

Learning Uncut Episode 191 - Team Alignment is commitment, not agreement - Lindsay Uittenbogaard and John Dobbin

Host Michelle Parry-Slater

Welcome to today's episode of Learning Uncut. In the spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge the traditional custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community, particularly to the Kombumerri People whose land I'm joining you from today. We pay respect to their elders past and present and we extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples present or listening today.

We're going to welcome to the episode today two people far away from Australia, but very welcome nonetheless, somebody from Dubai, somebody from the Netherlands. And the reason I'm mentioning all of this is it is important to remind ourselves we have a global listenership here on Learning Uncut, which is a real pleasure. And so today we're talking about something that matters to all of us. We're talking about organisations that don't really admit this.

It's all about alignment. So not the kind that lives on a values poster, not the kind that sort of determines whether we walk past it in the elevator, but actually the kind that determines the high stakes of success or failure under real pressure. My guest today, Lindsay Uittenbogaard, who's Founder and CEO of Mirror Mirror, a coordination methodology and alignment practice built around the idea that's servicing differences in how people see things and working those through. That's where the real change begins in business.

Mirror Mirror has got a diagnostic tool and a network of practitioners to deliver it for Lindsay. And we're also joined by John Dobbin. John is an independent management consultant. Now he's based in Dubai. He put Mirror Mirror into practice in a tier one global bank. So they were under a regulatory deadline with hundreds of developers across multiple geographies.

So we've got the case study from John, as well as the theory and the ideas from Lindsay. And I'm really excited to have this conversation today. So do want to introduce yourselves a little bit more? I'm keen to hear a little bit about what's life in the Netherlands doing for you? What's life in Dubai? Some troubling times. What's going on for you in all of those locations?

Lindsay, welcome to Learning Uncut.

Lindsay Uittenbogaard

Thank you very much, Michelle, and well done for pronouncing my surname. I am from the UK, but I've married a Dutchman. I've been over here for 20 years or so. And actually, the Netherlands is really working for me because it kind of lends itself to today's topic. Actually, I first came over for work and I was really surprised that people would sort of agree with each other happily. I mean, sorry, disagree with each other happily. They would say, well, I have a different view. Actually, I think this or I think that and people go, "okay, that's fine." Whereas I think traditionally in the UK I think "oh, do you" and it would be seen as a little bit of a threat but that's a sort of little backdrop into how I got to the Netherlands some time ago and yeah it's the morning here, but doing well today thank you.

So John, Dubai, how is it?

John Dobbin

Okay, so as you probably determined from my accent, I'm actually an Aussie, and I've been living the expat lifestyle for about eight years. And so yeah, live in Dubai, but most of my consulting work is in the Middle East region, in Europe, UK. I did a big stint in the UK for a couple of years. And it's wonderful. It's a very central place. It's a great place to live. When we're recording it, it's a little bit troublesome with the war going on, but all good so far.

Michelle Parry-Slater

It's a really interesting opportunity to speak to such an eclectic mix, a UK person living in the Netherlands and an Aussie living in Dubai. I'm British, I live in Australia. But this is what can cause misalignment within organisations, really understanding each other. So we're really the perfect set of people to be having this conversation today. So, Lindsay, Mirror, Mirror, can you give us a sort of quick sense? What is it? What's the thinking behind it?

Lindsay Uittenbogaard

Sure. I think the easiest way to describe it is that when you've got a team of people and they've got various inputs coming into their sort of unit, if you like. So we're talking about strategic direction, changes in the organization, the wider context, feedback on how the work is going. Then they will handle that as individual people. Our brains are not joined together to deliver outputs and hopefully outcomes through their behaviours, their actions, their decisions.

Now, all of this assumes that there's some kind of shared clarity to start with, sort of anything from understanding what their role is, what the role of other people is, how their strategy interacts with the work of the team, what that means in terms of how it relates, how they interact with each other to stay connected and how they interact to deliver and collaborate to deliver.

So that assumption about shared clarity is a very shaky one actually, because what we know from research and what we know from all of our work over the last 10 years is that people do interpret things differently.

They do not share clarity as a basic starting point and that takes a bit of work. So if those interpretation gaps are not properly managed, if you like, then it leads to delivery problems because those behaviours, those decisions and actions just won't match up and things go in different directions.

And I think this is where a lot of typical problems that people encounter are, a lot of projects fail, there's cost overruns. I mean, you name it right from attrition to frustration. A lot of these things are happening because there are people moving in different directions, that sort of friction going on that's unmanaged. So this is actually for me, the core of employee disengagement.

It's where alignment work started for me back in 2008. But just to summarize then about the idea behind all of this is that when you systematically compare the perspectives of people in teams and work through the key gaps together, then a few things happen. You build collective understanding about the context, the goals, the work. You reduce blind spots and assumptions and delivery risks.

And you improve then engagement, ownership and ultimately results. So it's the kind of missing piece. It's like, it's not taking for granted. People have that shared understanding. And I think there's one more thing I just need to get across right at the beginning here is that the definition of alignment is commonly misunderstood to be just agreement. You know, are we aligned? Do we agree? That's not correct because alignment is about agreement to take a certain course of action. It's about sort of commitment.

Even back in 1999, Amy Edmondson was quoted by saying, creating alignment is about shared understanding and commitment, not about complete agreement.

Because let's face it, you're not going to be able to get everybody to agree on all of their perspectives and opinions behind something. The idea is not to have everything, everyone become the same brain.

It's to use the different ideas and everything to become aligned in action. So that's what's behind all of this.

Michelle Parry-Slater

So interesting, so, so interesting, especially having moved to a country where largely culturally, agreement actually, I'd rather not have a disagreement. I'd rather be on the beach at the end of the day rather than have had a disagreement with somebody. So find it really fascinating. And here's John, an Aussie, I wonder if we agree or disagree on my perception of how I've noticed your country folk.

So tell me, John, you came into this program working as an independent agile lead. What was the situation when you arrived?

John Dobbin

Okay, so as you've already mentioned, [it] was a very large bank, one of the top 10 banks in the world, and they had an enormously complicated program in front of them. What they had to do is had to create a modelling environment for all of their assets, the derivatives, commodities, and they had to put that into an environment where they could understand different economic shocks, such as what happens if, hey, the Strait of Hormuz suddenly closes? What happens to all of their assets?

So this involved integrating hundreds of different systems together, which had never been designed to be integrated before. It was tremendously expensive. So the potential of getting this right was worth billions of dollars a year to the bank, the GDP of a small nation. But it had never been done before. And they had a hard regulatory deadline. So the problem was about as complex as you can get.

It was mostly an IT problem, but it also involved mathematicians and quants. And the organisation, I came in because they'd implemented a supposedly agile process, and it had been running for about a year and was going south. They were missing their deadlines. Senior executives were getting very nervous. That nervousness and anxiety was coming back down through the system and turning into this pervasive

"Are we going to make it?"

"Are we going to be able to complete this project?"

And all of the different manifestations of that.

"Am I in the right job?"

"Am I doing the right thing?"

"What's going to happen to this program?"

And so, I came in to try to turn this around by implementing processes and practices that fundamentally allowed over a thousand developers to coordinate across all these different time spans and geographies and to try to reach this goal even though the solution path was unknown and was emerging over time and to hit this hard regulatory deadline. So that was my job.

Michelle Parry-Slater

It sounds like there was a lot of risk in this. What did it look like on the ground when you arrived?

John Dobbin

So from a top level, the risk of failure, if they missed this regulatory deadline, it would take years and years for them to get back on board. The regulator had said, 'You have to get your model approved by this date.' If you miss this date, it could take two or three years for us to get back to approve your model. And so if they miss that, then they wouldn't be able to trade with as much certainty as they would if they had

the model. And because we're talking about hundreds of billions of dollars worth of assets being traded, that translates to multiple billions of dollars a year that they would have left on the table if they hadn't made it. So, at the very top level, it's huge. So at the very top level, there's a lot of pressure coming down. And they were in this very bureaucratic structure. So, they'd employed one of the top four consultancies, one of the big four consultancies to come in and put this agile process in. And it was a highly bureaucratic process. And that bureaucratic process broke the collaborative circuitry, which could have enabled them to achieve their goal.

And they realised this, and so I had to come in, I had to reconfigure the entire organisation to be able to meet this.

So, you've got a brain. Imagine Michelle I took your brain and chopped it into little cubes and then I put those cubes together with a little wire you know so the cubes of the brain were trying to communicate with each other. It wouldn't work very well would it?

Michelle Parry-Slater

Sounds gross.

John Dobbin

But why not?

And it's because the natural connections that you want to have between neurons, and the metaphor here is obviously the natural connection between people, are broken up by the bureaucracy.

So what I needed to do is to remove the bureaucratic impediments and enable these connections to occur. And so what I was able to do is to create structures which are highly dynamic and autonomous. So we created structures where we broke these large, very large bureaucratic teams down into these self-organising ensembles and we had to get these ensembles to communicate with each other. And what that required was a high degree of autonomy. So people had to become a lot more autonomous, work much more autonomously than they had in the past, which meant they had to communicate better. And they had to align together.

Over a thousand people had to align together without any bureaucratic or top-down control, or very little top-down control, in order to meet this massive multi-year program.

Michelle Parry-Slater

So help me to understand how do you go from, one of the Big Four have come in, you've come in with your different new ways of thinking, structuring differently, putting people into autonomous settings. Suddenly they've just got the psychological safety to go, yeah, let's go for that. You know, let's do that.

I feel like that, you know, what was actually happening was, and this probably is a little bit where Lindsay's thinking comes in, you know, what's not being addressed here?

What's underneath that nobody was talking about? Why did we need to shift? There was obviously low psychological safety, or is that an assumption on my part?

John Dobbin

It could be an assumption. It's something that we found out during the process.

So, what's low psychological safety? What does that mean? It means that people are unable to speak freely without fear of consequence. So could they raise their voice and not feel that there's bad, negative consequences? And those negative consequences are not just losing your job or being fired, but are they going to feel embarrassed? Are they going to feel ashamed? Are they going to feel that they're being poorly judged by their managers?

So if you've got this really ambitious program with a really unclear solution path, with the senior executive saying, we have to complete this project, we have to complete this project, and all the milestones are slipping, what's going to happen? People are going to feel very afraid to talk about things which are going to raise the alarm bells of senior management.

So one of the big learnings that came out of the work was this fear, which we can put under psychological safety, there was a fear of identifying risk.

So, if I had a program lead and they thought that they weren't going to quite make a milestone, they would sugarcoat it or they'd avoid it or they'd do anything they could but not to communicate that. And this is a real problem because the output of one team was the input of about six or seven other teams.

So, if that one team failed in a delivery deadline or delivery milestone, that created this cascading ripple effect through multiple other teams. And this is exactly the situation which I arrived upon.

So, people weren't saying, "hey, I think we've got a problem up here. I don't think we're going to make, we're not going to be able to finish this particular piece of coding by the end of the month." They were afraid to say that. And so they worked very hard to try to get it done. They exhausted themselves. And sometimes they wouldn't get it done. So all of a sudden in the monthly meeting, they said we didn't complete it. Now the senior executives were getting really upset because they weren't told.

And all the other downstream teams weren't able to take the inputs to be able to do their part of the work. So one of the key things to turn around was to get people to be able to safely signal and raise their concerns to the group so that the group could go, okay, doesn't sound like we're going to make the March deadline. How can we reconfigure?

And as we shifted that, a lot of the things started falling into place.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Lindsay, let me come to you because what we're hearing, what John's story really highlights is this sense of lack of safety.

What's going on underneath? Why are people feeling the need to sugarcoat rather than say, actually, we're not going to make it. There's a problem. This is the problem. It sounds to me like this is exactly what Mirror Mirror is designed to reach.

Am I reading it right?

Lindsay Uittenbogaard

Yeah, so it's not just about, it's slightly more holistic, let's say, because we're talking about giving people the opportunity to actually have a moment to articulate the kind of things that John's talking about. You know, sometimes it's finding the moment, you know, what am I supposed to just knock on the manager's door and say, I've got a point of view? mean, you know, that's a bit sort of out of place. So actually having an opportunity for people to get together and talk about it is one thing.

But if you have a diagnostic that's a bit more holistic, that doesn't just look at psychological safety, but looks at areas where there are, let's say, gaps on what's going on that either are causing problems right now that they need to talk about and be psychologically safe about, so the culture is like a layer on top, or they're about to cause problems because those interpretation gaps are going to have people moving in different directions.

Then you get some kind of evidence about what do we need to put on the table? And then the culture bit is, well, how can we do that? And being able to have a productive conflict, being able to have the psychological safety to raise those issues that John's talking about.

That's the kind of cultural aspect. So, you can kind of divide it into four areas.

You've got strategic alignment. What is the context around the intention of where we're going?

You've got the stakeholder alignment. Everybody's very familiar with. Are people and teams connected with the stakeholders that they need to be in the way that they need to be connected?

Then you've got the cultural alignment. Are they actually able to behave and manage their alignment through the way that they discuss things, through the psychological safety, through the emotional development that they have in a conversation or high quality dialogue conversation?

And then the fourth bit is alignment in action. So, and this is where some other conventional approaches don't touch what we do is because they're not looking at how is this all being applied in the real work to be effective.

So, that's I think that kind of puts a layer on. Let's say you've got this data about where is the team misaligned? What do you need to talk about?

John's work is all about, you know, how do you put that together into interaction so that these teams come out the other side in a better place and being more aligned.

So that, I think that hopefully that answers some of your questions.

Michelle Parry-Slater

So, generating the survey report helps people to sort of know what they don't know. It's surfacing those unknowns. And that ripple effect that John described earlier then is easier to address. Am I hearing that?

Lindsay Uittenbogaard

Yeah, so the diagnostic report is literally just a mirror. And that's why it's called Mirror Mirror, because it is just reflecting back the individual responses from team members about how they see aspects of their team. And it's combining and contrasting, sorry, it's combining those perspectives so that people can see, well, where do we actually hold the same views? And where do we have variation in views that could be looked at?

And there are two types of questions in it. So one is just straight verbatim, where we'll ask people about, "what do you think could be done to improve this?" So that it's literally grabbing the opportunity to say, now that we're talking, let's look at the inputs so that we can see where the most value is. And the second type of question is simply a rating, agree-to-disagree Likert scale rating and we've got quite a lot of those and they give us two scores.

So one is the average score of the team. Imagine the team is a single unit. know, does your team have? "Is it safe to bring up tough issues?" That's a good psychological safety question. We actually use the questions in the public domain from Amy Edmondson in that section. Is it safe to bring up tough issues?

Well, if they all agree that it is, then that's great because you can see, okay, we're aligned on that in terms of in principle, and we don't need to perhaps pay attention to that so much. But if there's a lot of variation there and we have a variation score that is, that shows the extent to which the responses are different, they could be either polarized, or they could be in different factions or just spread across the whole thing.

Then you can say, why would that be and how would that impact our work and what can we do about it?

And the dialogue process that we teach in our training, which is about how people then share perspectives, how they seek perspectives and how they coordinate their perspectives will lead them through to learning from each other. And they don't have to, like we say, agree with everything that everybody's saying, but they do have to come out with a, well, what are we going to do about that then? So, it's safe to bring up tough issues. I mean, if you were tackling that particular issue head on, so that's actually a psychological safety issue and you'd be talking about that rather than just hoping it's present in order for people to share things. So you can talk about it directly.

Some of the conclusions around that might be, well, you know, we find it difficult to raise tough issues because we get pushback from managers.

Now that's great feedback from teams to give to managers to say people aren't talking to you because they fear the repercussions. And that's a data-driven, I mean, it's perception based, but it's a data-driven piece of feedback coming out of a session that will help the organisation understand how can it get better at having people share tough issues. Another could be we don't share tough issues because we don't have the opportunity.

“We never asked about that.” Well, you know, or there's no opportunity to bring it forward. But whatever the context is, and however the team are approaching it, there's a way to say, well, what are we going to do about that then? Well, let's make sure that we have an opportunity to do that. That could be in the Mirror Mirror session, or the Deep Retro session that John takes forward as a variation on this with the work that he does. And that's what we're talking about. So we're not talking about a diagnostic assessment.

We're not necessarily drawing conclusions from what people say. We're just able to bring it to the fore to say, this is how your team sees everything. Now you go and pick out what's important in your context that you want to put on the table and deal with in the structured dialogue process that is fairly simple that we teach, that John uses, that our other practitioners use.

Michelle Parry-Slater

There's a real argument, isn't there, that you can't fix what you don't know about. You can't see it, you can't be it. And so by surfacing these, I just love the concept, the whole concept of the mirror reflecting where managers potentially, they have no idea that there's an issue.

They think everything's hunky-dory because no one's talking to them. So they must be happy, but the amount of assumption in that is quite shocking, really. So I want to come back to you, John, and help me to understand, you've got this information. How do you prioritize? How do you decide what's important?

You've got these various issues that are being thrown up by this diagnostic. You know, in your case study here, what went, what, what went next?

John Dobbin

It's a good question, but before I answer it, I just want to go back. I think it's really important distinction to make, which I don't know if it came through with Lindsay's answer. A lot of organisations run these surveys, and they'll do psychological satisfaction surveys, and the organisation that I was working for did them. And you get this data, and then people sit in a boardroom, and they put some stuff onto whiteboards, and then that's done. They might try to do something, they say we've got a problem, nothing goes on.

What makes Lindsay's tool quite really attractive to me, is that it's a team-based diagnostic. It's looking at a team level, not an organisational office, not just a survey. And it's asking really quite deep questions about how teams operate.

And the way I try to explain it to organisations, I call it a collective metacognitive process. So if you want to get an individual and help them to learn a task better, we can use metacognition, thinking about thinking. But what Lindsay's tool is particularly good at is getting a team to collectively think how they collectively work better. And it's fundamentally different from these large surveys.

So you're looking at a team level, you're asking questions at a meta level about how are we learning together, how are we working together, how are we collaborating together? And that, that's an input. So we get some data and it's anonymous. So it allows people to, so what happens is people get a link and they go away and it takes about 15 minutes, they fill out a little survey and ask all these questions, mirroring questions.

And that's the first part of the process and they might do that on, say, Tuesday. And they do that after hours or during their lunch break and they think about it. Then about a week later, that's compiled into a report and some lovely statistical graphs. And so you can start to see some patterns that are inside the team. But then what's really important, and the key to it, is you then take them into what I call a deep dialogical process or deep retros process.

Whereas most of the organisations I've worked with, they just do this at a very superficial level. So here's our problem, that's all we've got to do about it. But you need to take people and say, here is what your team has said about a problem. This is what's come out of it. This what you guys have said individually. And there's some curly things here. People are saying that they're afraid to speak up or people saying that they don't understand their role. You know, if you don't understand your role, you don't understand what a good job is.

How are we going to do a good job? And we need to create a dialogue. I use the concept of the Bohmian dialogue coming from the work of physicist David Bohm, who was also a philosopher, and he was very interested in the nature of thought. And he postulated that all thought emerges from what he called the tacit ground. So the tacit ground are our assumptions and our biases that exist.

So, not just our own head, but exist within a group. And so these groups, we've got norms. And we don't speak these norms. So a tacit really just means unspoken.

And so the teams go about their day in this operating with these unspoken rules or these unspoken assumptions, such as, you know, I think we're supposed to be doing this, you know, it's unspoken or I suppose we're just not allowed to speak up to managers if a manager says this and they're wrong. I suppose we're not allowed to speak up. I suppose we're not allowed to rock the boat. I suppose we just have to comply.

So there's all these supposes, there's all these assumptions about how the team's supposed to operate within an organisation. These are the norms. Different teams have got slightly different norms, but these are the norms. So how are we going to learn about what norms are operating and how are we going to then say these are counterproductive norms and this is where we want to edge these norms to become a better organising team.

And what Lindsay's diagnostic does, is it asks the questions, to start to ask questions that we wouldn't normally talk about in a team setting. So, there's been the agile retrospective, very, very good for looking at operational type of things. So, in an Agile Retro, teams get together every couple of weeks, for example, and they say, what did we do well? What didn't we do so well? And what can we do better? And mostly those things come down to coordination type issues.

You know, can we document a process better or can we turn up to a meeting greater? So fairly superficial things. It never gets to this normative layer. It never gets to the behavioural layer. And so it's never addressed. But what Lindsay's diagnostic does is ask these metacognitive questions or prompts to get people to think about what's really going on on the surface. And then they come along, come together in this Bohmian dialogue.

And the Bohmian dialogue is very different. It's, you take some time. You have to slow right down. So we might have a one or two hour session where we just take one or two topics and we go very deeply into it. And there's some rules.

So, one of the rules is that we completely suspend judgement. So, if Susan says this, Joe's not allowed to come in and say, you're wrong. We've got to go around the room and everyone on the team has got to say their piece and everyone's got to sit there and listen to it respectfully.

We create an environment where we try to make it as safe as possible for people to speak, be open and transparent as possible so people really get to speak their minds.

So, some facilitation is actually quite helpful.

What else do we do? We don't go to solutionising. We don't say, solve the problem. We keep the solution as a separate conversation.

So, we might have, if you want to do a one-day workshop, you do the Bohmian dialogue in the morning and you do the solutionising or the solution, the ideation in the afternoon.

I would usually keep it about a week before we went into a solution mode. So the Bohmian dialogue is purely about uncovering what it is which is holding back the collective intelligence of that group and for them to really get a very deep understanding of what happens.

Now, when you go about this process, you start, if you've ever been involved in it yourself, you start to see your own mind shifting.

So that was one of the rules is that you should be listening to other people.

With the mindset that you want to be, you are willing to be changed. You have to approach the conversation where I am able to be changed by the other. Because it might be me which is causing the problem, I have to change.

And this process is, you know, normally when you do it, nine times out of ten, it's an incredibly, incredibly powerful conversation because people start to raise things which they've never had the opportunity to raise before because the format hasn't been there.

They start to talk about things which are bit taboo. So for example, they might start to talk about the power dynamics and particular managers who are not in the room or fears about promotion. And so they start to talk about this thing and now each of other team members are hearing this happening and they're contributing to it. And so what the Bohmian does is we go into this tacit ground or this tacit field, the unspoken. We bring the unspoken into the spoken. So now we have a really good collective understanding of what's going on.

Plus what happens is you develop the sense of unity, the sense of cohesion about what the problem really is.

Brené Brown calls that strong ground.

So now we have this strong ground. We have this collective firm footing which gives us, it's almost like linking arms now. We're saying, well, we're going to change. We're no longer gonna have this psychologically unsafe environment, but we're no longer gonna have role ambiguity. We're gonna change at this time. We're gonna, we understand each other and we can push through it. And so I just want to be really distinct because it's not just a survey. This is a survey which uncovers this tacit ground. It brings it to the surface. It allows people through a structural dialogue process to really understand each other.

And it takes them to the next level. So, in fact, in metacognition, if we go through a good individual metacognition process, we come out as better learners.

As we go through a collective metacognition process as a team, we come out as a better team. The collective intelligence of that team is lifted. And that's why that process, Lindsay's process, questions in particular, and I've looked at all of them, is particularly good.

Michelle Parry-Slater

The power of surfacing the elephants in the room. My curiosity is how do you ensure that people feel safe enough, Lindsay?

They're filled in, you know, the survey, the diagnostic, but how do you then take them to the conversation at the depth and the level that John is having?

I'm curious. My curiosity comes from the statement, you've got to be willing to be changed.

So you could potentially, from the diagnostic, be facing things you didn't know existed before. You didn't know that about the team. You didn't know that they felt that way or your colleague, who you thought you got on really well with actually is an opposing perspective.

And if I just give you the reason for my thinking is when people are welcomed new to a space, it's so telling and so quickly telling how they go into what John's described there as those tacit ground, those norms. You move into a space and you instantly are looking to assimilate so you fit in and understand how things work around here. It takes a brave person not be that way.

So, I'm curious how do you go from these are the things that are true for us to I'm willing to listen and change?

Lindsay Uittenbogaard

So, John's talking about the practitioner perspective, I think, more than anything else, and there are different levels of team maturity on all of this.

And so you don't need to expose the team to the inner workings of what's happening in the process on the underlying levels. You can just sort of jump into it and ask some straightforward questions. And you don't have to have everybody admit everything openly.

I mean, people only need to say what they're comfortable to say. That's part of being in a safe space. So for example, let's take a more something out of the alignment in action domain result whereby I'm just looking inside my screen here because I'm looking at a report. We are good at making decisions.

That's just a statement that people are asked to rate. And let's say the average rating on this particular report is 43%. You think, oh, that's not very good. And the rating coherence is 22%. So actually, the average rating gives you a guide as to where the

whole team is, but everybody's in a different place, pretty much. So the spread of scores is very wide. So you can put that on the table, and then you go around and you just ask the simple questions. And every facilitator will have their style, and it depends on the maturity of the team and how this is, why this was chosen indeed, why was this particular score, because you can't debate everything sometimes as John says an, a signal as in a piece of data coming out of a report could take an hour to process in terms of everybody sharing their perspectives and learning from each other and reaching a conclusion about what might need to happen next.

It take longer, could take 30 minutes, but let's say you go around the room and say "Michelle, can you tell me from your perspective why this data might exist in the team or how it's relevant to the team?" So, we are good at making decisions and you confront them with the mirror of how the team is.

So again, you're not necessarily just talking about one, the data isn't what does Michelle think, the data is what does Michelle observe about the team, which is different, which is why we can compare the perspectives.

And you might say, well, to be honest, feel a bit uncomfortable because, let's make this up, sometimes we skip across the decisions without making them really explicit and sometimes we say we make a decision but then it doesn't happen. Now you naming that is making it real for the team.

And somebody could say, yeah, I guess so, or well, I'm not sure about that. But just hearing those, and maybe you've got a couple of minutes to share your perspective, and everybody does. So it's a couple of minutes each going around, what do I think about this result?

And as you start hearing different points of view, that learning process, and that building that John is talking about, that collective intelligence, and getting out of the blind spot, well, I suppose we do, well, what can we do about it? Those little shifts that John is talking about just start to happen.

Yeah, I guess it's a bit unprofessional that we don't really document our decisions, you know, how did that kind of slip? And the things do slip. I mean, you know, let's just be real, we're all human and often we're working remotely, especially in complex environments. It's difficult to keep track of these things. Let's forgive ourselves a bit. What could we do about it? Well, let's make sure we track explicit decisions and that we follow up on those.

End of conclusion, okay, what's the next topic? So we don't have to get into, let's be vulnerable, know, make sure that you, you all of the things that John knows as a professional coach, because John's one of our extremely experienced coaches that are going on under the surface, we don't necessarily have to name that.

I'm a big fan, for example, of not naming values necessarily, as we try to build up values, you just, you can behave those and role model them. It's a bit the same.

So, I would say that from a customer perspective, from a client perspective, this is a very straightforward process that is constructive, safe and rapid, and has people getting into a place within half an hour per topic or an hour per topic of things that they really should have got on top of or, I shouldn't say should actually, but things that people can really benefit from because they are dealing with the actual team, the team making, the work in progress that it just has to be dealt with that will give them a lot of mileage for progress in future.

So that's where I come from.

Michelle Parry-Slater

I think it's a really strong story for taking an evidence-based approach.

You've got the evidence from the diagnostic, it's then what you do with that evidence to move the team forward. And certainly, you know, Learning Uncut and in learning generally, we're really encouraging of taking an evidence-based approach. A lot of the times in learning, we're guilty of doing things because we're asked to, we're reactive, not proactive, and this enables really proactive conversation from what I'm hearing.

So, I'm curious, John, you had the bank, they were meeting their regulatory deadline and they did, as I understand. So, you know, what role did it all play in meeting that deadline? Can you talk us through that sort of ending of the story?

John Dobbin

So going back to my little chopping your brain up into cubes . . .

Michelle Parry-Slater

Do we have to? What an image!

John Dobbin

So it's unable, the edge cubes are unable to communicate. So what I kind of did is I sort of glued the things back together. So it enabled people to form instantaneous relationships across the network, enabled a lot of communication to occur. And so with that communication, came from information.

In the same way as if I put your brain back together again, your intelligence would increase because all your neurons could fire together and form patterns. Same thing happened to the organisation.

Now, so we have to break this down into a little bit more now because one of the things that you do if you remove bureaucracy, remove hierarchy is you're now increasing the level of autonomy and self-accountability that has to happen. At what I call the ensemble group level.

So, an ensemble is like a mini team. It might be three or four people coming together to solve a particular problem and disappearing back into the network again. And then

another ensemble forms. And these ensembles are forming and reforming all over the place.

So they have to take the responsibility for being better communicators with each other and also with the other team members. And so what that process did, was enable us to be able to go and give them a mechanism where they could self-reflect as a team or as an ensemble if you like, or even a team of teams, how they were communicating, what they could do better.

And some of the things which were raised were quite deep issues. So, they were all very good programmers, they were all very good quants, but they had problems communicating with each other. And one of the big change initiatives that came about of this was to really get them to improve their dialogical skills.

So, I created these training programs where it literally taught people how to speak up, gave them rules and heuristics of how to speak up.

How to raise an issue safely, how to break their sentences down into easier to be assertive and easier to raise an issue to someone who they perceived as having a very large power distance.

At the same time, I would take the reports, the data from all these different teams, from the Mirror Mirror reports, and I'd take it to the senior management and say, look, every single one of your teams is thwarted because they're afraid of you, right?

And they're afraid of you because of your behaviour. Now, it's not that you're a monster. It's just that you have to understand that the way you're communicating at the moment is creating fear. They're afraid.

You get angry because they don't raise risks for you, but they're afraid because this is how you behave. Now, what are you going to do about it? How are you going to. You as senior executives, How are you gonna communicate better?

And they went, oh, okay, we never really realised that, didn't understand that. And then they started going about. Now what you've done, we've removed the bureaucracy, or a lot of the bureaucracy, you had to have the standards of banking compliance and all that type of thing, but we removed a lot of the bureaucracy, got people talking together, given them the tools and the mechanisms for them to do critical reflection on the fly and do critical improvements.

Within their team and between the teams, we've increased their collective intelligence, which means they can collectively, over one and a half thousand people can now solve a massive problem together faster. And because they could do that, they're one of only two banks in the world which actually met this regulatory deadline.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Which is an excellent result.

John Dobbin

It was an excellent result. Then the regulators said, I must have made it too hard, so they moved the goalposts, but it doesn't matter.

They got across the finish line. And also because of that, I can't say who it was, but they're far more profitable.

I've watched their profit, they're going up and up and up, up and up. So it was a very, very successful reconfiguration and re-engineering of a very complex team.

And Lindsay's tools are a very important part of that.

Michelle Parry-Slater

I mean, we're laughing, the regulator moved the goalposts, but actually we live in a world where the goalposts are constantly being changed. And if you've set the team up to be able to regularly reflect, to speak openly with each other, to understand how they can have robust conversations without fear of judgement, without bias, to just be open with each other, I think you're really setting them up for success in the future for sure. Lindsay, in our preamble conversation, you talked about Mirror Mirror not being just discretionary team-builders.

And I think that John's example shows this. isn't just about, let's learn more about the team, because this has got huge ripple effects. And it is a bit of a significant reframe when we think about how this can help with risk mitigation, how this can help with dealing with times of change.

I wonder if there's anything that you want to add at this stage as we start to wrap up today to just really help us to understand as learning and development practitioners, we wrestle with this stuff constantly.

We are asked to put training programs in. We potentially recognize that they won't succeed because the foundation isn't right. The baseline isn't ready. The teams aren't ready to receive them. And I wonder how we could use your kind of approach as a little bit more of a robust evidence gathering because I think that that would help learning teams to have things that land rather than have things that we already know well okay we'll do we'll do a program but actually will it be as successful as it could be, that's a long way of me saying is there anything else that you want to add?

Lindsay Uittenbogaard

Yeah, well, no, think you make a good point in the sense that there's a lot out there and I kind of look at it a little bit like a dartboard whereby and there is a judgement here.

I can share John's view that the engagement typical employee wide engagement survey would be at the very outer rim of the dartboard if the real work is in the middle and there are a lot of interventions out there that still need transposing back into the workplace.

So typically inside that outer ring there might be things like leadership development programs.

Or other development programs where you get taken out of the work environment. You're expected to learn about skills and about ways of working, but then you still have to translate them back, which is why they're outside.

There are closer things. you know, organizational design, focus on personality analysis, that's still sort of like away from the center a bit, but they all are.

They all play a role and they're all helpful, but it's about how can you use the optimum mix according to the various contexts that your client is in to help them see and accommodate the various development or work pieces that are going on. So, I think that there's people kind of can lump Mirror Mirror in with the effectiveness approach and the skill building approach piece. it's a workshop. It's a team thing. It's like, DISC or Myers-Briggs, guess, would be an older version of the personality tests going on out there. But I think that we're more akin to delivery lifecycle tools like strategy execution and OKR platforms, for example, where they track goals, metrics and performance. But again, that's still not about the work.

So. I think where we differ, where we could be built into a portfolio of solutions across a longer time span for clients is that because we test shared clarity and commitments that are carried forward and we create shared clarity, or at least we help people create shared clarity proactively, and we address coordination gaps upstream of delivery issues, we're connecting through those skills and being a kind of anchor point that can integrate with other offerings.

So, if that answers your question and you might have noticed that we're using terminology like delivery risk coordination, coordination, gaps, things like that. And we've made a point of moving across from using things like alignment workshops that have people bucket us into the nice to have. if we've got a day's budget, which people frankly don't really have much these days.

Into something that's much more need-to-have because projects will fail and things will go wrong if people are not frankly aligned.

So that's where we're positioning ourselves to resonate with the way that people are talking and thinking these days.

Michelle Parry-Slater

It's exactly what I always say to learning teams. You must position yourself in the language of your business.

Because if you're talking about learning and development progress, if you're talking about leadership, yeah, instantly, well, we might need to do that. Or it is a nice to have what value are you bringing? What you're talking about is what businesses talk about and need.

And therefore it's well rooted and definitely not in that nice to have bucket. think at times of change, we do need to invest in aligning. We do need investing in developing ourselves and developing our team capabilities because otherwise if we're not doing it who is doing it our competitors and if our competitors are doing it they're going to move ahead of us so these are all really useful things to help us to think about. I'm going to go back to the word you used right at the beginning holistically and I think in L & D if we start to have that more holistic lens to see that bigger picture to look at the ripples of the work that we do then we will be able to have more influence and be able to add more value because we're looking at that bigger picture.

Now we do need to bring today to a close but I do want to give a bit of a shout out to everyone who's listening today that it is a special day for Mirror Mirror. Do you want to celebrate your special day Lindsay? Why is it special for you?

Lindsay Uittenbogaard

Yes, today the 22nd of September is our 10th anniversary.

So, I think it's just coincidental, but it's very nice to celebrate it with an event like this. So thank you very much for having us on and we're here are celebrating 10 years worth of investigating and developing this practice, this methodology around alignment. Thank you.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Well, one of the actions that John talked about was reflection.

So I wish you a day full of reflection today to see where you started 10 years ago and where you are today. Reflective practice is really important, I think.

So, I'd love to encourage you to do that because we do need to celebrate. We don't celebrate enough.

So, John, your program that you worked with, the celebration is that obviously you were one of two banks to meet that deadline. But I wonder if there's anything else that you want to just leave us with today before we wrap up.

John Dobbin

Yeah, well, to carry on with the idea of reflection and slowing down, I think it's really important in this day and age, like I'm dealing with multiple clients now that are looking at outsourcing a lot of their human cognitive functions to AIs. And I think that the teams of the future are going to be, or not even the future, but right now are going to be hybrid teams. And that is a risk and an opportunity at the same time.

And the risk is that everyone just goes faster because people probably all work with AIs that everything speeds up so you can get answers very quickly. And that's the opposite of slowing down and really starting to think about how our teams, and including our AI agents if we like, how are we working together?

And are we, for example, as a team, are we putting too much, are we outsourcing too much cognitive capabilities to this?

Are we short-cutting our judgement? Are we selling ourselves short? So to implement these deliberate, slow-thinking reflective practices, team reflective practices, I think are really, really important, because I think a lot of organisations are going to implement these AIs too quickly, without proper thought, and they're going to really burn themselves.

So that's my tip.

Michelle Parry-Slater

And that is a great tip. It is a great way for us to all end. Let's do some reflective practice, encouragement to all of our listeners. And if one of the ways you want to reflect on particularly Lindsay's approach, Lindsay's first book, *Do You See What I See*, will be out very shortly, which is a beautiful way for you, Lindsay, to celebrate your 10 years. And if anyone wants to get in touch with you and connect with you, both of you are on LinkedIn and happy to be connected too.

Lindsay Uittenbogaard

Absolutely. So our website is Mirror Mirror Alignment. And yeah, I'm on LinkedIn. Happy to connect with people. That would be great.

Michelle Parry-Slater

And the same for you, John, you're on LinkedIn, happy to be connected too.

John Dobbin

Yeah, yep, yep. I'll give you all my URL's that you can put in the show notes.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Perfect. Well, look in the show notes, listeners, because that's where you'll find all of the details, including the details to Lindsay's book as well.

I want to just thank you so much. It's beautiful to have conversations with people in adjacent communities and doing work that we do, but differently. And I think there's a lot to take out of today. So, I'm very grateful for you and happy work anniversary, Lindsay. It's a lovely way to celebrate with you. So take care. Thank you.

John Dobbin

Thank you, Michelle.

Lindsay Uittenbogaard

Thank you.

Learning Uncut Episode 191 - Team Alignment is commitment not agreement - Lindsay Uittenbogaard and John Dobbin



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