

**LEARNING UNCUT EPISODE 13:
CO-CREATE CHANGE WITH EXPERIENTIAL AND SOCIAL LEARNING - JEM MILLS**

Michelle Ockers: Welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut. I'm Michelle Ockers.

Karen Moloney: And I'm Karen Moloney.

Michelle Ockers: Today we're talking to Jem Mills who's the Practice Excellence Manager in an organization called Social Futures. Social Futures is located in the Northern Rivers region in New South Wales. Today we're discussing the use of experiential and social learning on a program called Change Conversationalists. That's a mouth full. Welcome, Jem.

Jem Mills: Thank you very much, Michelle. It's great to be here, and hi to you too Karen.

Karen Moloney: Hi, Jem. Nice to have you.

Michelle Ockers: Jem, to start off with, can you please describe who Social Futures is and what the organization does, the purpose of the organization in the region that it serves.

Jem Mills: Certainly, Michelle. Social Futures has a long history of embeddedness in the Northern Rivers or the Northern New South Wales region. Has recently expanded out to Western New South Wales as well. We're a social justice organization and we're all about helping people in our local communities to thrive and for communities to get stronger. We do that in a variety of ways. We run a variety of social services programs including rolling out Local Area Coordination for the National Disability Insurance Scheme. We run the Homelessness programs. We run programs to assist young people right through to capacity building in the Age Care sector as well. It's really about identifying local social justice issues and seeking funded programs to meet some of those needs.

Michelle Ockers: It's a really interesting organization. The range of services is fascinating as well. We'll put a link to the organization's website in the show notes for anyone who's interested in taking a closer look at that. Thanks for giving us a feel for the organization. Jem, can you give us a sense of who the people are in your organization and their working environment, for example, the types of roles they do, any common values or characteristics that are important to enable learning and where and when they physically work?

Jem Mills: Sure. Absolutely. One of the great privileges of my role, Michelle and Karen, is that I get to around and actually find out more about people and their background. I think one of the things that we're very good at here at Social Futures is attracting really great people. Often, people come from the cities and they're looking for a tree change to the wonderful Byron hinterland. It's very attractive to them. They have really big backgrounds, often great qualifications,

great experience whether that be life experience and work experience or both. They're very driven by social justice passions and often are attracted to our organizations because they feel a sense of alignment with the values that we have. There's lots of integrity. People are very interested in authenticity and really making a difference to individuals and to communities. They feel very connected to their local community and really value a sense of connection to each other, which will come out as being very relevant to the conversation we have.

Moving forward, we have offices in the border with Queensland and Tweed Heads right down through Lismore and Byron Bay and Mullumbimby and Kyogle, Casino, down to Grafton and in Coffs Harbor and out west to Dubbo, Orange, Bathurst, Broken Hill. Quite spread out.

Michelle Ockers: That's a fairly vast area. For anyone who's not familiar with the geography, that's a large part of New South Wales.

Jem Mills: Yes. Absolutely. I've worked across a similar region for all the jobs that I've had for the nearly 10 years I've been in Australia. I would describe it to people back in Europe as the geographic area just for the Northern New South Wales region is, geographically it's the size of Switzerland. There's only 500 000 people living in this area. The gaps between them is huge, the tyranny of distance as they call it. It presents unique challenges for connectivity.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. Of course, that applies to your people as well who are working in the organization. They're widely distributed, right?

Jem Mills: Absolutely right, yes.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. In terms of where they physically work, what's the balance of time spent in a location like an office or a location owned by your organization versus out in the community in different spaces and what are those spaces?

Jem Mills: Sure. It really depends on the program or the project that they're working on. Most programs have a degree of outreach, either to people's homes or to outlying centers in smaller population centers. It's probably 50/50 for most of the programs in terms of how much time they spend out in the community. Obviously, for some of the community engagement roles there's a bit more emphasis on going out and about in parks and trees and community centers and wherever the people are.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. Quite distributed, quite mobile but bound together, I think, it's bound together by some strong core values. You talked a fair bit about values when you were talking about the kind of people who work in the organization and that's connected with the organizational culture. What might help us if you talked just a little about the core values of the organization and what they are.

Jem Mills: Sure. It's something that really is spoken about a lot at Social Futures and we talk quite a bit about wanting our core values not just be words on a wall but to be really embedded in our practice. The way we define practice is very broad, so that means how we are with each other as well as how we are with our clients and participants and the communities that we serve and support. We think very carefully about our three core values and how they manifest in our every day practice. They are, in no particular order, integrity, inclusion and learning.

That last one, obviously is good for my role. It's great to work for an organization that has a declared central value of wanting to learn in everything it does. They go together really well as well, so, we talk about being inclusive and authentic with integrity in the way we learn. You can sort of mix them up like that. They really cover a lot of how we try and be out there in the world but also internally in terms of our corporate culture and how we work together.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. Look, I know from several conversations you and I have had over the past 18 months or so that building a connected culture is a key thing that comes up, that a connected culture is critical for Social Futures. In your mind and in your work, what does a connected culture mean and why is it important to the organization?

Jem Mills: Yeah. It is really, really important. The word connection appears a lot. Many of our program names include the word connected. We have Connecting Home, Connecting You. People talk about ... We've been expanding quite rapidly over the last few years and people talk about it being crucial that we maintain our connectedness to our values, to ourselves. In terms of what it means, it probably means lots of things to people at different levels.

It means being connected in terms of physically getting together but it also means working in similar ways ... having very similar ideas about the way we want to do things, how we want to present ourselves and how we embed our values in our work. It means connected in terms of working smarter, so, ensuring that we don't become silo-ized, if that's a word, in the way that we do our work. We're constantly looking for ways in which our programs and the work that's going on within programs might connect across the organization.

Michelle Ockers: You've got an unusual job title for the people that we've been talking to on the podcast. It's the first time we've come across a person whose job title is Practice Excellence Manager. In this context, what does the word practice mean and what's your responsibility in regard to learning in the organization?

Jem Mills: My previous role was Practice Leader and then I think in the Social Services sector, the community services sector, practice often refers to the clinical practice or the practice of workers with participants and clients in programs. We purposefully redefine that practice as organizational practice. It includes that and that stuff is very, very important but it also includes the practice of the rest of the organization. For instance, the IT department, the HR department, their

practice, their clients, if you like, are the rest of the people in the organization. Their practice is how they support the rest of the organization. We do see practice as everything we do for people in our local communities but also the way in which we work together and everything we do for each other within the organization.

The Practice Excellence Model really looks to promote an ongoing learning cycle whereby we reflect on that practice, we reflect on evidence and good practice guidelines, compare what we're doing with that and seek to just improve and get better in a cyclical, iterative way.

Michelle Ockers: I'm hearing a close linkage between learning and how things get done and almost like a continuous improvement cycle with learning and practice feeding off each other.

Jem Mills: That's exactly right, Michelle. We have a cycle graph that starts with practice, moves on to reflection ... A core part of our practice framework is reflective practice where we, in a variety of ways, will stop, pause and think, which is very difficult in a fast paced changing environment. We're not successful in that a 100% of the time but we're constantly looking to get back to that reflective space. We then have a variety of learning resources that that reflection feeds from and into, including the practice framework. We go around, reflect and learn, reflect and learn and practice again.

Michelle Ockers: One of the big challenges you've got at the moment is growth, fairly rapid growth, can you talk about the growth that's occurring now and the challenge that's presenting for you in the change management space?

Jem Mills: Sure, absolutely. We have a well-defined growth strategy. We currently ... Put it this way, I started at the organization, which was just two years ago, I ... One of the first things I did was MC for a staff conference, which we called the All In Day, and practically everybody turned up. At that point, there was 96 people in the organization. I was co-facilitating with a lady who used to work at Social Futures or Northern Rivers Social Development Council as it was previously called. She, a couple of years previously, had MC'd a previous all-staff event and she said to me "When I was doing this last time there was 40 people in the organization". That day there was 96 people in the organization and as we sit here now we are just pushing 300. That gives you some sense of the expansion.

Michelle Ockers: Okay. Where is that headed? You have a declared growth strategy. What are the growth targets that you're looking in at the moment?

Jem Mills: We're looking at between two and five years we'll reach about a 1 000 staff.

Michelle Ockers: So, very rapid large scale growth with a group, a work force spread over a wide area and relatively mobile in terms of where they work. So, there's some clear challenges there. In terms of change management, you've made a decision to

adopt an approach called Open Source Change Management, which a lot of people may not be familiar with. It's not one of the main stream approaches that gets talked about regularly. What are the key features of this approach and why was it chosen?

Jem Mills:

One of the first things is we rebranded that to Co-created Change Management because we found that fitted our culture and connectedness. We like all the co-words here at Social Features. You know, collaboration and communication. I always say collaboration, communication, cooperation, Corona, we quite like that one as well on a Friday afternoon. The Open Source Change Management comes from ... that term Open Source comes from the computer programming field where, some people may be familiar with the idea that there is a community of people who come together to build a program. In the learning space, Moodle is a really good example of an open source software program. That's a large community of people. Wikipedia, for instance, is an open source resource. This thinking, this kind of co-design, co-creative thinking has been applied to change management.

It's something that we adopted, frankly, in response to having not done very well with rapid change, utilize anything like a more traditional, sometimes referred to as a top-down change management approach. The classic change management approach would see a group of senior managers or executives develop a change strategy, which is then communicated down a sort of hierarchy to team leaders and staff who are expected to implement that change. The communication is quite often predominantly one way. There may be some consultation along the way. That is, broadly speaking, a sort of traditional approach to change management. We had a very difficult and challenging time with that model.

In the process of going from a 100 staff to nearly 300 staff, that was quite a painful and challenging time. I've been picking up on this, it is very obvious to everyone really, and I saw it as part of my role was to go off and research frameworks and models that would help support the learning and development of the organization and came across a white paper from a group called CEB Global on Open Source Change Management. It just spoke to our values and culture and I decided to bring it to our leadership group during a conversation around how hard this time had been and what we needed to do to, kind of, do it better next time.

Karen Moloney:

It's quite obvious that you're talking about the Open Source Change Management approach being quite different to the traditional top-down methodologies like PROSCI's ADKAR or the Kotter's eight step process. Just for our listeners, can you just outline for us briefly, what does an Open Source Change Management program look like? What are the key features of it?

Jem Mills:

Sure, Karen. The key part of Open Source Change Management, or Co-created Change Management as we call it, is that if you are likely to be impacted by the

proposed change then the commitment is that you will be centrally involved in planning the implementation of that change. Right. So, it's a co-design, co-production kind of process. So, it's a co-created change strategy. The employees own the change implementation planning process and then crucially what that sets up is, a sort of third partner definition if you like, is that the communications focus on a conversation, talking rather than telling.

Karen Moloney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jem Mills: All right. That then sets up an atmosphere of context where the people who are expected to implement the change has been centrally involved in the planning of that implementation. So, they're the ones that are most likely to be able to identify obstacles, road blocks and by the time they've planned out the change, it drastically reduces resistance to the change because they've been involved from the beginning.

Karen Moloney: Okay. That makes perfect sense and I can see why people would, a lot of people would welcome that, but it is quite a different approach to change management for both management and employees. How was that received in the business? Was it welcomed or was it ... Were people a little bit wary of how it was going to play out?

Jem Mills: This is about ... One of the key learnings, for me personally, was about picking your moments. I mentioned we had, sort of, a clandestine meeting where it became very obvious that the change management approach really hadn't worked and we were experiencing somewhat of a kind of cultural crisis. I talked before about how precious people hold the culture here. I was reminded of that old maxim that the Chinese characters for crises, made up of two characters, the first one represents danger and the second one represents opportunity. It speaks to the wisdom that inside every crisis is an opportunity for transformation and change. During this quite fraught meeting that we had when we were reviewing the fact that we hadn't done well in terms of the traditional approach to change management, I was then able to go and talk about this Open Source Change Management approach. Of course, it really spoke to people because of our focus on connectedness and co-design and collaboration and learning. It was also very timely because people were really feeling the need for something new. It was a very good moment to bring it in for a variety of reasons.

Karen Moloney: That's good, yeah. Timing is everything.

Jem Mills: Absolutely.

Karen Moloney: Thinking about the ... This approach for learning context, did you have specific learning outcomes defined for that program as opposed to project goals? Because we've talked already about that connectedness and embedding this as

part of your culture. How do you make that work ... Learning outcomes and producing a, I don't know, a result for what you were trying to achieve?

Jem Mills:

Initially, we had to think about ways of introducing these concepts and this methodology to the people who were going to be actually using it, which were the whole of the staff group, you're talking about 300 people. We wanted to do that in a way that was clearly consistent and aligned with the ethos and the methods of Open Source Change Management. We had to do the education and the implementation of co-created change management in a co-created change way. We had to own the fact that we hadn't done change management as well as we wanted to. We had to then communicate with, in a conversational way, the whole of the organization about that, hold our hands up to it and then propose this ... Having a conversation to get buy-in into this new methodology.

We agreed to start three co-created change management processes at the same time. One was a fairly short one that pulled together the story of our change story so that we could actually agree as a leadership group on a form of words. We were actually holding our hands up and saying "We hadn't done well and that things were going to be different". That ... We did that in a co-created change way as well so that we could take into a second process called the Change Conversationalists. There was like a two-way learning process that we wanted to facilitate there. We wanted to learn from the people who'd experienced the change ... the changes that we'd implemented badly. We wanted to learn from their experience, warts and all, and during that process validate that and make a commitment to not doing that again.

Then, at the same time, we wanted to introduce them to the concept of Open Source Change Management and engage them in adopting that process.

Karen Moloney:

The first step very much feeds into the second bit.

Jem Mills:

Yeah. Exactly right. Exactly right. We wanted that to be conversational. We started to ... First of all ... When the first ... It can be difficult to begin this process because you have to ... very early on ask questions about "Okay. Who needs to be in this at the beginning?" It very quickly feels like everybody needs to be here. Then you have conversations about why you can't have 300 people in a room all having a conversation about how you're going to manage this. What we did is, we put out an expression of interest for representatives from all across the organization and we purposefully left the expression of interest open until we felt we had saturation of or representation from all layers and all parts of the organization. That took a while. We got quite a lot of interest, initially, but it also took a little bit of purposefully phoning up departments and saying "Hi, no one from your department's put their hand up. Is there someone you can spare?"

We got all of those people together for a half-day workshop and explained to them what we wanted them to do, which was essentially to go off into their

locations, their offices, their teams and have conversations about the change process that people have been through and then to introduce the basics of this idea of Open Source Change Management. So, we recruited a load of people to have those conversations and then to collect all the data on that.

Karen Moloney: When you say "we", cause I understand that you're a L&D team of one, so, who was putting that message out and giving that instruction?

Jem Mills: I originally took the Open Source Change Management idea to a leadership team. We have a leadership team, which is made up of about 25 people and sought interested parties from that group. There was a sort of core team to the leadership group who were charged with as soon as possible handing that over to a wider facilitation group, who in turn, were charged with passing that ... having that conversation with as wide a group as was possible. Yeah.

Karen Moloney: Okay.

Michelle Ockers: It seems like there's this layering of the learning and who's involved and who gets to learn and in what ways, Jem. It's not-

Jem Mills: Yeah. Absolutely, there's a sort of network ... almost like a network marketing kind of approach.

Karen Moloeny: Thinking about learning, what strategies did you use to ensure that people actually learn from the experience rather than just going through the experience, because if we're talking about, again ... It's a thing of about ... This is coming up quite a lot in our conversations with people about L&D letting go control of what we're doing and handing it over to the people that it affects most. Obviously those people are not as skilled as we are in terms of facilitation and those kinds of things. How did you ensure that there was learning taking place through that whole experience?

Jem Mills: Yeah. You're absolutely right, it's a challenge and I think you have to kind of trust. The other thing you have to do is not necessarily rely on the traditional teaching and learning methodologies. We agreed to keep PowerPoint presentations to a minimum and I purposely wanted to take myself out of it as a facilitator as early as possible. In the beginning, I was badged as the Open Source Change Management guy and we need Jem in every meeting to discuss this. I purposefully pulled back from that and focused much more on providing resources, written resources and online store of all sorts of articles and information. In a fast-paced changing environment I find the one or two-page brief a really crucial tool. I used that as a tool for trying to put the keywords and the key explanations on the lips of as many people as possible, if that makes sense.

Karen Moloney: Yeah. That's fine.

Jem Mills: I spent quite a lot of time developing those in response to the common questions that you hear. I'll have a few conversations first, really try and get a feel for what makes sense to people, what comes naturally but also the key things that people get hooked up on and maybe confused about and I'll try and build that into a two-page brief. Then try and make sure that you have a core group of people who really get it, so I'll look for people who are energized by the idea, who ask any more question about it and the people that are asking for more information and I will sort of personally go and spend time with them and make sure that they really get those key stumbling blocks for people as well. So that, as soon as possible, you try to kind of create a critical mass of people that have a bit more learning.

Karen Moloney: You've already talked about reflection being one of the key pillars of that practice in an excellence framework. How was reflection used specifically in Change Conversationalist Program?

Jem Mills: In a number of ways. We had another half-day workshop at the end of the process or towards the end of the process where the data that people had collected had been somewhat summarized and we had a sort of sense-making session. Where we came together, presented back the common themes and the raw data and some of the sort of quantitative stuff on graphs as well. We had a reflective practice discussion on what this all meant, what the key points were, what the next steps forward were in terms of taking this forward.

Karen Moloney: Okay. Cool. Thinking about that connected culture, you have an overarching goal of creating that connected culture through the organization and making sure it's really embedded and using social learning initiatives on an ongoing basis to help achieve that. What advice would you give to others on using social learning approaches?

Jem Mills: Well, actually, there's some really good advice that comes out of the Open Source Change Management literature that gives tips to people working in different parts of the organization. I think one of the ones that I've come back to again and again and again, is, particularly for senior leaders, is to not default to making decisions in the interest of speed. This is real .. This is something that's really common and central to the failure of traditional top-down change management methods in the current climate. There's a sense that we need to be doing things faster and faster and, so, in the interest of that, senior leaders particularly, will make decisions on behalf of their teams because they feel like there's not time to do a full consultation process, let alone a co-create change process, which takes three times as long.

Karen Moloney: Yeah. Sure.

Jem Mills: But the time saving is down the track when things don't fall over and they get embedded. There's a sort of ... There's an initial investment at the beginning of time but you save way much more down the track.

Karen Moloney: I imagine, obviously, having a lot more engagement with your teams. Really good. Just thinking about practical tips ... We like to be practical on this podcast and help people try new things. Anybody listening that's keen to do more of the experiential and social learning, can you give us your top tips around your biggest challenges, how you would overcome them or the biggest lessons that you learned through this process?

Jem Mills: Absolutely. Well, one thing that's absolutely key is to get your whole leadership group on board with this or at least a critical mass of them. If you can explain how this fits with the culture. One thing that was really crucial for this process was that people kind of had an aha-moment. They thought "Okay. This is the way we should be doing change management" and because I presented it in a way that really showed it connected with the way we do everything else.

Because I'm a learning department of one, I'd already been thinking for a couple of years of how do we get learning practice happening, you know, learning and development practice happening. Or course, what's key to that is you think about all the spaces where questions are asked and answered and that is primarily amongst teams and particularly between team leaders and their teams. And you think "Okay. How can I get the answers that we all need to share into those conversations?" And so, all the ... All the existing structures and work flows that you have I would look to get those, if you like, new ideas embedded into those processes.

Practically, that means suggesting that we adopt right across all team meetings a ten-minute section on co-created change management in monthly team meetings. Looking to have those conversations in supervision. You look for all the places in which those conversations were happening and you look for ways of tagging those with the social learning goals that you have.

It's, again, it's that idea of taking time. Ten years ago if I was in this situation, I would have quickly gone into my office, quickly banged up a training session, done some PowerPoints, then started rushing around the organization trying to teach as many people as possible. I think when I first turned up here at the organization that's kind of what they wanted me to do. What I've now learned to do is that it's saves time in the long run to take a step back and think "Okay, how is learning happening already?" Knowledge transfer is happening in organizations all the time. If you take the time to just step back and think "What are the most successful methods that are currently happening?"

I think "Who are the most chatty people? Who are the people that are most connected with everyone else? How can I make those people my best friends and how can I get them ready and onto this idea? What concepts are already flowing around the organization and how can I attach this learning to that?" It's that kind of approach you need to take.

Michelle Ockers: Sure. I once heard Harold Jarche describe social learning or our role in social learning as being to help people have better conversations and that's very in line with the suggestions you've just given, Jem.

Jem Mills: Beautiful. Yeah. That's great.

Michelle Ockers: Jem, finally, can you share with us one of the most important things you do for your own professional development?

Jem Mills: I've always really sought out really good mentors and supervisors. Sometimes that means if you read a book or if I receive something online, I'll actually take the time, take a deep breath, see if I can track down that person's contact details and give them an odd afternoon phone call or drop them a strange email from this weird pom whose landed in Australia and whose got some wacky ideas he wants some answers to. Michelle, you can give testament to that because that's exactly how we met. I saw a video blog of yours on SharePoint that really answered a question I had and I sought you out and became a bit of a pain in your neck for a little while trying to, kind of, get information out of you. You turned out to be a fantastic mentor for me. So, thank you very, very much for that.

I would thoroughly recommend people seek out mentors and don't be afraid to approach the people that they're really impressed by and that they think could really add value to their work.

Michelle Ockers: Jem, a good conversation always goes both ways, so, I've enjoyed and gotten a lot out of our conversations over the time we've known each other as well. So, thank you for tracking me down.

Jem Mills: It's a pleasure.

Michelle Ockers: Jem, what's the best way for people to get in touch with you if they want to continue the conversation?

Jem Mills: Sure, I'm very happy to talk to anyone, pass on any kind of resources that we might have. Probably, I'd say, through my LinkedIn profile, so, if you search LinkedIn for Jem Mills, so it's J E M, M I L L S for sugar mills and I come up as the Practice Excellence Manager at Social Futures and you can read about my weird and wonderful background in mental health back in the UK.

Michelle Ockers: Thanks so much, Jem, for sharing your work and insights with us a being willing to continue the conversation with others.

Jem Mills: That's an absolute pleasure. Thank you very much, Karen and Michelle, for inviting me.