Michelle Ockers:

In late 2020 I read a booked called The Curious Advantage. One of the co-authors is Simon Brown, who is the Chief Learning Officer at Novartis. The book looks broadly at why curiosity is important to individuals, organisations and societies, particularly as a way of navigating through ambiguity and uncertainty. It also offers a practical framework for putting curiosity into action. It is peppered with examples of how curiosity can be fostered from a range of organisations, including, of course, Novartis.

Simon joined us in the Learning Uncut Emergent series to speak alongside Nigel Paine about Culture and Curiosity. In this episode he is back to dive into how Novartis is creating a culture of curiosity, with a particular focus on the work of the learning and development team. While the L&D team at Novartis is very big - 1,000 people globally serving a workforce of 110,000 - there is much that you can take away and adapt to an organisation of any size.

If you'd like to dig further into being more curious as an individual, or building curiosity in your organisation I recommend reading The Curious Advantage. My copy of the book is jammed full of sticky notes and scribbled ideas and is fuelling lots of little actions. I hope you enjoy both the book and this conversation as much as I did.

Michelle Ockers:
Welcome to Learning Uncut, Simon. It's lovely to have you here.

Simon Brown:
Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here so thank you for the invitation.

Michelle Ockers:
You're joining us from Novartis, where are you? Where are you sitting in the world right now?

Simon Brown:
I am physically in Basel, Switzerland. Looking out at blue sky and sunshine which feels like summer is on its way. Although, we did have snow yesterday so I can't be too sure at the moment.

Michelle Ockers:
The world's a pretty confused place at the moment. And Novartis, of course, is a global

organization. Can you introduce us to Novartis?

Simon Brown:

Yeah, absolutely. So we're a medicines company, presence all around the world. 110,000 associates and last year provided medicines to about 800 million patients around the world. So a big impact that we have.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, massive impact. And probably most of our listeners would have used a Novartis product at some stage, right?

Simon Brown:

Quite possibly. Under either the Novartis brand or also Sandoz which is our generics brand as well. So, yeah. Quite likely.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And tell me a bit about your role in the team that you work in.

Simon Brown:

I'm Chief Learning Officer. I've been in this role maybe two years now. I've been with Novartis for eight years in total. Responsible for all of our learning all across the world. We've got a team of about 1000 people in learning, spread throughout the world in many different roles, supporting all of the different parts of our company. Whether that's the manufacturing area, the scientific research in clinical trials area, our sales force and marketeers in the commercial business, or also a lot of our central functions of IT, supply chain, et cetera.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So there's a lot of variety in the workforce you support there, like that list of functions you rattled off, quite a big range. How would you describe your workforce?

Simon Brown:

It's almost many different, if you like, companies in one from a workforce perspective. So the needs of a manufacturing organization are so different to the needs of a deep science research area, focused either on the manufacturing side, you're physically working with the machines that produce the medicines. In the scientific research side, you're in the labs or working out with doctors on our clinical trials, et cetera. Sales force, generally field based, often mobile although with the pandemic obviously that's created its own set of challenges.

Simon Brown:

Then central functions, maybe more office space or whatever, so completely different workforces, different needs. From a learning perspective, it makes it absolutely fascinating whether it's a very deep world expert in a particular scientific area and how do we work on learning there versus some of the other roles where it may be at a very different level. So it's a fascinating area to be involved in.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, it certainly is. One of the things that I'm curious about, if I can throw that word in for the first time in the conversation, and that wasn't intentional by the way, I'm genuinely curious. This is a conversation largely about culture. So the idea of how do you build a coherent culture with a workforce of that size spread around the world with so much diversity

in their roles. I think let's not go there directly, let's unpack that over time, but I'm really fascinated to hear how an organization... Well, how Novartis specifically has done that.

Michelle Ockers:

There are many, many aspects of learning we could talk about at Novartis, the one we want to talk about today is the idea of curiosity and curiosity as part of your culture and what that's meant for learning and development. And of course, some of our listeners may be aware that you're one of the coauthors of a book called The Curious Advantage, which came out in 2020, is that right?

Simon Brown:

That's right, yes, yes, that's right.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So if you'd like to maybe... whilst the conversation is focused on Novartis, of course it's fueled in part, there's some sort of relationship between your thinking and the way it's expressed in your work at Novartis and some of the stuff you bring to the world in the book. So perhaps if you could introduce the book briefly and talk to us about how you define curiosity, what is curiosity and why is it important to organizations?

Simon Brown:

Yeah, thanks. So the book came about from... In fact, it's during 2019, a couple of people in the space of a few weeks said to me, "You should write a book about the journey that you've been on at Novartis." And I'd never thought about that before but that prompted me to give it some thought and then friends Garrick and Paul that I've worked with for many years, offered to come on the journey of coauthoring it with me as well. So that led to the launch of the book in 2020 and it evolved into being beyond the Novartis journey into actually being an exploration of curiosity.

Simon Brown:

So in there we look at the history of curiosity, we look at a lot of the research around curiosity and why it's so important, particularly now. So I think we all see the ambiguity that's in the world, or in many areas there's no single clear answer where you can look at how it was done 10 years ago and just replicated that model, there's acceleration in technology, there's the impact the pandemic has had in creating a whole other level of uncertainty.

Simon Brown:

Then we see that the change in skills as well, so new to world skills, skills expiring, et cetera. Through the research and through our experience our view is that actually curiosity is a fantastic way of navigating through all of that ambiguity, that uncertainty, and a way to motivate in the development of skills for both individuals and organizations to be able to thrive in the digital age.

Michelle Ockers:

So in a nutshell then, what is curiosity?

Simon Brown:

So we define it, curiosity, as having an attitude of wonder with a spirit of exploration. So the attitude of wonder of wanting to discover more, being curious to find out more, but it needs that spirit of exploration of actually going forward and putting things into practice, and it's not just sitting there and asking questions. There needs to be an exploration of actually going

forward and trying things.

Michelle Ockers:

I love that definition, and I will say people can't see it, I might post a photo online of my copy of The Curious Advantage, I thought it was a fantastic read and I got so much out of it, Simon, so thank you for bringing it to the world and I'd encourage others just to go and take a look at it if you're not already familiar with it.

Simon Brown:

I'm glad you liked it.

Michelle Ockers:

I loved it, I loved it. Which is why I reached out to you to have this conversation. One of the things you talk about in the book, you went through some of the Novartis journey with curiosity, and you state that Novartis has strived to put curiosity at the center of its culture. Where did that idea come from, that curiosity could become the center of the culture of Novartis, sort of when did this start happening and why?

Simon Brown:

So a few years ago, we had a new CEO, Vas Narasimhan, and he identified that culture needed to be a key priority for us as a company and he refreshed what the culture actually looks like and came up with three terms. So inspired, curious, and unbossed. That was inspired by Dan Pink's work around Drive, where he has autonomy, mastery, and purpose. So that was Vas's take of an evolution of those principles.

Simon Brown:

So that work around culture came about very quickly after he came into that CEO role. As a company we then worked on a people strategy, so in 2019 we worked on our first people strategy, I asked didn't we have a people strategy before. We had various HR strategies, which focused on the scope of HR, but here we wanted to actually go broader and look at all the areas that actually touch our people. It might be facilities, it might be IT infrastructure and support, all of these different pieces. So the people strategy covered all of that, and in there we identified three areas that we wanted to differentiate ourselves on as a company, and that was around my growth, my leadership, and my impact. So my impact is am I able to actually have an impact day-to-day, do I have the energy to be able to do so, can I see the impact that my actions have in a small way or even in a big way, the impact on patients.

Simon Brown:

My leadership is if I'm a leader, am I role modeling what great leadership looks like, or if I'm not a leader is my leader supporting me and helping me in what great leadership looks like? And then my growth all around getting access to great learning opportunities and being able to be curious. Those three tie very well to the inspired, curious and unbossed. So impact to being inspired, curious around growth, and unbossed as we call it to leadership.

Simon Brown:

Off the back of that the People Strategy gave us the opportunity to then make the case for how would we differentiate around growth and support curiosity. So beginning of 2019, we had a session with our executive committee and made the proposal to go big on learning and actually invest $100 million additional funds over five years to really ramp up our support for learning and curiosity across the company. That was based on attracting and retaining

the best talent and supporting the business strategy and building the skills that we needed.

Simon Brown:

So that was sort of the path from the decision on culture, as part of our overall strategy we have unleashing the power of our people as our number one priority within the strategy, and that's really underpinned then by the culture and then curiosity being one of three elements of culture.

Michelle Ockers:

So I've got so many places I could take that, there was a lot in that short response. The idea of curiosity, clearly it's pinned to the my growth component. Why curiosity and not growth mindset? Growth mindset has generated a lot of conversation and we've actually had on the Learning Uncut podcast, where Katrina Moss from Shopify had come on and talk about how they've adopted growth mindset as a critical element of their culture. So why curiosity and not growth mindset?

Simon Brown:

Yeah, so I think the work on growth mindset and the work Carol Dweck done and also how companies have adopted it, Microsoft as well being a great proponent of that is fantastic, and I think curiosity aligns incredibly well with growth mindset, but I would say it goes even beyond that. So growth mindset being around we're constantly learning, we're constantly growing. Curiosity being even further to be actually asking questions and experimenting and trying things and learning from what works, learning from what doesn't work. So I would say it encompasses many elements of growth mindset, but it even goes beyond the learning aspect of growth mindset of I'm constantly learning and constantly evolving into also part of that learning is around asking great questions, wanting to try new things, what if we try this and then taking that through, back to that spirit of exploration we talked about in the definition, is actually exploring and learning and finding what works and what doesn't.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. I think that spirit of exploration differentiates it for me, as we had this conversation, and I think about it in the moment. It's more action oriented. Mindset is a frame of mind that we engage the world with, where curiosity, it's almost a verb the way you've used it in the book.

Simon Brown:

Yeah, exactly.

Michelle Ockers:

So what does curiosity look like at Novartis? Like if I moved around Novartis just observing what was happening or had a video camera and I'm videoing and then I'm looking back and playing it and someone else is looking at it, what would I see that would be indicators of curiosity in action at Novartis?

Simon Brown:

I would say we're on the journey so we're still learning and evolving towards being a curious organization, we haven't cracked it completely at all. So I think there's different elements. There's the piece that maybe links most to growth mindset, which is around learning and learning opportunities. So we are actively encouraging people to be spending time learning and we've actually set an aspiration of people spending 5% of their time or 100 hours a year on learning. So there would be visible that people are actively spending that time learning and we've doubled the amount of learning hours people are doing over the last two years as

a company. So that will be one visible element.

Simon Brown:

But then going beyond that into the broader curiosity element would be I think a greater recognition around diverse teams, around the way those teams operate that it's no longer that the leader has the right answer all the time and says this is how we do it, and this is where the culture comes together of not just curiosity but also the unbossed element, that actually within teams there's a more... if I look to the past anyway, there's more of a sense of discovery and questioning and being able to seek out the answer and the way forward as opposed to needing to know the right answer. And given you come back to the ambiguity and the speed of acceleration it's almost impossible in so many areas with the complexity of the world today to be able to say absolutely the way forward is X.

Simon Brown:

And yet, that's the way historically things were done, whereas the curiosity in the company now is okay, let's understand the problem, let's understand the direction that we're going, what are the different ways we could get there, what are the questions we need to ask and understand, and then being able to experiment and try out and discover, and some of those things will work. The other area is then a greater acceptance around things that don't work that okay, we tried that, it didn't go exactly to plan, what can we learn from that, how do we pivot and how do we adjust our way forward?

Simon Brown:

So I think as you look across the company, more and more we see those types of behaviors, those types of ways of working versus the answer is this, here's a three year plan to get there, off you go and we don't change direction as we go through that.

Michelle Ockers:

So some of your work practices have changed along the way as well to bring that to life.

Simon Brown:

Very much so.

Michelle Ockers:

I wanted to come back to this people spending a targeted time, 5% of their time on learning. That's a difficult one, right, to decide whether to go down that path or not.

Simon Brown:

Oh yes, it's a controversial one, yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

It is. How do you measure that, how do you measure whether someone's learning or not, particularly with all this conversation about learning and the flow of work? So unpack that a little bit for me around that decision.

Simon Brown:

It is, it's a controversial one and it's one I absolutely see there's two sides to the argument on this. So people may be sitting there thinking, encouraging people to spend time learning, learning hours is... it's a meaningless metric, it's an input metric, it doesn't talk about impact, even it could generate behaviors that you don't want of people, making learning longer than

it needs to be, et cetera. I understand all of those arguments.

Simon Brown:

But on the other hand, the way I look at it is we were doing 22.6 hours of learning on average per person in 2018, and we took the view that we wanted people to be building their skills, we want people to be developing themselves. When you look at the data around the speed that skills are changing and 26% of the skills we have today will be irrelevant in three years' time, 46% of people have learnt a new to world skill in the last three years. We need to be spending the time on understanding what's changing and building the knowledge and the skills to support us in the future, so we're bringing the most up to date ideas, the most up to date skills.

Simon Brown:

And people struggle with finding the time to do that. So often we hear, "I haven't got time to learn, I haven't got time for my learning I'm too busy." But when you unpack that, what does that really mean? It means that I've taken a prioritization call that is my day-to-day tasks are more important than my learning and my skills development. I always use the example, if we tied someone's bonus to their learning hours then I suspect learning would actually happen to a far greater extent and it would move up the priority list.

Simon Brown:

So it's therefore, someone could make the decision to make their learning, then it comes back to I have personally prioritized it that it's below all these other things. So how do you move it up the priority list? And that's where we say well, by being very deliberate about saying we have an aspiration, we would encourage people to be doing 100 hours a year, spending 5% of their time learning. That will move it up the priority list, we'll also... we'll measure it, we'll look at it across the company and see which teams are doing that and which teams aren't.

Simon Brown:

There's no repercussions so it's not that you'll get a poor performance review or anything, but we can use that data to then help us to see okay, why is this area of the business doing so much less, maybe we need to send more encouraging messages, we need to help people to prioritize it more, maybe we need to look at the workload or whatever to help with that, suggest some tips on how people could fit it in, et cetera.

Simon Brown:

So it gives a way to understand what's happening, it gives a way for people themselves to be able to see where they are against that aspiration. And I deliberately used the word aspiration rather than target because it isn't a target, it is an aspiration that we want people to feel they can do that. And we're still, like everywhere else, we're still challenged when everyone's busy and have to fit it in, but we have seen... we saw a 58% increase in learning hours in the first year and we saw... Well, we've now doubled it in two years up to 46 hours last year. So we've still got a way to go towards that 100 hours aspiration.

Simon Brown:

Then to your question about on the job learning and all of that. So we get the numbers from our core systems, learning management system and other learning systems but we've also made it very easy for people to track external learning. So I've read a book or I've listened to a couple of podcasts, whatever. All of that can get very easily added in with two or three clicks, and we're broad about what people consider as learning. So if I've had lunch with someone and we've talked about what they're doing in a different area of the business and

I've learnt about that particular area of the business and I want to capture half an hour of learning as part of that, fine, include that. There's no auditing of exactly what people have put in in there or whatever. There's no approvals to say yes, I confirm that Michelle has read this book and it's eight hours of time. It's to give us an indication-

Michelle Ockers:

It's more directional, right?

Simon Brown:

Exactly.

Michelle Ockers:

Opening up, still it's not closing down, learning equals this set of activities, it's opening up the range of activities that are considered learning so you can still have a conversation around, there's many ways of learning.

Simon Brown:

Yeah, exactly. And why 100 hours? There's nothing scientific around 100 hours, we chose it as a symbolic number based upon where we were that it required a change of behavior for everyone, essentially, across the company to be able to do it. Even in our heavily regulated areas, we might have 60 hours of operating procedure training, et cetera, but by setting it at 100 hours there's still a behavior change that's needed there of voluntary learning on top of the operating procedure training, et cetera.

Simon Brown:

So yeah, that's the rationale of why and then if that time is spent on learning that's aligned to the business with good quality learning, et cetera, then that has to be a good thing, and we then have other metrics that can show the skills movement over time and other things, so it's a headline metric but it's not the only thing, there's a lot more things that we then manage behind the scenes to understand actually, is that time being spent in a worthwhile way, et cetera?

Michelle Ockers:

Great. And do you try to correlate the learning hours in any way with team or individual performance?

Simon Brown:

So we're doing a lot of work at the moment around how do we link through curiosity and learning to business performance. We've seen some early signs of correlation between learning and attrition, so that the more learning hours, the lower the attrition. So that's a very interesting dynamic that's there. And I know other companies have also made that link that the higher learning, generally people who are doing higher learning hours are at a lower risk of leaving the organization.

Simon Brown:

We've also, from other conversations, I think it's Cognizant Stefaan van Hooydonk when he was there, shared some interesting data around the leader learning hours and the team

learning hours as well and seeing that there's an interesting linkage there as well.

Michelle Ockers:

So it's looking at the impact of role modeling.

Simon Brown:

Exactly, exactly. Which is so important. So yeah, we're doing a lot of work at the moment to try and make that link through between overall curiosity and business impact and also the learning hours as a metric in there and business performance as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Great. So let's talk about going big on learning and investing $100 million certainly was going big on learning.

Simon Brown:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

Tell us about that decision, like what did it take to get that level of investment approved and what were the key elements of the case you needed to put up there?

Simon Brown:

We made the case on two core arguments and one that I talked to as well, so the two core arguments were if we want to attract and retain the best talent, then we need to get great at learning and we have many data points from internal interview studies, focus groups, et cetera. We had an internal idea, cross company sort of ideas generation jam, and the number one idea was around access to vocational learning and two out of the top four ideas were learning related. So there's a very clear message from our associates that they wanted access to great learning.

Simon Brown:

We also see why people join companies and why people stay with companies, all of the external data indicates learning as either the number one or one of the top reasons for people joining and staying. So if we want the best people, we want to retain the best people, we need to get great at learning.

Simon Brown:

Then you look on the more business side and we say okay, we've got these five strategic pillars, and within that there's a key set of skills that we need and we need to get great at learning in order to be able to develop those skills and also maintain those skills, and citing some of those facts around emerging skills of people having learnt new to world skills, of expiring skills, of the need for re-skilling that's cited by World Economic Forum, et cetera.

Simon Brown:

So again, internal/external data, so the backing up why skills are so important, and then some of those themes, data and digital, operational excellence, et cetera, where we need to develop agile working or you need to develop data science, et cetera. And therefore we

need to get great at learning to be able to do that.

Simon Brown:

Then there's a sweet spot as well in the middle, so we sort of showed it as two overlapping circles but actually the first one attracting and retaining talent, if you look at something like data science, for many people that's an attractive skill to be developing, and it's a skill that we need as a business. So there's actually the sweet spot where if we're developing data science skills, it's something that people want, would join the company for and stay with the company for, and it's a critical skill that we need as a business, and it's not so easy or inexpensive to hire for, and therefore there's a sweet spot there that actually it benefits our associates and it benefits the company at the same time.

Michelle Ockers:

Great example of using internal and external data to put together a business case.

Simon Brown:

Yes, absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

One of the things you did when you went big on learning was to build a new learning organization to really look at how you were structured for learning. What changes did you... Or actually, let's take it a slightly different way, what does your learning model look like now, what does your organizational model look like for learning now?

Simon Brown:

Yeah, so I'm very fortunate we've got an incredible team across our learning community and more widely. So there's essentially three parts to the learning model at the moment, and some of these would directly as a result of the support that we got through that going big on learning. One is from a divisional perspective, we now have a single accountable person, the head of learning for every division. That wasn't something that was as formally structured as that historically. We may have had senior learning people in each division but they didn't have the complete accountability over everything in that division. So bringing that clarity was one of the first steps.

Simon Brown:

So every division, global head of learning, responsible for all learning for all people within that division. Doesn't necessarily mean they own all the budget or own all of the people but they have the overall accountability across what happens in that division, so that's the sort of first piece. Second piece then is the global central team, so there we have things like learning operations, operational excellence. We have our capability team, so leadership development, data and digital, enterprise capability. So those are the capabilities that span across the organization, and then we have strategy and innovation as well in there, so looking after all of our systems, looking after how do we bring innovation into the organization including learning design, knowledge management, those areas as well.

Simon Brown:

Then the third part then is the regional dimension, so being in 100 plus countries around the world, and with a view that there are certain things we want to be doing in a standardized way but we also recognize there are local needs in rolling something out as well. So then the third piece of the model is the regional bit so we now have representation in every region across the world from what we call our Novartis Learning Institute, and there those teams can understand the local needs, the local channels, so in China it may be using WeChat

versus other means, et cetera. So it's what are the language needs, cultural needs, the technology needs that may be different in particular regions.

Simon Brown:

So those three pieces then work together, so the divisional focus, the central team and the regional focus in order to make sure then that we're supporting across all of our associates, and we've been very fortunate to bring in some incredible expertise into that team and also to be developing the expertise in some of our existing associates as well.

Michelle Ockers:

And do you have responsibility for all of those areas? Like are there reporting lines from all of those people through to you, formal reporting lines?

Simon Brown:

Yeah, so either dotted or straight lines from all of that, so then I have overall accountability then across all of that.

Michelle Ockers:

One of the big challenges when you've got learning and development spread all around the globe like this, can be getting everybody aligned in terms of how they're working, what they're working on, having everybody rolling in the same direction, versus when you've got autonomy built in and sometimes I work with organizations where you've got a central team that's trying to influence, a central L&D team that's trying to influence, so it can be really hard to create a coherent organizational learning strategy and you get a lot of duplication, fragmentation.

Michelle Ockers:

The kind of structure you just described helps to address that whilst allowing the flexibility for instance in the regional areas to do what makes sense in the local context. So it sounds like that you've got the balance there. Do you still have challenges with that or does your structure really support you well?

Simon Brown:

At the moment it seems to be working for us. Recognize that there's no single perfect model that works for all organizations, I mean in my background I worked with a consulting firm working with a lot of organizations looking at their learning models, so I recognize there's no one size fits all for this but for us it seems to strike the right balance between the understanding that the needs of the divisions and those global heads of learning also generally report into our strategy teams in the division. So that's something we changed as well, and that was with a view to understanding the divisional business strategy, what are the trends, what's the direction, where are they going, what are the capabilities therefore that are going to be needed, and then the heads of learning can make sure that the learning teams are looking to the future, not just reacting to whatever may be, a seeming immediate

need that's there. So getting that balance.

Michelle Ockers:

So a really nice way of improving your opportunity for business alignment as well, right?

Simon Brown:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

Having those roles reporting the strategy. It's an unusual reporting line, I think, for learning and development.

Simon Brown:

Yeah. And that seems to be serving as very well so far. The regional lens is also really important because it then avoids duplication at a country level as well. So we have a global learning council that meets, which is essentially those parts of the teams or the divisional teams, the central teams, and the representation of the regions. But then at a regional level we have typically a regional learning council as well, so you bring each of the regional divisional people together around the table and that way we can make sure there's an alignment and avoiding a duplication where in one country there's development of a certain program in one division and then often, historically, there may have been duplication that similar programs are developed in other divisions. Whereas now we can get people together, we can make sure we're sharing, we're going out with a joined up message, et cetera, at that regional level.

Simon Brown:

Where that also is very valuable is from a talent perspective, because it means if I'm in a region and I want a learning career in that region, historically I may not have known about other roles that are available in other divisions, whereas now we can far better manage the careers of our learning community to be able to say, "Okay, I've got a great talent here in India. They're not mobile to go to another location but who has a next role that we can help this person then to move into?" So it allows that far better management of people's learning careers than we were able to do previously.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you for explaining that. You've actually made it quite easy to follow without us having to look at a diagram, so thank you very much Simon. Let's move on to talk about your learning ecosystem and dig into the linkage between your ecosystem and your building a culture of curiosity. So in your book you do describe the Novartis learning ecosystem and the four elements in it. Can you walk us through that at a high level, what are the elements of the learning ecosystem, and why you've picked those?

Simon Brown:

Yeah. So in the book we talk about four elements of culture, content, channels, and infrastructure. It would be helpful in there to articulate how we structure things but also how I've thought about the different elements there. So maybe, picking them off one at a time and we can then go deeper as needed. So culture is around creating, I guess, the environment to encourage people to learn. So we talk about the curious culture, but it's the creating a safe environment for people to spend time learning, the incentives for people to be able to do that, potentially linking it through to things like performance management or whatever as well, that people should be encouraged to develop themselves or develop others and make

those linkages.

Simon Brown:

So all of those elements around the culture. Content then around what people are actually learning, so do people have access to great content, whether that's generic content from external libraries or whether that's internal content to be able to develop their skills and knowledge. So the things that people are actually learning. The channels then being the methods that people use for how they learn, so is it through face-to-face learning, is it through mobile learning, is it through on the job learning, is it through virtual reality learning or whatever? So whatever content you have in the second box, what are the channels to get that content then to people and the different ways of learning.

Simon Brown:

Then infrastructure being... the infrastructure, the technology, the processes, the teams, all of those things that are there to then be able to support that. So the learning management systems, learning experience platforms, the skills ecosystems, the data that's behind it all and understanding what's going on, the teams and the structures and the processes, all of those elements in infrastructure as well. And all of those together then create the success or not of the learning world and the appetite for people to learn and the ability for that learning to have an impact on to their performance, ultimately.

Michelle Ockers:

I suspect we could have a separate podcast conversation on each of those four elements.

Simon Brown:

Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

Which right now we're not about to do, but if we were to hone in on one of those elements that you think we could best explore to understand how that contributes to building curiosity, which of those would you like to tackle and talk about in a little more detail some of the aspects of the linkage between that element and what's in that element and curiosity?

Simon Brown:

So probably culture is the one that's been least talked about, if you like, as an industry. We forever have talked about content and channels and the technology piece, but I'm not sure the conversation has been there around culture to the same extent, and the culture piece extends far beyond learning as well because it can't be the ownership of just the learning team to be creating a learning culture, it goes across the whole organization, it goes across the leadership of the organization, it goes across the HR teams, so yeah. That one I say is critical, it's probably the hardest of all of them as well, but I think it's potentially the most important for things to be a success as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, I often talk to people about the fact that the culture of an organization is not like a big piece of pie and this slice is your risk culture and this slice is your safety culture and this slice is your learning culture, like all the flavors are all mixed in together if you like, and your culture either promotes and encourages certain behaviors or inhibits those behaviors, and

dampens them.

Michelle Ockers:

So it's certainly not something that your L&D team alone can build, there's a lot of cooperation, hence some of the complexity and challenge in it. But when you break down learning culture a little bit, what are the elements of learning culture, or what are some of the aspects that you've worked on building? What stands out for you as critical to the work you've done to build learning culture in order to generate curiosity?

Simon Brown:

Yeah, I mean there are so many parts in there. There's a big piece in the clarity of the message around learning and curiosity and this is where we're very fortunate that we have curiosity as a part of the culture and therefore the culture, and what we call unleashing the power of our people, is recognized as the number one priority for the company, it's part of our five strategic pillars.

Simon Brown:

So therefore, from the CEO across our leadership team, et cetera, there's a very frequent conversation around culture, there's significant actions to change the culture, including what we call our unbossed leadership experience, which is a leadership program for last year 5000 leaders, this year another 5000 leaders to help evolve the culture of the behavior of our leaders, and a big part of that is around self-awareness and actually understanding the impact leaders have on teams and creating that safe environment and discussion and the questioning and the curiosity, et cetera, within the teams.

Simon Brown:

So there's the linkage to the messaging across the whole company tied in with comms, tied in with leadership. There's the changing the behavior of the leaders with programs like that unbossed leadership experience to change that. There's measurement around culture, so understanding our culture journey and we measure many aspects of the culture through different means but a big part of that is a quarterly pulse survey where we can see engagement across many different metrics and see are we moving on our culture journey or not?

Simon Brown:

Many of those things are beyond the learning team to be putting into place, and therefore it is a far bigger... I want to say initiative but it's almost bigger than an initiative, far bigger journey than just a learning team to be able to create that culture around curiosity and continuous learning.

Michelle Ockers:

So at your level, who else, like what other areas, what other roles are you most frequently engaging with around building learning culture and what kind of things would you be doing with those other people or other areas of the business?

Simon Brown:

Yeah, so very heavily within HR that we changed the name of our HR team to people and organization, recognizing that we have two stakeholders actually, it's not just the organization, it's actually our people are a key stakeholder of the team. So across the people and organization team, whether that's talent management, whether that's our OD team, we have a chief culture officer, so heavily working with him. But also, directly with our CEO as well. So we have regular discussions around culture and diving into what we need to be

doing on particular areas and how do we work on curiosity and what's working, what's not working, what do we need to focus on in order to go further on that journey?

Simon Brown:

So it starts at the top of the organization, and it goes then throughout the whole organization, the P&O team has a critical role to play but it can't be just done by P&O, it's the leadership of the organization to a significant degree, not just the very top leaders but actually leadership across the whole piece.

Michelle Ockers:

So P&O, can you decode that for us?

Simon Brown:

People and organization.

Michelle Ockers:

Oh, sorry, thank you.

Simon Brown:

Yeah, so that's our HR team.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, I'm more used to P&C these days. So you talked about conversations around looking at what's working with curiosity and what's not working. Up to this point of the Novartis curiosity journey, what has worked best to build curiosity?

Simon Brown:

So we've had various symbolic actions over the years around... And one in particular was our curiosity month that we've done for the last three years. So we've actually dedicated a whole month to curiosity and when we first thought of that it was saying should we do a curiosity day? Maybe we should do a curiosity week. But we'll still be away on holiday for a week so maybe we should make it a month. And that was where we settled, and that's just got bigger and bigger over the last three years. 130 plus events, or whatever, I think we had last year despite the pandemic it all went virtual and opened it up across the world.

Simon Brown:

So that's been a real flagship event, I guess, for the last three years. This year we're moving that to actually be across the whole year rather than even dedicated to a single month. So a lot of the feedback we had from last year was this is fantastic but it's only a month, actually can we spread it throughout the whole year. So we're taking that move this year to really make sure we have events running throughout the whole year to inspire people to be curious.

Michelle Ockers:

So what sort of events do you run then that help to inspire people to be curious? Give me a couple of examples.

Simon Brown:

Yeah, so a series of webinars that are open to the whole company on different areas, so getting in external thought leaders or internal experts or influencers and being able to then

open that up to be able to share here's their points of view, we may tie a book club or something like that around it as well to get greater engagement, may tie in specific sessions in particular divisions or areas as well to further reinforce it, and then deeper learning off the back of that as well.

Simon Brown:

We have a program, Energized for Life, that looks at how do we get the right balance, how do we support people from an energy mental health, et cetera. So we may have a speaker tied to that. We then have e-learnings that help people in understanding that and how to take actions themselves around mindfulness, et cetera. So tied in multiple different ways of learning around a particular theme and then that changes as we go through the years. So those types of initiatives.

Michelle Ockers:

So it sounds like a whole stack of things that would be outside of we're equipping you to be job role ready and to perform your current job role, it's more about we're expanding your horizons, looking at other skillsets or other practices that you might be curious about or that would feed your brain, look after your body.

Simon Brown:

Yeah. I mean, there's different aspects. So absolutely we then also have the job role specific pieces where we're encouraging people to build their sales skills, sales knowledge or whatever other skills, tech and IT skills and whatever. So that all exists as well but then these are I guess a layer on top around that broader curiosity.

Michelle Ockers:

Do you specifically build learning skills, you know things idea of learning agility as a skill? That comes up a lot in the whole skills for the future conversation. Is that something you specifically tackle?

Simon Brown:

So yes, we've had sessions with Barbara Oakley on learning how to learn, we had Erik Anderson in as well recently talking about how to learn. So yes, we are also doing elements around that and also pointing people towards resources that exist in LinkedIn Learning and Coursera and things like that, that also help in building those learning skills. So there's an element of that there as well.

Michelle Ockers:

So as a Novartis associate, what would this... If I was a Novartis associate, what would have been the most significant shifts for me in my day-to-day experience of work at Novartis as a result of building a culture of curiosity?

Simon Brown:

So I think early on it would have been access to new content and more easily accessible content. So we brought in enterprise access to many external leading catalogs of learning. So the ability to be able to get access to that content and get certificates from leading universities or being able to spend time on accessing that great content would be the first piece. Being able to find it better would be another one, so investments into learning portals and launching a learning app that provides access to mobile learning, et cetera. So those elements to make it easier to access. Then the change of tone and recognition around time spent learning, so talked to people and historically there was almost a sense of guilt if I was sat at my desk with a video on the screen doing a piece of learning, it's almost if someone

walks past you there's an oh should I be doing this piece in work time?

Simon Brown:

So the dialogue around actually encouraging people to spend that time learning changes that perception of actually it's now encouraged to be spending that time learning and something to be proud of, as opposed to something maybe someone will think I'm not working if I'm actually doing learning time as opposed to now it's the perception of it's a critical part of all of our roles to be building those skills to stay current and be able to do our job better. I think those would be some of the changes that people would have seen.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And if I'm part of the L&D team, what would have been the most significant shifts for me in my role?

Simon Brown:

So I guess it depends very much on the role. So some roles on delivery and things may not have changed hugely, although probably moving to virtual more, but then there's completely new roles that we have today that we didn't have two years ago. So we now have roles on learning analytics, we have roles on the future of learning design, we have roles on knowledge management. These weren't areas that we had previously. We had people focused on more of the communication and marketing around learning, those just didn't exist before and I think the availability of data is a huge change that we see now, so we have the learning dashboard where we can see learning hours not at an individual level but at a country or division or cut in various ways.

Simon Brown:

So the learning teams more and more are now going on data based decisions and using data to guide what it is that we do versus previously it was far more subjective and to opinion or who shouted the loudest as to what we focused on, whereas now we can look, we can look at the engagement scores across learning and how those have moved over time, we can look at learning hours and see how that's moving over time, we can see the subjects that people are focusing on, we can see skills progression over time versus benchmark. So the learning teams are starting to use all of that to guide and that would be a huge change from where we were two, three years ago.

Michelle Ockers:

There's a question of scale, of course. You've got the scale where you can have specialist roles focusing in on some of these, so for the listeners who don't have the kind of scale you're talking about, and some of the listeners are very small teams, I think the challenge for them then is to think about where their attention is going, their time, what partners they're working with, who else in the business they're working with, to be able to cover things like innovation and data and technology.

Simon Brown:

But many of these things can, as you say, come through partners. So some of our richest data comes through our partnership with Coursera where we're able to see skills progression over time versus benchmarks, whether that's industry or all company benchmarks, and that gives us some very rich data of where we're making progress but also where we're not making progress, and where we need to focus. It changes the dynamics of the conversation from trying to look good into actually this is what the data says and let's look at actually less on what's good, let's look at the areas we need to focus on and where the data is telling us things aren't working, and then we can have then a far more meaningful

discussion around okay, this is a strategically important skill and yet we're behind benchmark on it.

Simon Brown:

Do we recognize that and what are we going to do about it? And when we do something about it, is it working? Are we seeing the data moving or not, and why not then? And let's understand that. So it completely changes the conversation having access to that data. Some of that we built internally but some of that we get through our partners.

Michelle Ockers:

I think that's a really good point about working through your partners. I think generally we're in a rich data environment and figuring out how to work with it smartly is really important. So you're on a journey. When you look at the future and where you're going next with curiosity at Novartis, and in particular is relevant to the work of L&D, where are you taking it and I guess what questions do you have or what challenges are you grappling with at the moment around where to go next with curiosity?

Simon Brown:

Yeah, so one of the big focuses at the moment is skills as I think is the case with so many other organizations, so how do we focus a lot of our activity, learning and curiosity around skills and understanding the skills we're going to need in the future from strategic workforce planning, how we develop those skills internally, whether that's through learning but also partnership with talent management around project roles and moving people through development roles, et cetera. So bringing all of that together in a skills ecosystem, that's a big focus.

Simon Brown:

And then, specifically from curiosity perspective, we've made great progress around the learning training piece, but then there's other elements of curiosity that we talked about, so the learning from failure and the comfort in sharing what didn't work as well as what did work. So that's an organizational learning element. There's a lot that we can make progress on there. So it moves it from purely that learning training piece into some of the bigger, cultural elements that we need to focus on.

Michelle Ockers:

Which is critical about taking it beyond just learning and into the day-to-day work.

Simon Brown:

Exactly. Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And I wish we had more time to go there and unpack that a little, so maybe there's a follow-up episode in a year's time or so Simon, where you've gone with that.

Simon Brown:

Very happy to.

Michelle Ockers:

What tips would you have for others in learning and development who want to either get started using curiosity more, or to continue and expand how well they're using curiosity not

so much for themselves but to engender curiosity in their workforce?

Simon Brown:

Yeah, I think we dived a bit into culture and I think that's the piece that is so often missed. So as I was saying, do pay attention to culture, whether that's leader role modeling, whether that's the messaging and the communications, whether that's key symbols that can show that learning is important, whether that's leaders sharing their learning, whether that's leaders talking about the importance of particular learning programs or skills. All of those things matter that you can have the best programs and the best systems but if people don't feel that they have the time to take advantage of it or don't see the linkage between that and their own performance and progression then it's not going to have the impact that is needed. So I would say don't forget that culture element and building that curiosity.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you so much, it's been a wonderful conversation Simon. We'll include a link to your LinkedIn profile if anyone would like to look you up there and connect with you to find out more about the topics discussed in today's episode. And of course, for our listeners, I post every episode on LinkedIn, I tag it with the hashtag LearningUncut, and I encourage and invite you to comment on the episodes there, to raise questions there, it's a nice easy way for us all to lean into more discovery and be curious about the conversations we have with our guests. Thank you so much, Simon, for sharing your work and insights with us today.

Simon Brown:

Thanks Michelle, it was great to talk to you.

About Michelle Ockers

Michelle Ockers works with business and learning leaders to realise the untapped potential of learning in organisations. She is an organisational learning strategist and modern workplace learning practitioner. Michelle works with organisations to develop and implement transformative organisational learning strategy, and to build the capability of their learning team. She delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events.   Michelle also mentors learning professionals at all career stages on career planning and professional development.

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:
- *Australian Institute of Training and Development Dr Alastair Rylatt Award for L&D Professional of the Year – for outstanding contribution to the practice of learning and development*
- *Internet Time Alliance Jay Cross Memorial Award – for outstanding contribution to the field of informal learning*

Michelle can be contacted at michelle@michelleockers.com.