sometimes constrains this in a traditional business. That said, I've come across some incredibly good people leaders who are very good at this. I remember one of the people leaders at NAB in my previous job, who's in fact Head of Tax, he was just fantastic at it. Was he rewarded for it? Probably not but his people got the benefit of it. And they I think, really loved him for his attention to it. There's quite a difference there.

And in fact, Agile talked about taking the role of a traditional manager and breaking it into three. There's the Chapter Lead focused on developing people, there's a product owner who focuses on the work and getting the work done. They drive the work in the squad and then there's the Agile coach who focuses on, how are we going to get it done? And so traditional leaders do all of that. In Agile, there are three different roles who take on different parts of that. And so the intent is the part that they take on, they do an extremely good job of and so that's what our call to arms for Chapter Leads is, do a really good job of developing your people. And they want to. And so when you're there saying, "And I'm here to help you with that."

They do tend to welcome you with open arms and that's just a great opportunity.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. It's partly about focus and capacity in the role to develop their people, plus the incentivisation through the way their performance is assessed.

Damien Woods:

Yeah, yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, absolutely. Two key differences in terms of levers to make things happen differently. And I like the way you talked about the traditional manager's role being broken down, I think that makes a lot of sense. Something you mention there, you used the word experiment when you talked about encouraging people to go out, build their network, to come back and share who they've added to their network. And this idea of running small experiments and seeing what works, I think is something that you don't have to be in an Agile environment in order to do, right.

Damien Woods:

No. No, you don't at all. I think that's something that anyone can do. I've got probably a slightly better system to help do that in but I think that idea of experimenting and trying something new is something that anyone can do. And if I were in a more traditional environment, I'd probably pick a team I thought were more receptive to trying a new idea. And so I talked about Steve, Head of Tax at NAB. We did some experiments with that team when it came to how they approach their learning and they were successful. And what mattered was, there was a team leader, a manager who said, "I'm up for that, I'm interested in ... Let's try something a bit different."

It's interesting how I connected with Steve in the start. I'd written something on LinkedIn, which he read. I think I would have come up in his feed because I was new to NAB and I was a NAB person. And we connected on LinkedIn before we'd met at work. And we got talking that way. And I realized he was an extremely passionate person about building the capability of his people and his team. My advice, if you're not in an Agile environment, is to find those leaders who are going to be your allies and try some stuff in teams where you've got someone who will help you.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. And it was interesting, this idea of experiments really fell out of the Emergent podcast series I did last year with Laura Overton and Shannon Tipton, where we were exploring what will it take for L&D to emerge as more relevant and effective than ever with the shifts going on with the pandemic? And there were four things that fell out of that. And one of them is experiments and running experiments and the value of that to create shifts. I'd encourage everyone to get on board with experiments and think about what little things can they try, particularly if they're trying to shift practices for learning and move towards more continuous learning practices and building learning culture. I think you're spot on there with that, Damien.

I've got another question about getting work done. The squad is the way work is organised and managed but then within the craft, there are work practices and ways of getting work done. If I'm a member of the Learning and Growth squad ... Sorry, the Learning and Growth chapter, I'm working in one squad and then I'm reallocated to work in another squad. Where will I be in terms of the practice around my craft? Who defines that, what that practice looks like and will my practice around my craft needs to change in different squads?

Damien Woods:

Yeah. It's an excellent question, Michelle. And in fact, the practice is defined in the chapter. And so the Chapter Lead's role is to try and find methodologies and processes and approaches that are best practice and make sense and could and should be replicated. And so a good example of that would be, we have 10 learning people in our squads that face into the stores, the store network. And some of the development needs are ... Or a lot of the development needs are very consistent across the whole country. And so if we've got a better way of doing something, whether it's a customer interaction approach, how do we build great customer experiences? If we can come up with a good way of doing that, we should do it consistently and scale that across the country. And so as a Chapter Lead Michelle, Leanne and I spend time on well, where are the opportunities for consistency and how do we build that in our people? That's very much a challenge for the chapter and the Chapter Leads.

Michelle Ockers:

We've talked a fair bit about continuous learning and continuous learning approaches. There would still be outside of that, I imagine ... You talked a bit there around consistency in a practice to do different things. Your vision for learning I imagine, is not solely about continuous learning out in the chapters as people work but there's an element of it, which is perhaps still course-related. Do you still use courses? Do you still use content? Where do they sit in this vision?

Damien Woods:

Yeah, yeah. We do, yeah. Look, we still use courses. We will probably always use them. I think that formal layer of learning serves a very important purpose in certain circumstances. And we have some formal learning, if you're new as a store leader, we have a program that everyone goes through and it's become increasingly blended but there are formal elements of that which are facilitated. And we do them virtually at the moment but there's definitely a place for that. There's definitely a place for more structured formal digital learning because I think that gives you scale and reach that you can't achieve if you're trying to build your own. We're looking at, who are the providers that will give us that scale and reach from that digital space but the catch that comes with that is for many of our people, it's a new way of learning that they're not used to as yet. Our job is to make it available because our Chapter Lead's actually asking for stuff like that but then we have to think about how do we drive adoption? And that's a behavioural change piece.

You have to think about how you help people move to a different style of learning, where they might be able to access formal but digital programs whenever they need them, when they've not done that before. And I've seen that that challenge exists in every business I've worked in, most businesses have had access to those types of tools but the adoption problem has been very consistent. You usually have a small cohort of people who are actively using and a very, very long tail who don't tend to get any benefit from them at all. For me, the learning people, their job is to be advocates of adoption or to think about ways, whether it's campaigns or for me, it will be chapters and Chapter Leads helping drive adoption and that stuff within their space but yeah, absolutely a part of our ecosystem. And I think it always will be because the other thing about learning, learning is a social thing. We like to learn with and from others and those formal environments give us that as well, which I think is enormously important as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. In this new world context with the vision you've got moving ahead for learning, what's the role of the Learning and Growth Chapter then and how do you ... What are you looking for in the people who join the chapter?

Damien Woods:

Yeah, it's a great question. And I think we talked about this in previous conversations, Michelle. I think the learning professional these days, they're enablers. They're enablers of an ecosystem and they pull the levers to help learning be something that happens every day and they help set the environment up for that. There's an element in my team of being a trusted partner, I would love to have every one of the Learning and Growth Chapter really capable of partnering with the chapter and a Chapter Lead and say, "I'm going to be your guide through this whole learning approach."

And so what you need therefore, is people who are skilled and adept with the various different ways that we can help foster that culture of learning in those chapters. And then good at partnering and consulting and influencing as well. Part of that mindset is a marketing mindset, "How am I going to promote and market the types of things that we're trying to do?"

I just don't think you can escape the need for people to be digital natives when it comes to learning these days as well, having curiosity about, what do we have access to today and what could we be getting more from? We all use Teams all day, every day. Teams is an incredibly sophisticated platform and there are some great things, there are lots of apps you can plug in and turn on that could help foster that culture of learning within a chapter. Our people should understand those things and be continually looking at, what are the other things that we could be using to help foster learning? I want people who are curious, digitally savvy, good at partnering and I suppose in an Agile sense, prepared to test and learn and not get stuff right but bounce back and try something new. Like every part of the business, we've got to evolve and adapt and change and add new things to our toolkit as well. And we've got to do that at pace because business and the world of work is changing pretty quickly.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And these are all things as you described them, that I would think any contemporary organisation would get value from in their own team. It's not just about Agile, it's just you're in a slightly different environment. And because it's still fresh and new in particular, there's probably some openness to these shifts but I think everything you're talking about here in terms of the shift in approaches, in terms of experiments, in terms of getting close to the business, is doable in more traditionally structured organisations but you probably have to work a bit harder to go with pockets of influence. It's not set up quite as well for you.

Damien Woods:

Yeah, agree completely. Yeah. We've had these conversations in previous places, Michelle. And they're no different, right.

Michelle Ockers:

What's going well with the whole Agile transformation and why?

Damien Woods:

I think 7-Eleven is a really interesting business. It's resilient, it's adaptable. Now, it hasn't been all plain sailing. We've lost people. We've lost people who thought, "No, this is not for me." And that's fine. That was always going to happen but I think if you step back and say ... If you compare us today to where we were in January, it is a very, very different business. And so what's gone well, I think we've adopted new ways of working really successfully. We might not feel that and think that because we're still in that painful, "I'm unsure" phase, where you know you're learning new things and you've got to remind people that's the learning space right, when you're outside your comfort zone but there are some awesome examples. We've proven that our timeline to get a new product out, which might've been six months previously, we can get it down to four weeks if you work differently. There are proof points there. We've got really interesting business metrics to measure how we're doing that stuff, so speed to market for example.

A lot of the other business measure is actually a really tough at the moment because our business is really struggling, like a lot of businesses are with the pandemic this year, given Victoria and New South Wales are pretty much in lockdown and that's where our biggest footprints are. I think that also probably is a testament that we're a resilient business, that we've made a fundamental change to the way we work. We're in a historically unique and difficult environment but we're I think, still doing pretty well and we're staying true to the

model and getting better at it, getting more sophisticated about how we do it. I talked about quarterly business review earlier in the conversation, we've done that a couple of times. Now, this time round, it was so much better. And everyone thought, "Yeah, that actually worked really well this time."

You're seeing proof points as we get more mature, that we're getting better at how we do this. And we always talked about, "We're not going to be perfect straight away. It'll take us time to get this right. Be persistent, stay the journey and we'll get there."

And I think you're seeing incrementally, we're getting better but we've still got a long way to go.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. For you personally, the experience you've had this year, what are the most important things you've learned about making this shift to Agile?

Damien Woods:

That's a really good one. First of all, I've worked in Agile businesses. I was at ANZ when they went to Agile and there are Agile principles in a couple of other places. What I've learned now, is I didn't really understand Agile at all. And so being in the heart of the transformation team, I've learned a hell of a lot.

And secondly, it's opened up for me opportunities that I haven't seen before, around if you're a learning person in an Agile business, you've got some really unique opportunities to be a lever of business performance. And I think that that's increasingly clear for me. You always should be no matter ... If you can't demonstrate the work you're doing, the time you're spending, how they're helping the business perform better, you got to wonder whether or not you're working on the right stuff. I think that I've got a much better line of sight now as to how I'm helping and how we're helping the business meet its objectives and the business perform better. Really much closer to learning as a means to an end. And that end is performing better and delighting your customers and et cetera, et cetera. I think that that's been the other really key learning, it's brought that closer for me.

Michelle Ockers:

Which is great to have that opportunity but I really like the way you're talking about the fact that your basic philosophy as a learning leader, it's very consistent with the conversations you and I have had in the past, both in the podcast and in other environments as well. If you've landed in an environment where perhaps you've got more opportunity to realise it, than working through some of the resistances that more traditional organisational structures bring to creating environments of continuous learning and individual responsibility for learning in particular. Damien, with that in mind, in terms of tips for others who'd like to leverage some of the opportunities that Agile ways of working bring but particularly those who perhaps aren't in Agile environments, based on what you've learned, some of the things you're doing in that environment, what do you think others can do without potentially a wide-scale change to their organisation?

Damien Woods:

Look, I think that opportunity to maybe experiment with community of practice, guild, chapter type structure, I think exists in most businesses. And NAB had a couple of those. There was a cloud guild and there was a data guild and they basically serve the purpose of the chapter. They said, "This is an important capability for our business. It's an order winner for us, therefore we really want to focus on building that."

I think you can do that in any business if you're really clear about what are the game changing capabilities in your business where you could actually wrap a structure around and potentially put someone in charge and say, "Okay, your job is to build this capability."

I think that's absolutely something you can try in a lot of places. And we've talked about other businesses Michelle, that you've worked with who do that stuff and build around particular key capabilities, whether you call it academies or guilds or whatever communities of practice.

Michelle Ockers:

Skill networks, the Australian Public Service has introduced them, a model with Professions for some of their strategic capabilities. There's lots of ways of cutting it. I actually quite like some of the alternate language to the Community of Practice language. As much as my heart belongs to communities of practice and I think they're amazing, they can feel a bit optional, whereas language like guilds or professions, establishes a different tone and gives them I guess, a little more authority.

Damien Woods:

Yeah. And there's lots of really good research on how to set up a better practice model for those as well. I'd encourage people to have a bit of a ... our friend Google and have a look at guilds and community of practice, better practice models because there are some consistent things there that help get them established.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, yeah. And you're right, anyone can have a go at that with a little bit of careful thought and strategic positioning in their organisation. Is there anything we haven't covered or that you'd like to speak to before we close out, Damien?

Damien Woods:

Oh, no. Nothing in particular, Michelle. I think that's been a really ... As always, an interesting conversation and hopefully some stuff there that people find useful and interesting.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And I suspect that there are questions that other people have who are listening right now that I won't have asked. I'm going to encourage people to use your LinkedIn profile. The link will be in the show notes and reach out to you if they're not already connected with you. If they've got other questions, it'd be great to have them just asked openly on LinkedIn where I post the episode, so others can join the conversation as well.

Damien Woods:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you so much Damien, for sharing this work in progress at 7-Eleven. And I'm sure we will circle back at some point into the future and see where you've landed and what other

insights you have.

Damien Woods:

Yeah, love to do that, Michelle. Thanks for having me on again.

Michelle Ockers:

Always a pleasure.

 ## About Learning Uncut

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.

We are highly collaborative and pragmatic. We partner with organisations to align learning to their business needs, unleash continuous learning, and build capability to help them thrive.

Learn more about us at our website.

About your host, Michelle Ockers

Michelle is the founder of Learning Uncut. She is an experience, 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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