

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to today's episode of Learning Uncut. I would like to acknowledge the Brinja Yuin people on whose lands I sit as we record the podcast today and pay respect to all elders past, present and emerging in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities around Australia. We've got a really interesting topic today, an important one around diversity inclusion. It's around building equity in construction, specifically through a mentoring program run by NAWIC, National Association of Women in Construction. And we've got two fantastic guests who've been deeply involved with the program to talk to us today about the program. Jana Clyde from Wisdom Learning. Welcome, Jana.

Jana Clyde:

Thanks, Michelle.

Michelle Ockers:

And Jo Farrell from Build Like a Girl.

Jo Farrell:

Thanks, Michelle. Thanks for having me.

Michelle Ockers:

I love the name of that organisation, Build Like a Girl. And this is really exciting, not only because of the content. I personally have a connection to the construction industry. My Dad was a bricklayer for 40 years and ran a company that did a lot of work with big developers around Sydney, but also because you were the AITD's 2025 award winner for best diversity and inclusion program. So we're going to see some diversity and inclusion initiatives at their best in today's story. So, Jo, I'd like to start with you today. You've had a remarkable career in construction, from apprentice carpenter to founder of a national charity, and now deeply involved with mentoring programs in the sector. Can you share a personal experience from your early career days, and it's up to you whether you mention when this was, That illustrates what it was like being a woman in construction and how that shaped your interest and passion for creating change in the sector?

Jo Farrell:

Yeah, sure. So, I started my apprenticeship in 1996 and it was really, really difficult to get a start. This was in Wollongong, pretty normal for all of the guys in class to go and get a job at the steelworks because, you know, dad or uncle or someone they knew worked there and that was kind of it. And when I suggested that maybe it'd be good for me to take that sort of same route that they were taking. I was told if I want to do an apprenticeship to go and learn to be a hairdresser. And so it was just sort of an automatic. And even, you know, my mum and dad were very, very supportive. They actually wanted someone handy around the house because my dad wasn't, my

older brother wasn't. So mum was quite keen to have someone who knew how to use some tools and fix things.

So they were really supportive, but I very quickly learned that the external environment, other people weren't. It was pretty hard to get a start. And so the first couple of years were incredibly trying and a bit of a battle of wills around, you know, was I going to keep turning up every day and putting up with the types of behaviours and the things that were being said and done on site, you know, or was I going to give up because it just got too much? And so I kept turning up and time went on and two years in, I moved to Sydney. And so I went from small residential sites with maybe 20 blokes, giving me a bit of a hard time to working on a site with 250 blokes. And so we've had to navigate a whole different environment in that space. And it's a very lonely space when there's no one else who looks like you, acts like you, has the same experiences as you. And so it was quite lonely and quite isolating navigating amenities and trying to, you know, there wasn't a female bathroom on the site. Why would they have one? I was only one person. And so there was a lot of really difficult situations, quite traumatic situations that I had to navigate at a very young age, you know, at the age of 18 and 19. It was quite, for me, a very, very difficult period of building that resilience to just keep sort of pushing my way through and it didn't really change for me in terms of having a support network for quite a while and seeing someone else around me until one day I stumbled into the office of one of the large contractors, it was a Mirvac project we were working on and one of the ladies behind the desk who was a receptionist just happened to say, hey, have you thought about going across to one of these NARWIC meetings that they have sort of, you know, once a month? And I said, I don't even know what NARWIC is. And so she gave me some information on it and I thought, I'll just go along and say what this is about and by this time it was 2003 and so I went across and it happened to be a night where they were running a mentoring match up and at that time there was no sort of real structured program around it, it was just we'll pair you with someone and you know send you off and hopefully have some good conversations and so, you know, I won the professional lottery that night.

I was matched with a woman called Alison Myram, who at the time was the regional construction director of Multiplex. She was the first female regional construction director at the time. She was incredibly fierce. I mean, she still is. We've been friends now, you know, for over 22 years. And that was a life changing point for me and a point where I was ready to really kind of give up on the industry, because I just thought that it didn't want me and it wasn't going to make me feel welcome or safe. And so it was a time that I thought that maybe I should just step away and find something else. So it was quite pivotal, quite powerful. And, and our mentoring relationship has gone on now for, you know, over two decades, from strength to strength. And interestingly, I met up with her, she was down in Canberra here a couple of weeks ago, and we're having a really good chat about things. And she said, you know, when you're talking about our relationship and about mentoring, and how much I've done for you, she said, do you tell people that in the latter stages, know in the past couple of years you're the one who's been mentoring me? And I said no because that's not my perception and she said well it is because the last few years of my career and what's happened with me have been incredibly difficult and you were the one person I could rely on to actually come back to and speak to



without a level of judgment that I knew that I was a safe space that I could share how I was feeling about things. And so, you know, we've had this lovely, I guess, relationship over this time where the whole dynamic of the relationship has been able to ebb and flow and change and get the most out of it. So for me, mentoring has been something that's just shaped my entire career trajectory with where I've been and where I've come from.

Michelle Ockers:

Jana, what are your thoughts? What's going on for you when you listen to Jo's story?

Jana Clyde:

Well, it's really interesting because we designed the ACT NARWIC mentoring program back in 2017. And we did a lot of industry engagement. The then president, Lisa Dart, was a real advocate for ensuring that we put in some structure, because as Jo said, there's so many great points that Jo made. And what she said there around winning the professional lottery is actually a really interesting one, because often mentoring can be a bit of a lottery, whereas when you actually put some great structured learning behind it, what you can do is you can take out some of those luck factors. So looking at doing some of the profiling beforehand, ensuring that there's structures in place around the scope and scale of the mentoring program and the mentoring relationship. What are the boundaries? Because we know that some mentoring relationships change and evolve over a long period of time and others are actually for quite a short period of time. It may just be for the length of the time they're doing the program and both are okay. It's just a matter of everyone being clear about the expectations.

And I think Jo made a really important point in something that came up initially during when we did the co-design back in the day, which was around there needs to be acknowledged value for the mentor and the mentee in this because I think too often the expectation is that the mentor comes fully formed and you'll often ask people to be mentors and their first initial approach is, hold on, hold on, I don't know enough, I'm not good enough, I haven't done enough, why would you want me as a mentor? So being able to say, hey, look, there's actually the opportunity, you've done all these amazing things in your career. There is a really great opportunity here for you to be able to give back, but we'll also provide you both some structure as well as some learning. So we've made sure that when we've designed this particular program, that there are elements in there specifically for the mentors, for the mentors to bond and have conversations, for the mentees to say, hey, look, but when we get to a certain point in this relationship, let's actually assess whether we want to keep going. Because if the mentoring relationship does continue, that evolution that Jo's talking about needs to be managed really carefully because there's some really interesting power dynamics when it comes to mentoring relationships. When you're looking at trying to create something that's psychologically safe, that is a really big deal, especially when you're looking at something like diversity and inclusion in a space where people are often quite vulnerable anyway. There's a lack of gender equality, as we know, in this space. So there was lots that came to mind in Jo's presentation. And what I'd say is we've tried to learn from all of those aspects and embed them into some of the key principles that sit behind the program.

Michelle Ockers:

Oh, you've laid out some amazing threads for us to come back and pick up on as we go through the conversation, Jana. And listeners, I'm sure you can already hear you're going to get a lot of value out of this if you are at all interested in mentoring and doing mentoring well and supporting mentoring well. So let's circle back to NARWIC ACT, who the program was designed for and who I understand still run the program. Tell me a little bit about NARWIC. And I don't mind which of you takes this question. Who are they? Why do they exist? What's their purpose?

Jo Farrell:

I can jump in, I guess, because I've been a member and actively involved. I sat on the board for a period of time, the National Board, and so have also been heavily involved in the committees in New South Wales and ACT, so know quite a lot. Yeah, they're a peak body for women in construction. And it's about representation, it's about advocacy, predominantly, and then moving into space around education and training, which is where they partner with people like Wisdom, it's volunteer-led, so even though they're having a CEO now at the top and a board, but the board are volunteers and all the committees across the different states and territories are all voluntary, so they obviously have limitations with what they can do, but what they do have is a backing of 10,000 plus members, active membership, and obviously a strong sponsorship base across every state and territory and also at a national level as well.

You know, where I think the strength is, is partnering with organisations that then know how to deliver programs like this. And thankfully enough, even though I'm not sitting within the inner circle now, we still get to partner as Build Like a Girl as a delivery partner. So, you know, one of the most recent things we've done is actually a program that, again, Jana's team developed, which was the NAWIC Embark program, which was for young women in the first five years of their career, predominantly site-based, trade-based women, so a little bit of a different bent from more of the white-collar universe which was developed and put together by Jana's team. Build Like a Girl has now come on as a facilitator to deliver that because obviously myself and the other volunteers that work with Build Like a Girl are all qualified tradeswomen. So we can impart that lived experience through, again, a structured mentor program.

And just getting back to Jana's point about mentors, I think it's really important to point out most people don't even understand what mentoring is and what a mentor is. And we get confused over, oh, am I a coach? you know, am I a sponsor? What are my boundaries? And so it's so critical for people who have never been in the space who really want to give back because the people who do step forward as mentors have the best of intentions and really want to impart their knowledge and their skill set, you know, and a lot of that lived experience, but just have no clue how to do it. And so having structure, I think, as a person who sat on pretty much every single part of this arrangement and these relationships, really sort of making sure that people do have set boundaries, do understand the stop and start point, and also understand that the best mentoring relationships are driven by the mentees. So they're the ones who drive the relationship. They're the ones who are responsible for gleaning as much input and, you know, stories and, ways to deal with things from

that mentor. And so a lot of the time it's viewed the other way and that's where it doesn't work.

And, you know, I've been involved in many, many mentoring programs around the country. There's, you know, lots of different organisations who run them, including peak bodies like the MBA and HIA and, you know, numerous others. And where I find it sort of falls short is just there's that lack of guidance around, you know, what is your role on this journey and really sort of setting the groundwork for that. So then the relationship can happen organically. And that's really where the magic happens with it. So, you know, it's so important to have those guidelines up front because people step into it, often step over boundaries. You know, if a mentee has got a problem and we see it quite regularly where we might have a young woman who's having some issues at work, not sure how to navigate these things. And they're quite tricky. They could be gender based harassment. They could be, you know, other things. And a mentor will kind of step in and try and take control of that situation and go, oh, I'll fix this for you. I'll get you another job or I'll do this. And it's like, no, no, no, that's actually not what this is. And so it's sort of really quickly course correcting that sort of stuff. and doing that within that structured learning space. I think you can do that quite well and sort of bring people back to where they need to be. So, you know, but from a NARWIC perspective, yeah, they're probably the most prevalent in terms of these programs nationally. And like I said, from an isolation perspective with the women that we work with every day, they're very, very powerful tools to be able to keep women because we know that retention specifically is the biggest issue in construction at the moment. We can't keep people. We can't keep anyone. We lose 168,000 people a year in construction.

Michelle Ockers:

What's the size of the sector, Jo? How many people?

Jo Farrell:

Over a million people. And we're losing 16% of those a year. Yeah, so that was a stat that KPMG and BuildSkills, which is a federally funded organisation, you know, like a targeted organisation that was set up to try and course correct the construction sector. So earlier this year, sitting there looking at stats and looking around, you know, the houses we have to build, the skill shortages we have, and we started looking at, you know, what our actual participation rates are of various people. One of the things that stood out was, yeah, 168,000 a year. Now, some of those are just natural attrition, which is retirement and aging. But a lot of that is people who are choosing a different industry to then go into. And we generally can't replace that many people. We fall short. We can replace maybe over 100,000, if we're lucky, year to year. So you can see that every year we're getting a gradual slide backwards, where all of the discourse in the media is around the skills gap, all of the discourse is we need more qualified tradespeople, we need more construction workers to build the pipeline in accordance with the National Housing Accord, plus all the other infrastructure works that we're building, and we can't keep people.

And I mean, the startling statistics is first year apprentices. So as a male as a first year apprentice, 44% drop out in the first 12 months. So almost half of the young guys, but it's 72% for young women. So, you know, if we're talking about one of the

stats, the other stats I rolled out said we want to attract 50,000 women to the construction sector by 2030. And so I sort of look at that and go, well, if we break that down into sort of bite-sized numbers to go, how many of those are apprentices? And if we lose 72% every year in the first 12 months, you're talking about three times that number that you have to engage to try and get them through a four-year apprenticeship to get to the finish line. So not only are we behind our targets, not only are we not really drilling down into the facts and statistics and why people aren't staying in the industry and addressing culture, you know, we're never going to get there with that sort of mindset without really understanding it. And so these are the types of programs that I see. are there for the retention because we know it's proven and even the conversations we have day in day out that keeping particularly young women in the first five years of their career or women who are stepping from maybe a blue collar world into a white collar world or stepping into maybe a leadership arrangement, they're the ones that need that support and they're the ones most at risk and most vulnerable of leaving because they don't have that. So this is where these programs have so much efficacy and so much strength in terms of correcting that retention issue that we have. And so they're absolutely critical for me.

Michelle Ockers:

Jana, I'm going to flip to you just in terms of rounding out the challenge that the program is intended to address. Jo's done a really nice job of painting this big picture, right? So around attracting women in the first place, no doubt there's cultural issues which show you've got lived experience you've shared with us that make it a, or have made it, I don't know if that's still the case today, a kind of hostile environment for women to try to step into. We've got a high turnover rate, much higher dropout rate for females entering the sector. Jana, when you first started working on the program with NARWIC back in 2017, what was the, you know, was there a specific goal or a specific aspect of the challenge you were trying to address and has that shifted over the almost nine years that the program's now been running?

Jana Clyde:

Yeah, great question. So a distilled version of what Jo is talking about, it was really focused on one, retention, but two, mobility. So when the program started, there was a real gap in women moving into any sort of leadership roles within construction. So it actually started, its initial name was the CEO Shadow Program when it commenced. So it was all around, how do you support women into senior leadership roles? Because we know that where there are women making decisions, there are often then more women able to come into that culture, the cultures change, there's different decision-making processes, etc. So when the program was initially being built, it was all around how do we ensure that it's structured in such a way that we are addressing those challenges, which meant that we actually embedded a lot of learning into the program. So instead of it being a come and meet and greet, and then basically away you go and let the magic happen and meet so often, we actually put a lot of structure and we put skills-based workshops amongst the program.

We opened the program with ensuring that we'd done some really good matching, really good structure around what the mentoring relationship needed to look like, and having people then actually sign an agreement into how they were going to engage

with each other. Then we used profiling tools as well to support that real EQ and understanding, because I think confidence is a really big challenge. Because if you're constantly being in an environment where you're told that you don't belong here, there's no space for you here, etc. There's a big piece, and unfortunately it needs to be driven at multiple different levels, but the nice thing about the NARWIC program in addressing some of these challenges is it wasn't within one organisation. I think one of the lovely things is it was across multiple large scale, you know, tier one construction, all the way down to mentors who work in different organisations within construction that might be a bit smaller. So it meant that the mentees and the mentors, there was a lot of cross-pollination between those things. Now, when that happens, what you're doing is you're actually allowing a range of different conversations to be had outside of the constraints of a hierarchy within a workplace, which can be really powerful, especially within these sort of mentoring programs. And what we found by embedding skills-based workshops throughout the program, you're actually enabling the people in the program to go through and have the support of a mentor and start to build that relationship, but to then also build those skills and capabilities as they go through that they can actually apply. And I think one of the powerful things with this particular program is because it is truly co-designed and as a female leader in learning, I have had the privilege of seeing on the inside of construction. And before this program, we had no idea. So when Joe mentioned the stories about, you know, not having access to bathrooms, and we know that there are, there's quite a heavy female dominance in the learning space. Like I had a my team was 80% women. So the thought when I was hearing these stories from NARWIC that, you know, not only was there not equity, there was an opportunity. I was just absolutely gobsmacked.

So that thought of what can we do to wrap around and actually use learning in a real capability building way that's actually going to move the needle on culture. So in answer to your question around what problem were we addressing to start with, it was really around that mobility piece. And as NARWIC evolved, and NARWIC's done an amazing evolution over the past, you know, 10 years as it's moved through, it's got really clear with its strategies at the ACT level. There's just an amazing group of people leading that both, you know, people who have been in the industry a long time and also newcomers. And they've really driven this agenda to look at what can they meaningfully do to make a difference. But what it's meant is that the programs continue to evolve. So we've kept a similar base level principles around how we engage, what we do, but the actual topics have moved because we know that the skills that individuals are needing now, five years ago, they were not the same conversations that we were having. So I'd say the program's really evolved as NARWIC's evolved. So there's a bigger component now, I reckon, around ensuring that gender equity piece, ensuring that there are conversations being had back in the workplace with confidence.

Michelle Ockers:

So is the program today just for women to support women in construction moving into leadership roles, or is it broader than that?

Jana Clyde:

Much broader than that now. So it's really any women across the construction industry who are looking for that retention piece. So they're looking at how do they engage? And as Jo said, NARWIC did a really great job of identifying that there was a gap for women coming into the industry, which is where they look to set up that embark program. And Jo and her team with that, we know in vocational learning, that that lived experience is so important in being able to both relate, tell stories, and help with understanding the environment that they're going into. So this program is really for people who've been in the construction industry three or four years, who are looking at how do they continue to grow in that space. And keep in mind, there's a range of different mentors. They don't need to just be female mentors. We have had wonderful mentors from, like I said, a range of different experiences, backgrounds, etc.

Michelle Ockers:

Interesting. So let's talk about the participant experience. And I want to dig into both mentees and mentors. So let's start with mentees. And Jana, if you can walk us through this. What's the, you know, I'm coming into the program, I've been in the industry three, four years. We know that includes some mentoring. I'm going to be matched with someone, that there's some workshops. What's kind of my typical experience from start to end, assuming there is an end point for participation as a mentee?

Jana Clyde:

There is an end point in the program, but sometimes not to the mentoring relationships. So what we've discovered over the years is that as the programs become better known, it's become easier too. So there's always wait lists of people to get into the program and they're putting a case forward as to why they should be included. But we found that really good communication early around expectations important. And it's really simple, but the committee do an excellent job of this, making phone calls, ensuring that emails go out, setting that really clear expectation because we know that there's a range of different thinking preferences that people have got and we want to minimise that overhead for people. So we want to create a psychologically safe environment from the initial contact because we know that people putting themselves forward for a mentoring program is a really big deal and it might be the very first time they've actually put themselves out there. So whether they're chosen for the program or not, we're looking to make this a really positive experience and make sure that they realise that they're welcome and that what they've put forward is important.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so I'm going to get a phone call from someone. I've put in my application. I'm going to get a phone call from someone from NARWIC to have a chat to me. What are they looking for? What's that experience going to be like for me? And then assuming I'm accepted into the program, how do I get started?

Jana Clyde:

Exactly. So what you'll do is there's an enrolment form, you'll come into the first workshop and in that first workshop is the meet and greet. So we would have got

profiles in the background and NARWIC do a really good job and they've got a really good methodology now that we've helped them build in the background for matching where they're looking at who is the best person, mentee, mentor that can come together to support one another. We ensure that the mentees and the mentors both get separate groups to start with to talk about what this experience is going to be like for them. And then so that builds that camaraderie between the mentees as well. So they get a really good understanding with each other around, you know, what are you here for? What are you hoping to get out of it? And just generally helping those nerves start to relax a little bit. Then they get paired up with their mentor. And what we do is we give them an agenda to work through together because we find that structure is really important when they're working through the program. Because, you know, you've met somebody for the first time, maybe you're 25 and you're sitting there with the CEO of this major construction company and you're thinking, have I made a good choice here? Because this person's really senior and I still don't quite know what I'm doing.

So the mentors do an exceptional job of really helping the mentee feel comfortable. So often in that first engagement, there's a range of different questions that they ask, but also around the scope of what they are and aren't willing to talk about. So are there boundaries here? You know, very early on in the program, as every mentoring program, when we did the pilot, There were, as Jo said, some mentees that contacted the mentors outside of hours in emergency situations and those sorts of things. And it's just getting the boundaries of what is appropriate in that relationship. So we've got some really good boundaries that come together. There is then an activity of working together. So we've got an experiential event in that first session, because we know that there is a bond formed when people do things together. So that active learning and in that experience, it's always really wonderful to watch, whether it be, you know, the marshmallow construction activity, which is always a favourite, or looking at some sort of conceptual problem solving, you start to see people come to life, their true personalities start to come out.

Then it's really around setting the cadence and the structure. So in the background, we would have worked with the NARWIC team to choose what are the topics going to be, the mentoring topics over the course of this particular program. And then we set the cadence in place. So the mentee and mentor agree how often they're going to catch up. There is the in-dispersed workshops, which the mentees as well as the mentors are welcome to come to, but they're really focused on the mentees. And then they start to work through the structure. So working through where they've framed out, what do they actually want out of that conversation? This is where having a facilitator is actually really important because this is where mentoring relationships can get a bit lost, especially early on. So we've got a really fabulous team of facilitators at Wisdom Learning who have a lot of lived industry experience. We have one of the key facilitators at the moment, Kylie Flower, who we're really fortunate. She's really senior ex-Australian Federal Police. So obviously highly male dominated environment. And her and her husband actually own a construction company. So she's this really unique mix. So her being able to go around and then question the mentees and mentors, because if it's the first time you've mentored, helping a mentee get to a point where they're like, this is actually what I think I want out of this conversation, especially if for the first time, because we know in the

Australian culture, we're not great at saying, hey, look, I want to be absolutely excellent. And I would like to be the senior leader in this organisation. We do suffer from a bit of tall poppy.

Michelle Ockers:

I was just thinking tall poppy, yeah.

Jana Clyde:

And we see that come out a lot in the mentoring. So what'll happen is often the mentees will play small and say, oh, look, it'd just be nice to have some support. I'm thinking, meh, okay. So what we do is we actually help them frame that out into what could the future look like? What are the things that are really important to discuss? And as that relationship builds, what we find is that's when the real unpicking starts to come. But again, where those boundaries of psychological safety need to come in, because when you're dealing with people's career pathways and where they want to go, that can often bring up a lot of insecurities. We've had lots of people on the program who've had different mental health challenges at different points, but there is a line there that you go, as a mentor, that's actually where I need to refer you on. Here's the boundary. I can absolutely hear that's a real challenge for you and it sounds like there's a lot in that. Maybe someone was traumatised early in their career. Maybe they've had something really difficult come up. Now it's not for the mentor to deal with that. It is for the mentor to refer that onto the appropriate pathways. And that's again where NARWIC is excellent because they've got a range of different referral pathways there that they've built in. So by the end of the program, the mentee and mentor come together and they do a presentation about their experience, which over the years, there's been some absolutely fabulous presentations, some really wonderful senior people who knew that they were so funny. But you can start to see what people then got out of it. And in that presentation, we make it really important that we hear from the mentee and the mentor. So what did the mentor get out of this program? What did the mentee get out of this program because there's this range of sharing. And I think it really validates the mentee as well, that they've not just been a drain on the system. It is been a two way experience.

Michelle Ockers:

How long does the program run for in each round?

Jana Clyde:

Yeah, generally six months. So depending on timings of holidays, some are a little bit longer, but yes, generally six months. And then participants are handed their certificate at the end. And then in that final conversation, it's up to the mentee and mentor if they continue on the relationship or not. And what we do is we make sure that there's an environment where either option's okay. So it's not seen as a failure, my mentor doesn't like me enough to continue. You know, it is just it might be about time and capacity, but what you've generally built is a really great advocate.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So why six months? What's special about six months versus four or twelve?

Jana Clyde:

Well, yeah, it's really about you need time to build a relationship. And in that relationship, you need multiple interactions. We know how important it is that a one off interaction you're only going to get so much information. You're only going to build so much rapport. And it's only after multiple interactions and rapport building opportunities that you start to really build a deeper connection and relationship, and also get to know someone. Because I think we're actually talking about a really high level of trust here. You've been paired with someone that, even if you've met them before, it's unlikely that you've had a real conversation with them. And in that mentoring conversation, like Jo said, it's very different from coaching on a skill. You're not suddenly teaching me how to use Excel. We're talking about effective communication. We're talking about growth and career management. I'm talking to you potentially about some of my biggest dreams. I would like to be a lead architect on a particular piece of work. I would like to be in the infrastructure section. And there may be things that you've actually never spoken to anybody out loud about before. So time is really important in that.

We also need time and spacing for the workshops. So the workshops, and we know that embedding skills and capability, once you've learned something, you need time to go and apply it. And we know that skills atrophy if they're not applied. So what we're trying to do is build an ecosystem around that learner, given that we're not working directly with their environment. So at Wisdom, we often run programs where we are building an ecosystem within a large organisation. Now in that, you can work with the managers, you can work with their systems and processes, but NARWIC sits outside of that, which has benefits, but also challenges. So you're supporting an ecosystem, not in someone's workplace. You're giving them tasks to be able to go back and try, but then to also work with their mentor. So you're going to need time for that. And there's also logistics, things like school holidays.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes.

Jana Clyde:

And ensuring that you're scheduling around those things. And for the NARWIC committee, as Jo said, the volunteers are incredible individuals who are giving large amounts of their time. So it takes time to set the program up, to get information, to get the right matches, to ensure the time, to do the evaluation, to make amendments to the program.

Jo Farrell:

I think, can I jump in? So mentoring is all around EQ, not so much IQ. You're going to talk about shop, you know, you're going to talk about, oh, this is my experience in this company. This is what I've done as a mentor. You know, like I'm a leader in this field and all this sort of stuff, but it's about the emotional connection. And it's about imparting a lot more of the other skills that we often overlook or underrepresent, and so, it's just a completely different way of interacting with someone. You know, I think Jana touched on it before, like this isn't a person in your immediate organisation who holds sway over, you know, what your job is and those sorts of things. And it's not someone in your personal life from a familial background or a friendship background

or a sporting team. It's a completely unique person in your life that can actually guide all different facets of your life with things.

And where some of the things come out from a mentee experience is just having someone that they can, you know, often it's like a sounding board. And I know that for me, when I was a mentee and sat on that side, it was, am I crazy or is this not acceptable behaviour? And so it was just having someone that I could sound it off or, you know, am I not approaching this discussion with my superior in the right way? Because there's some friction with that. And so I didn't know how to navigate certain conversations with supervisors or managers. And I felt a bit hard done by. Some of it actually was course correction for me and my attitude, because I'd started to develop a little bit of an ego. You know, I'd started to make these strides in my career, and my head got a little bit big and a bit full of myself. And I developed an attitude that wasn't that productive in terms of having some of these conversations. And I had someone who wasn't my boss, who wasn't in an organisation, who wasn't mum and dad, who sat there and said, can I give you some honest, constructive feedback? I think your tone and your attitude and how you're having these conversations isn't getting you where you need. Have you tried this? And automatically overnight, that changed the game. And so I didn't get my back up about it. I didn't feel like I was being attacked. I didn't feel like a person in authority in my organisation was having a crack at me. It was someone completely independent who went, I'm listening to it and I can see that you are actually part of the problem. And I think that what we need to understand is around that relationship is going when it's built on a foundation of trust, when all of these things that Jana's talking about happen right at the beginning, and that relationship starts to build, you can't do that in three months, you can't do it in four months, you know, you need that strong foundation, you need to go through some of the ebbs and flows of life.

Like a 12-month program is always better, we know that, but often, you know, people can't fund that, so there's restraints around that. But it's got to be a minimum of six, because there's a natural emotional flow to how people interact and sort of how they get to know. There's a stagnation point, usually around halfway, where it gets a little bit cold, you kind of go, not really gelling here. And that's the really magic moment where if people can actually overcome that little hump and come back, that's where that next step of that connection happens. And so, you know, what I see now with the mentoring that we do, and you know, Build Like a Girl's mentored over 500 women since 2020. And long-term, you know, so when Jana's saying, yeah, you know, the program might end at six months, but once that foundation is there, it goes on.

And I mean, I was in the, I think in 2019, I was a mentor in the, in the program. And I got paired up with a young lady who had just started her electrical apprenticeship. So we were the only two tradies in the room. So naturally we got matched up together from that lived experience, but we are still fantastic friends now. She's since moved to Melbourne. She's fully qualified. You know, she rings me every other week. We stay in touch. We have this fantastic relationship. She said, can you be a reference? Because I'm joining the army reserves. It'd be really great to have your support. Like, it's just this ongoing, sustainable relationship that is unspoken that, you know, we're ride or die. We're going to be there for each other forever because we just have that

relationship established from that program that has just been such, you know, a beautiful, organic thing that sort of happened along the way. And she knows unequivocally that she can come to me and get the right advice, and sometimes that advice may not be what she wants to hear at the time, like what I had. But she'll be able to take it away, mull it over and come back and go, I think you're right, I think I need to do this.

And so it's not about having a cheer squad. It's not about someone having a rah-rah person in your corner always sort of going, yeah, you're great, you can do it. Sometimes it's something going, hey, I think you might need to actually work on this and you might find that there'll be a better outcome for you. And you can only do that once you have quite an established you know, foundation of trust, a foundation of honesty, where, you know, give the mentor some criticism back to going, I don't think you're supporting me in the right way, I really need this from you. And that that has happened, I've witnessed that where a mentor has sat back and gone, I'm withholding parts of myself from this, when I really should be more open. And so they're the types of things that when the programs go over, you know, a longer period of time, that that's where you get all of that EQ, all that really fantastic stuff starts coming out to support the structure.

Jana Clyde:

I think what's important in what you're saying there too, Jo, is that lull that you talk about. It happens in every program, every relationship, and it looks different. We use a profiling tool up front. We've used ranges of different ones over the years. The one we've used at the moment is HBDI, the Herman Brain Dominance Instrument. And what I like about that particular tool is it talks about preference, not competence. So we have a preference for engaging in a certain way, and we have a preference for, you know, going about things in a certain way. And I think where there's been friction in some of the mentee mentor relationships navigated world, some of that friction has the most powerful impact to actually form relationships.

And I think what Jo's talking about there, we've had mentees and mentors not get on. And sometimes it's been that the mentor hasn't been willing to engage. And like you're saying, Jo, because there's a high level of vulnerability that we're talking about here. And that is asking a lot. And I think that surprises people sometimes because sometimes mentors, and over the years we've evolved this, but mentors can often come in with the expectations that they're the expert and this is an advice opportunity, I shall come in and I shall offer you. Whereas actually the reverse of that, most of it is listening. Most of it is actually asking the question, helping the individual think for themselves and navigate their own way through. So because of that, the questions that we've got and the structure that we've got in the program actually calls those things out. So in the midway section, there's questions to the mentee and mentor around, what am I not doing that I need to be doing? Is there things that you need from me now? It's a lot easier when the facilitator gives you these questions and you think, I just have to answer them, than you having to then front up and say to someone, hey, do you know what, I'm not quite getting what I need from this. But what we find over time is people actually build the confidence to have those conversations more broadly, because sometimes it's the first time they've

ever done that. Sometimes it's the first time they've ever said in a relationship, this is not actually meeting my needs.

Michelle Ockers:

It can be pretty confronting, right, to do that, but what incredible life skills to be supported to develop, right?

Jana Clyde:

That's exactly right, Michelle. And I think that is the thing with this program. We're talking about people experiencing something for the first time and where there is emotional risk, there's real gain to be had. So where people are putting themselves out there, that's what real learning is, isn't it? Like learning is not comfortable. I think we have this idea that learning is fun, learning is comfortable and in facilitation, we do a great job, you know, at connecting and engaging. But we also know where there is some real gritty, hardcore emotions, there's actually wonderful learning to be had there. And if you can create the right environment for that, which to Jo's point around the length of time, the facilitators, how we engage with the program. The program doesn't work by accident. And I think that from the outside looking in, oh, it looks like, you know, there's a couple of workshops and you do a profiling tool and you have a couple of conversations and here you go. The data that sits behind it and the commitment and the cadence that we've got has been refined in consultation after such a long period of time to get it just right.

Michelle Ockers:

How structured is it? If I'm a mentor, for instance, is there like a schedule laid out? You need to meet with your mentee at this point, at this point, at this point. Here's a checklist or a sheet telling you what sort of things you want to be talking about. It's down to that.

Jana Clyde:

It is down to that, but what I would say is there's also choice. So it is, we provide the guardrails, so to speak. So the structure is there if you need it to depend on it, but if your mentoring relationship goes in a different direction, but it's meeting the intent of the mentoring program, that's okay too. So it's just checking in to make sure that the mentee and the mentor are getting what they need and that this is a growth opportunity and that, you know, we've had some mentee-mentor relationships that got a little over-focused in talking shop also because it was safe, right? It is easier to talk about the latest program you're on and how you know, the tradie that was meant to turn up didn't turn up and didn't do the things that everyone's behind schedule and the government's pulled money and you know, it's easy to get caught up in those conversations but what I'd say in the structure is there is a structure that's depended upon and there's also accountability which is really important too because when you've put a program together, again, if you've got a good facilitator, but also a really good program structure, you start to see pretty quickly those who are not turning up. So we've actually exited mentees and mentors from the programs at different points. And one absolutely wonderful mentor did not have a mentee in the end because the mentee was not driving that relationship. They would make times, but they would never turn up to the mentoring appointments, et cetera. So it goes both ways.

Jo Farrell:

But I think it's interesting to just point out, though, that mentors come back year on year. They do. That's one of the, I guess, you know, if you're going to measure success, the fact that it is now quite a sought after thing to do as mentors. I mean, I got shoved out the door because I'd done it for a few years and I was taking up space where someone else wanted to come in. And so I sort of had to, you know, step to the side to let other people have an opportunity. But that's, you know, that's the efficacy of it is that, you know, people who are sitting in these roles as mentors and who want to sit in this role as mentor, it's sought after. People want to come back each year and participate because they get so much out of it as mentors and also we see mentees now come back as mentors so there's a sustainable you know sort of thing going on which is so important to have that. I mean that kind of tells me that it's in the right direction that people are so active in terms of wanting to be involved that we actually you know, then have to start going, okay, well, some people who have been involved in the program for a while, you have to step aside and let some other people have a go. But, you know, that tells you how much they get out of it and how much they, you know, find it so rewarding on both sides of the fence.

Michelle Ockers:

So, Jo, can we stick with you for a moment around the mentor? I'm so conscious of time. I feel like we need twice the amount of time that we've got today. There's so much else I'd love to dig into. Can we stick with the experience of the mentors for a moment? How, you know, specifically within this program, how is it that the mentors are supported that sets them up for success? We can give some specific examples of what support for the mentors looks like. That means that they're able to do a great job with it and also that they get something specific for their growth out of it.

Jo Farrell:

Yeah. I mean, for me coming in as a mentor for the first time, the structure for me was key. I had no clue what it meant to be a mentor. I just knew that I was able to give a lot back, having been on the other side for so long. And so, you know, the guidance and the structure and the facilitation for me was key. So, you know, I'd never had anything to do with the HBDI stuff. And so it was an eye opener for me to realise I've got to big chunk of yellow brain and a little bit of red and no blue and green. And so for me, interacting with people who were highly blue and green, it was kind of like, all right, this is going to be a challenge.

Michelle Ockers:

Now I'm not even going to try to unpack what the colours mean. I am not familiar with HBDI and some of our listeners may not be, but I'll put a link in the show notes.

Jo Farrell:

But it's such an important part because it actually, you know, understanding how you interact, your perspective, what's important to you? How do you work? So it covers all of that sort of stuff. And so for me, being, you know, a big picture person and a kind of fly by the seat of my pants, understanding that there's people who are the complete opposite of that, you know, for me, that was really integral, because number one, it was the first time I actually understood myself and how I approach things, how I approach problem solving and other things, and so straight away it sat

me back in my chair and kind of went... oh, this is sometimes why I struggle to get my point across to people or I struggle when people are so in the detail. And I'm like, why are you so worried about the detail? Let's just go and work it out as we go. Whereas that's just anxiety inducing for people who sit in that other field. So, you know, straight away understanding how I communicate what I do in terms of approaching different things was so important for self-knowledge and self-awareness to then be able to step into that arena and actually have a conversation with someone who may be the complete opposite. And so having that structure, having that awareness of self was the first step for me to actually be able to approach this program and give to it what I needed to give.

And then having that structure around setting up that psychological safety, having the discussion around how do you like to communicate because from a generational perspective more and more we're seeing young people don't like to pick up and answer their phone but they talk like crazy and they'll Whatsapp like crazy. I mean I've got apprentices that I mentor who will not answer the phone and have a conversation but will write long winded novels on text messages. So understanding how people are comfortable communicating, understanding that that is so fluid. And so having that structure there through and meeting up once a month and also having that interaction with other mentors about how are you going and what have you been doing? And we go for a walk around the lake every couple of weeks and have a chat that way. And I'm like, oh, ok, that's good. Instead of sitting in a coffee shop and sometimes getting a bit stagnant, finding different ways to interact and having, you know, a group of mentors who all of us are completely different, all of us do different jobs and different things.

And so even having that touch point to kind of go, Oh, I'm actually not approaching this in the right way. And this is probably why we're not getting what we need out of this. And so, yeah, the structure is key as a mentor. And for me, it really, and because I did it so many years ago now, I still use the same premise and the same approach for all of the mentoring I do now. I've got 137 women in Build Like a Girl mentoring arrangements. And so, you know, all of that has been from that foundation from this program from day one of me stepping in going, I want to do this, but I've got no idea. And so I think that's the power of it is it gives you the tools and the skill sets that can then just follow on and follow on and follow on.

Jana Clyde:

It's really interesting, Michelle, because we've got manuals that we actually put together because we do know that people have different preferences. I've still got it. And when we put that together, it starts really basically with what is mentoring, like the actual definition, what's expected of me, what's expected of my mentor, and then a conversation to have to sign up to go, yeah, this is what we're expecting of each other. The other thing we see a lot of, because mentors do come back, is that it builds deep relationships across the community. Now, we're really fortunate in the ACT and that we've got a tight community down here. It's a small place to be. But those relationships have been really valuable to the mentors as well. So I think that there are multiple levels of value here that we see. So we know that networking done over something that's meaningful together, you feel like you achieve something. And I think that the being enabled by an external party is something that's really

interesting as well, because the mentors also have someone to go to for advice and help. And say hey, look, this isn't quite working out. Have you got any suggestions? And then one of our facilitators or a NARWIC team member say, hey, have you considered this? What are you doing? Where are the gaps? That sort of thing.

Jo Farrell:

But I think too, don't forget, leadership is a very lonely place. And it's a very lonely place for women in particular. And I think that there's been so much focus on, our leaders need to be better, you know, they need to do all these things for the team and all of these other, you know, sort of pressures and, you know, sort of the running dialogue of all of our failures about where we fall over. And sort of not acknowledging that, you know, quite often, a woman in leadership is the only woman standing there. Quite often she takes the emotional burden of all of the other people around her. And so, you know, being a mentor in one of these programs, you can turn up where there's other leaders who feel exactly the same way. And so it's almost like a, yeah, it's not just a mentor mentee sort of thing. It's a group of people that are providing a framework of support that is nonjudgmental. It's not attached to other parts of your life. And you can actually kind of, just that feeling of not being so isolated or lonely in that space is a very, very powerful thing as well.

Michelle Ockers:

There's so many layers of benefit here for different people involved in the program. Jana, how have you monitored the progress and outcomes of the program over the years? What signals do you look for? What feedback? What data do you use?

Jana Clyde:

Yeah, great. So we started doing probably the best and the most detailed data tracking from around 2020. So some of the stats that we've got is we've had an 85% completion rate of the mentoring program where the national average sits at 47. We have 98% of the graduates of the program. that they experienced improved workplace performance. So we use Kirkpatrick's model and then over the years what we've done is we've really worked with NARWIC and their strategic planning to see what are the key data points that we need to gather that are going to help them both continue to evolve the program, because I think one of the risks in a program like this is the thought that it's working, so we'll keep it static. So if a program doesn't evolve and stays current, I think you've got a lot of challenges. So we look at everything from engagement to outcomes. Now, outcomes can be right, as we know, you know, trying to get impact, measuring impact on learning, another space that I'm really passionate about. Wisdom's currently doing some work with University of Technology Sydney and their data scientists around how do we track the right data points at the right time to get, to ensure that we're getting the data that's meaningful to help us measure impact.

Michelle Ockers:

Fantastic.

Jana Clyde:

But I think the key metrics would be around participants recommending the program, application in the workplace. We do look for things like whether people are promoted

out of the program. And we've got anecdotal feedback. It's difficult, as you know, to track back to say, I did this one thing, so therefore this happened. But we have anecdotal feedback that says there is a higher percentage of women that get promoted out of the program than don't if they haven't gone through the program.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Jo, and unfortunately, we're going to have to wrap up the conversation. So this is sort of one of the closing questions. From your perspective, you know, you've been involved in the sector since 1996. What signs do you see that the industry culture has changed or is starting to change? What shifts do you see and how do you know things are getting better?

Jo Farrell:

Oh, you've left this the last question. It's like this is a separate conversation, isn't it? And just every time we say 1996, I just feel really old. But look, the industry is changing. No question. There's been so much work by organisations, NARWIC, you know, ourselves at Built Like a Girl, Empowered Women in Trades, Future Lady Tradies. I mean, there's I think there's about 23 or 24 organisations around the country actively working to, you know, engage and retain women in the construction sector. And that has been growing exponentially. I've seen in the past five years, you know, uptick in statistics in terms of young women, particularly school aged women who are like, yep, I'm going to be a tradie. Whereas before it was, there was so much stigma and stereotype attached to it that, you know, that wouldn't have been something that came out of their mouth.

So I think from a recruitment engagement perspective, it's happening. And women are seeing a viable career in construction and particularly on the tools as a very lucrative and very long term career. Has the industry evolved enough to make it safe and welcoming and provide what they need to have? No, no. And, you know, we see it day in day out where we have to have conversations with builders about sanitary bins in toilets that aren't there, providing access to clean amenities. It's one thing to have a toilet, it's another thing to have somewhere where this actually has a lock on it and is safe to use and have the things in there that people need. And that's from a basic level. And then you start moving through behaviour, you start looking at harassment and look, we're a bit of a boots on ground organisation where we say that Build Like a Girl logo is like a bat symbol. You shoot it up into the air if something's wrong and we respond.

And the amount of call outs I get to come out to sites to mediate and have intervention around things that have happened to women on sites is still very prevalent. We've had some pretty unsavoury and pretty uncomfortable experiences for women around sexual harassment recently in the past 12 months. And so whilst we're seeing a huge uptick of engagement and women entering the industry, that retention piece now has to be everybody's sole focus, because that is not fixed. And it's not fixed because we're not addressing culture. And we're not addressing the issues in the industry that have been so prevalent. It's still a predominantly male industry with a very, you know, specific distilled set of behaviours that we see in the community. But when you distil it into an industry like ours, and don't address that as for its cause, then we're still going to be fighting the same battle. So, you know, the

programs like this and the work that we all do advocating for this stuff is where we start to sort of chip away at that. So, you know, from a positive spin, yes, it's changing, Michelle. Yes, we're seeing a lot more women engaged, a lot more women having a crack and a lot more women who are starting to break through that barrier into those leadership roles. Is it happening quickly enough? No. Is there enough women? No. So I don't want to be complacent and pat ourselves on the back and go, look how wonderful it is. We're definitely on the top of the wave. I don't want to fall off the back of it. I want to catch that wave. And so, you know, we need to continue these types of programs. We need to properly fund them and we need to get them out more broadly across Australia, particularly in regional areas as well. to make sure that we're keeping these women in the industry where they belong and seeing them then progress through to those upper levels.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Thanks, Jo. Obviously, so much more to be done still. So, Jana, a final question for you. What advice would you give to the L&D professionals who are listening to this conversation and thinking, I really want to build mentoring programs in a more intentional, purposeful way to drive real change in my organisation or in my sector? What key advice would you give them?

Jana Clyde:

So I would say design for psychological safety up front, and that is probably going to be one of the biggest things that you really need to consider around how do you support different people at different career points, engaging in a way that is safe for both of them. I would also say building the mentoring into your learning architecture. So when you're looking at all the forms of engagement, don't think about, okay, we're going to run a workshop here, that's the learning. Actually learning is from the moment that you've matched someone. So a learning interaction is around looking at what are the requirements? How do we support someone to the outcome? And what are the different tools that we can use?

The other thing I'd say is you really want to keep the program current. So identify those core principles that work and that you've built the program on, but also ensure that you're consistently updating the program to reflect where that community is. So I think there is a perception often that co-design is something that you do at the beginning of a learning program and you co-design it. Whereas we look at it as a learning partnership. We need to be in that constant conversation with industry alongside them. We are not the construction experts, we're the learning experts. Our job is to come in alongside and hear from Jo, hey, look, the numbers actually haven't moved. You know, we're actually going backwards here. What else can we do? So it becomes a currency conversation that you're having.

And then the final point would be, be mindful about the data you're getting. So we know that we can make data say a whole range of things, but in learning, I think too many people are still using the good old happy sheets, so the Likert scale. I think really starting to evolve your thinking around impact aligned to industry so that you're used as a strategic lever. So this learning is not a one-off interaction where you can tick a box to say, Hey, look, how good are we? We got some people together and they're feeling good about themselves. No, this is about actual change, which means

Learning Uncut Episode 176

Mentoring That Works: Lessons from Construction – Jana Clyde and Jo Farrell

that sometimes it's not going to go the way you expected, that you're going to get feedback that isn't great and that you're going to need to take that and keep going. I think people get afraid of trying things because the feedback might not be good, as opposed to going, actually, in the interest of this industry, we've got some really gritty learning and development to do here. There's going to be difficult conversations to have. If we look at that data in the context of moving things forward, actually, that's really powerful. So just making sure that you're taking the right data down and you're putting it in the right context.

Michelle Ockers:

Use data to improve, not prove. Yeah.

Jana Clyde:

Exactly right.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. I feel like this has been such a rich conversation, but there's so much more I would like to keep chatting about. Maybe we'll frame up another conversation. But for listeners, you can connect with Jo and Jana on LinkedIn. We'll put your LinkedIn links to your LinkedIn profiles and also to both of your businesses in the show notes for listeners, it's clear that both of you and your organisations approach mentoring, approach long-term change, approach shifting culture in really meaningful ways. And I know there's so much I've gotten from the conversation and listeners will have already. So thank you so much for sharing your work with us today.

Jo Clyde:

Thanks Michelle, really appreciate it.



Learning Uncut are learning and development consultants that help Learning and Development leaders and their teams become a strategic enabler so that their businesses can thrive. We work in evidence-informed ways to drive tangible outcomes and business impact and are strong believers in the power of collaboration and community. We specialise in helping to build or refresh organisational learning strategy, update their L&D Operating Model, enable skills development, and conduct learning evaluation. We also offer workshops to shift learning mindset and practices for both L&D teams and the broader workforce – as well as speaking at public and internal events.

Learn more about us [at our website](#).

About your host, Michelle Ockers



Michelle is the co-founder and Chief Learning Strategy at 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*



Find Michelle on [LinkedIn](#)